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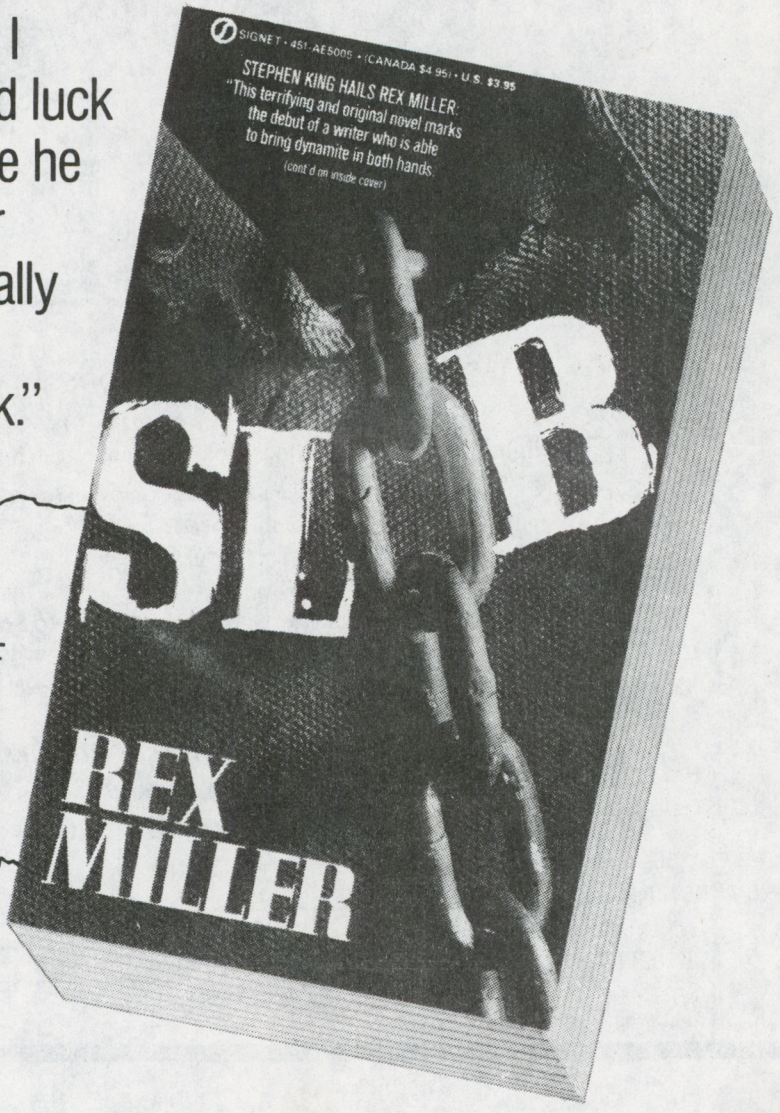

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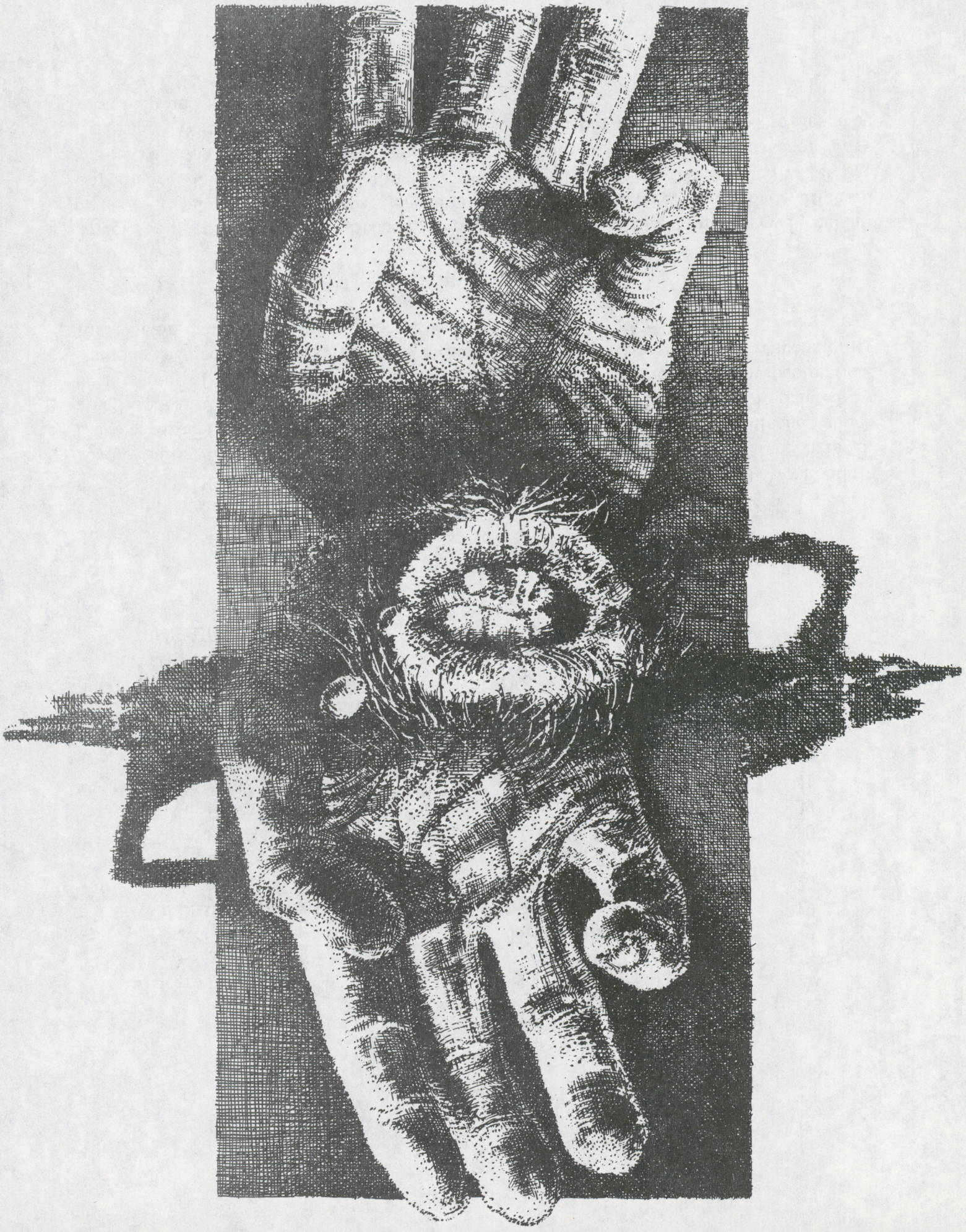

REPEAT OFFENDER

BY DAVID STARKEY
ILLUSTRATION BY ROGER GERBERDING

It was almost ten o'clock by the time Donna parked her car in the lot and started walking toward her apartment. She hated getting home after dark; she hated it every time it happened. There were only two dim lights in the entire lot, and she had to walk nearly fifty yards to reach her *own* home, past those awful decorative trees and bushes the manager thought were so lovely; oh they were lovely all right -- when they were bathed in sunlight. But at night, they were horrors hiding horrors.

A tenant had been mugged last month on his way past these bushes. And just two weeks ago, a woman had been attacked. Dragged behind a bush, gagged, and raped.

Donna strode quickly on, holding her purse tightly against her side, holding her apartment key ready in her hand.

They were terrible, the shadows, the bushes, the trees -- why wasn't there more light? God, why didn't the manager *do* something about the lighting? Donna was definitely moving when her lease expired. She was certainly *not* going to stay in this apartment complex another year.

Her heart was pounding so hard that her chest ached by the time she guided the key into the doorknob, pushed open the apartment door, rushed into the living room, flipped on the light, and slammed the door behind her.

She whirled around and slid the safety chain into its slot, and then, she relaxed. She was safe in her home. She'd survived another day of teaching, a long PTA meeting, and the terrors of the walk from the parking lot to her apartment.

She stepped into the short hallway, flipped on the light, shuffled wearily into the bedroom, and flung her coat onto the bed.

As she flipped on the bedroom light, a sudden breeze made the window shade billow out into the room. The window, which she made sure to close every morning, was now open, and she saw broken glass on the floor beneath it.

She glanced frantically around the room, decided to call the police, rushed toward the phone, then decided to get out of her apartment. She'd run next door to the neighbors. Then she'd ... But it was then that her closet door burst open and the decisions were no longer hers to make.

She barely saw his face. It was a hidden mass of black, curly beard, hair, and eyebrows -- all growing together as a single tangle that obscured every feature except his fat, bloated lips... *He rushes upon her and knocks her to the floor. He is a mound of sweat and stench and fur; he is hands and fingers, and sharpened nails, tearing, gouging, ripping, flattening her against the*

floor.

She screams -- once, and the beefy furry fist hits her face, dazes her, slows it all down to horrible, deliberate certainty as he rapes her, wounds her, takes her as if she is nothing but a lump of soft flesh for him to pound into the floor...

And then he is no longer moving. He is lying on top of her like a rancid halved hog, fatness, saltiness, the smell of it, the stench *of it -- and her ears are humming, the scream in her own throat trying to make its way out, as the weight of him seems to be fading, fading,* yes *he's* fading, *but he's not leaving. He is* not *walking away. But he is no longer as massive, no longer crushing her beneath him. He is, no longer shaped like a man.*

She lies there beneath him as his weight diminishes, he is smaller -- shrinking, no longer a man that impales her, but a mishapen piece of flesh, red, and raw, and shriveling, growing smaller still, and lighter, the weight of him no longer pressing on her, as the lump of man-flesh shrinks and recedes, fading into the man-tube that is rooted deep, deep within her.

Darkness all around her, seeping in from the edges of the room, the room spinning, whirling, the darkness moving closer. And she knows, she feels, she senses it as she watches the abyss of blackness swallowing her. He hasn't gone away. He's still here.

And then she feels nothing except the horrible, voracious darkness.

When the darkness creeps back into the walls, it happens to the sound of screaming. She knows the voice. The scream. She begins to cry, realizing the screaming is her own.

The policemen climbed into the open bedroom window and found her. There were two policemen. Such blue, blue uniforms they were wearing. Such dark blue uniforms...

"Can you hear us, Miss Grant?" the blonde-haired policeman asked. He took Donna's coat from the bed and spread it gently over her nakedness. ("Better call an ambulance," he says to his partner.)

"He's still here," Donna said very distinctly. "He's still here, the man who raped me."

The dark-haired policeman drew his gun and looked toward the bedroom door.

"No," said Donna Grant. She pointed to her belly. "He's here," she said.

The two policemen looked sadly at each other. The one with dark hair picked up the phone, and the blonde-haired policeman looked around the room and started making notes on a white pad he had taken from his shirt pocket.

After the ambulance ride to the hospital, after the doctor examined her, after she sat shaking, cold, and terrified in a clean, so clean

white conference room, a woman came in and sat down across from her.

"Hello Donna," the woman said to her. "I'm Jill Courtney. I'm a member of the police force. I'd like to talk with you about what happened tonight."

Donna sat staring toward the woman, sat staring at her short-cropped sandy hair, her pudgy, friendly face, her warm blue eyes, the look of genuine concern that formed the tiny creases around her eyes.

Donna didn't say anything.

"I know this has been horrible for you," the woman said. "And I want you to know I care about you, and want to help you. Sometimes," she said, "if you can talk about it, you won't feel that you're trying to handle it all alone. You'll know that somebody else understands."

Donna didn't say anything. But her face was wet. She could feel it. Why was her face so wet?

"Here," said the woman as she handed Donna several clean white tissues. "Go ahead and cry. Then we'll talk. It's O.K. I have plenty of time. Just have a good cry. Then we'll talk."

Donna saw the tissues being placed into her limp hand, and then quietly watched them fall toward the floor. The woman pulled some more tissues from the box and began gently drying Donna's face.

"Donna," the blond woman said to her. "Are you thirsty? Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Coke? Water?"

Donna nodded. Thirsty. Yes. She was thirsty

"Coffee?" asked the woman. "How about coffee?"

Donna nodded again. Sure Coffee. Warm and safe. Like in the mornings, in her own sunny kitchen, at breakfast, before school.

"I'll be right back." said the woman.

Donna sat stiffly in her chair, watching the door close.

As soon as the door closed, she felt it.

Something crawling along her arm. No. Something crawling *inside* her arm.

She tore back the sleeve of her blouse and stared at what lay beneath. A lump. On her forearm. It was just under the skin -- between the skin and the muscle -- crawling -- like a mouse -- crawling like a living mouse under her skin, crawling toward her *hand*.

Donna began screaming, shrieking, howling.

"He's *in* me!" She screamed. "He's still inside me! Get him out! Get him *out*!"

Jill Courtney ran back into the room.

"He's here!" Donna screamed, pointing at her exposed, smooth forearm. "He's still here!" She began

digging at the spot with her fingernails.

Jill picked up the white phone and called for help. Then she pinned Donna's arms behind her and held her that way until the orderlies arrived.

Donna wakes up in another white room. She sees the ceiling, dim, but white, mercifully white, clean, so meticulously clean. She turns her head to one side -- to a view of white walls, and then to the other side, where the view is the same.

She slowly becomes aware of the straps holding her arms beside her, the straps holding her feet tightly against the mattress. And then the lump, moving up her belly, the lump, moving between her breasts, onto her throat, choking her -- she feels it, pushing against her windpipe, sitting on her throat, just beneath the skin, sitting on her larynx, pushing against it, choking her.

She is coughing. And between each cough, she is screaming.

"He's inside me!" she screams, gasping for breath. "He's still inside me!"

As the door is flung open, she feels the lump on her throat suddenly going away, sliding deeper within her, settling into a hiding place where it won't be noticed. Donna feels her cough stop, but the nurse is running in, not even talking, not even asking where it is this time, where he is this time. The nurse is intent only on giving the cold, silver injection which whirls Donna swiftly into the dreamless blackness of synthetic sleep.

Time passes as a series of bright lights punctuated by empty darkness, sore twitching muscles, cold alcohol pads cleaning the skin on her temples, warm metal plates touching her head, the white light delivering pulsed confusion, exploded memories, the white flashes erasing and purging, destroying, and blasting away the images of abomination.

What is a month other than a random series of flashes?

What is a day? What is a week?

The sun is shining outside her window. She muses on the shininess it imparts to the shimmering trees.

"Hello, Donna," said Dr. Pickard (why does she know this man's name?) as he walked into her cheerfully sunny room on the east wing of St. Matthew's Psychiatric Hospital. (Why does she know his name? *St. Matthew's.*)

"You're doing much better," said Dr. Pickard, smiling at her, his bald head glistening pink in the gentle sunlight. "How do you feel?"

"I, don't know," said Donna. "I think I feel OK. How long have I been here?" she asked, with a

feeling of only mild curiosity. The lack of an intense feeling of any kind bothered her. Why didn't she really care how long she'd been here? It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't even know why she was here. But she was tired. She felt a little like crying, but she didn't know why.

"You've been with us four months," said Dr. Pickard. "You've had shook therapy, and some of your memories, certain memories that were too painful for you to deal with at the time you were admitted, have been erased as the result of therapy."

"Teaching," she suddenly said, easily remembering that much. After all, she'd been a teacher for five years. "My job. My classes."

"All taken care of," said Dr. Pickard. "The school year is nearly over now, and you'll soon have the whole summer before you. You can resume your teaching duties next year if you wish. It's all been taken care of.:

"What's happened to me?" asked Donna. "Why can't I remember what happened..."

"Donna," said Dr. Pickard. "You were raped. And then you suffered a breakdown. You had terrible memories of the rape itself, and terrible hallucinations as well. But we've erased the memory of the rape, and you're better now. You're much better. Now that the memory of the actual event is gone, we'll be able to talk about it. You'll be able to deal with the *concept* of what happened to you -- without suffering any more from the memory of the event itself."

Donna wiped her hand slowly across her forehead, as if trying to sense the empty places in her brain, the places where memories had once been stored like black jewels nestled on convoluted shelves. Then she looked toward the window and the yellow sunlight, out toward the greenness of the trees, the beckoning softness of the lawn.

"Can I go outside?" she asked? "Outside into the sunshine?"

"I think that's an excellent idea," said the psychiatrist. "I'll call a nurse to go with you. We'll talk some more tomorrow. How about that?"

"All right," said Donna. "Tomorrow.". It was a term that carried no meaning. At that moment, all she saw, all she could think about, was the grass, the softness she knew would be there, the sunlight she knew would welcome her back like a long-lost sister.

***

Dr. Pickard signed her release papers on July 18th. Donna could handle it now -- understanding, but not really *knowing* what had happened

to her. She understood that it was better that way -- better to deal with a concept than a memory. Dr. Pickard was very pleased with her progress. Her depression had lifted entirely. Her sense of time had returned. She was looking forward to going home.

It was noon when she pulled into the parking lot and turned off her car's engine. Walking past the pandemonium of unpruned trees and bushes made her feel uneasy. Someone had been mugged there at one time, wasn't that so? At night, walking home from the lot. And a woman raped. But that had been a long time ago, a very long time ago. Still, the whir of the wind in the trees made her feel anxious and eager for her own apartment. The kitchen would be so nice.

All her houseplants were dead. She threw them into the trash, and opened the windows (the once-shattered bedroom window that she had no memory of ever having seen broken had been repaired while she was away). She turned on the TV. She went out for groceries. She only bought two bags worth so that she could carry them from the lot all in one trip. The wind was whipping the trees harder than before as she walked past them with the groceries. Her left arm started to ache just a few feet from her apartment door. She carried the groceries inside, and rubbed her sore arm. There was a slight lump underneath the skin. She thought she'd bruised her arm carrying the heavy bag. After all, it was a heavy load, and she hadn't carried anything for a long while. It was good to hear the sound of the TV in her empty apartment.

The swelling went away while she was fixing her dinner. She settled down in front of the TV and watched until 10:00. Then she went into her bedroom, undressed, and climbed into bed.

She read a while, the warm light from the bedside lamp welcome and soft. For a moment, she experienced a flicker of anxiety, feeling, as silly as it seemed, that she was not alone. It was an odd, nebulous feeling of general uneasiness that passed quickly. She pulled the soft edge of the sheet closer to her throat.

Donna shivered a bit, read some more, and then closed her eyes.

***

She awakens in the grip of agony, her legs forced wide apart. She sees herself giving birth to it -- to the same bulbous piece of flesh that had entered her months before.

The fleshy lump is leaving her now. It is an amorphous mound sitting on her bed. It is quickly solidifying, transmogrifying back into the

same huge man that she can never be rid of. He is soon standing over her, standing on her bed, leering down at her from the deep black sockets of his hairy face.

She begins to scream.

He slaps her so hard that she is thrown from the bed and lands on the floor.

And then he leaps upon her and rapes her again.

The darkness rushes from the walls to seize her as she feels his weight diminish and fade, as she glimpses him -- a shrinking bulbous lump of gray flesh receding into her yet again

The policemen will arrive in a minute. The policemen will find Donna lying on the floor in her bedroom. The policemen will think the rapist is gone.

But Donna will know where he is

DEAD HEAT

In a summer midnight of bourbon
and bougainvillea, of bones in heat,
the pheromones of the dead rise up
and their bodies rise in turn,
a sweet nausea of putrefaction,
a corruption from beyond the grave.

Past the copse of cottonwood
where failed flesh is coffined,
the moon pierces these shades
of passion unspent in life,
a ghostly concupiscence is released,
See how they dance like spurned
angels,
dionysian with madness and belief.

Senseless as the damp black grass
or the rotting jasmine leaves,
their desiccated torsos clack
and clack in frightful copulation
as they swallow their own grief.
Their ghoulish voices undulate
and siren through the streets.

While beyond the bougainvillea
and the sweating windowpanes,
beneath some spired gothic ruin
youdown another glistening drink.
You wait with leaded glass in hand.
The clock's shaped like a cicada
and it's far too hot for sleep.

By Bruce Boston

DOWN THE DRAIN

BY EDGAR F. TATRO

The cabin door clicked securely. His loyal aides would guarantee privacy. The ornate covering swung soundlessly to the right. Zippers were disengaged. The aircraft's engines hummed serenely from a lower source.

This was not a sexual act. Rapes never are. This was a political act, the allegorical culmination of a career, the metaphorical exclamation point to an intense, but special day. History is born. A new leader takes the reigns.

All goals had been achieved within a skinny hour - the triangulation of shots aimed at the target, the official proclamation of death at a local hospital, the fabrication of crucial evidence identifying a sole assassin, a pathetic patsy, and the swift removal of the late commander's lifeless body to this very airliner to avoid a proper autopsy. Conspiracy and cover-up parexcellence.

The cocky young upstart had underestimated his enemies, those closest to him, his praetorian guard, his successor. The end of "liberal bullshit" was at hand. Coup D'etat, dominance, destruction.

Now the ultimate reality . . . penetration and desecration of the knightly image, the archetypal nemesis. Climax was sheer bliss, utter satisfaction, symbolic completion to the pinnacle of success.

Somehow he ignored the sounds of suction. Somehow he disregarded the phlegm, the blood, the sperm, as he withdrew his dripping penis from the anterior throat wound of the slain victim. Calmly he wiped his genitals and spat defiantly at the butchered corpse. He re-zippered the body bag and his own pants, then quietly shut the coffin lid.

He adjusted his tie and cleared his throat. It was time to leave. . . time to lead. No longer second fiddle, no longer second banana. Air Force One was nearing Washington, D. C. .

SNUZZLEFRED

BY WILLIAM RELLING JR

I am sitting here in the darkness. Alone and afraid, feeling the dampness that surrounds me, smelling the moist concrete, an aroma that fills my nostrils. The darkness and the dampness and the aroma cause me to think: *This is what it is like to be buried. This is what it's like inside a grave ...*

I say to myself, harshly: *No.*

This place is not a grave. It's a basement, that's all. *My* basement, underneath my own house, and I am not dead. I am very much alive -- and sober, for a change. Frightened. And hiding. But alive.

And afraid.

I hear footsteps on the floor above, and I press myself tighter into the corner. I can feel my skin tingling.

The footsteps are directly above me.

They pause.

There is the click of a latch. Then the squeak of the door at the top of the stairs under which I am hiding. Then another sound, someone flicking on and off the light switch at the top of the stairwell, someone who doesn't know that I've shut off all the power in the house to make sure that no one can find me in the dark.

There is silence.

I wait. Until I hear another footstep, just one, at the top of the stairwell. Coming down. Hesitantly.

Then a voice calls me. A voice that sends tiny fingers of ice playing along my spine. A voice that makes me want badly to scream, so badly that I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

A voice that calls sweetly into the darkness, so sweetly. "Daddy?" she says. "Daddy, are you down there?"

Dear God, I whisper to myself. *Dear God, please don't let her find me.*

Because I remember ...

*

My memory is shattered into pieces, the shards of a broken mirror. Each piece reflects back to me a part of what happened to bring me here.

In the first piece, I see a figure standing in front of a classroom full of people. I know his name: Kurt Hartog. *Professor* Kurt Hartog, artist and teacher. The walls of the classroom are hung with sketches, the work of students -- portraits and figure studies, anatomical designs, a beginner's course in drawing. It takes me a moment to recognize the teacher: Hartog, the slender young man with shoulder-length brown hair and walrus moustache, jeans and work shirt speckled with spots of color and smudges of charcoal. The hair is much too long and the moustache has disappeared some

time ago, but I recognize him, at last, as myself. And I see someone else, one of the students, a girl -- tall and beautiful, green eyed, tawny blonde. Her name is as beautiful as she is: Alida. She has talent as well; there is nothing he -- I -- can show her. We talk, and as we talk there is something that we see in each other's eyes, something that says: *I am falling in love with you.*

Another piece:

The day of our wedding. The name of the place echoes distantly in my mind: *Santa Barbara.* California. A park. Outdoors. August. Sunlight dappling through the trees whose leaves form a canopy over our heads. The guests: our families and friends. The minister. And the two of us, we two smiling children, looking so young.

Another piece:

Alida and I are making love.

Another piece:

The hospital, the emergency room. Alida, being wheeled on a stretcher by two white-garbed attendants. She is unconscious, her head turned to one side, eyes closed, damp hair plastered to the waxen, bloodless flesh of her face. Her belly is swollen. I am running alongside the stretcher, holding her clammy hand, whispering futilely: *It's all right everything's all right you'll be all right I love you.* Knowing that she cannot hear me; knowing, somehow, that she will never hear me again.

Another piece:

A doctor. A weary man, dressed in a sickly green smock, sickly green trousers, sickly green slippers, sickly green cap, sickly green mask hanging around his neck. The smock is spattered with blood. I am sitting down, only vaguely aware of the place, a waiting room. I listen to the doctor, who says to me: *I'm very sorry about your wife, Mister Hartog. Thank god we were able to save the baby.*

Another piece:

I reach for the bottle of whiskey.

Another piece:

The little girl, now seven years old, a tiny, doll-version of her mother -- the same blonde hair, the same green eyes. Her name is Erika. I am inside the house, our house where we have been living for only a few weeks, trying to paint, trying to create *something*, anything, but there is nothing, nothing for me, not since Alida died and left me alone. I can hear the child's voice: *Daddy you said you would come out and play with me there's nobody for me to play with Daddy you promised.* The voice grows louder and louder, screeching in my ears, and I press my hands to the sides of my head to block out the sound, but it will not go away.

Another piece:

The murders ...

*

There is another footstep. Then the sweet voice again, coaxing me: "Daddy? Daddy, I know you're down there ..."

Then she giggles. It is a high, merry, musical, utterly terrifying sound.

There is another footstep.

*

I remember.

I remember when we came to this place, this town, only a few months ago, in July. There are so many places my daughter and I have lived, in her short life. Perhaps that's why ...

I remember a woman, the child psychologist at Erika's last school, calling me last spring, asking me to come see her at her office. I remember what she said to me: "Erika is a such a bright, imaginative child, Mr. Hartog. I understand you are an artist -- perhaps that's where she gets her imagination."

I said nothing.

"The problem is," she said, "Erika has a difficult time making friends. She is painfully shy."

I said nothing.

"I noticed," she said, "that you have moved quite a bit in the past six years. California. New Mexico. South Dakota. Montana. Now here, Oregon. We're her second school in as many years. Perhaps the problem with your daughter is that you've never stayed in one place long enough for her to make any friends, to put down roots."

I said nothing.

"I understand," she said, "That you are moving again, after this school year is finished. That you've taken another new teaching job. You're returning to California?"

I said nothing.

"I think," she said, "that you don't have your daughter's best interest at heart."

I said nothing.

"Perhaps," she said, "you need to do something about your own ... problem first. Your drinking."

I said nothing. What could I say? *I know all that I love my daughter desperately I would do anything for her to make her happy I know that Erika doesn't have any friends I know that it's my fault because I keep dragging her along with me but what can I do what else can I do when I cannot work cannot paint cannot create and if I stay in one place for too long a time I start to drink because I see her face Alida's face in my dreams my nightmares accusing me saying to me you did this to me Kurt you let me get pregnant when you knew the danger you knew that it could kill me I told you that what happened could happen ...*

But said nothing. And we left that place, Erika and I. And we

came here.

To this place, this beautiful northern California town, and I took a new job teaching at the college in the center of this beautiful northern California town. And Erika started school, a new school, a new school in this new place. For awhile, a short while, everything was fine.

Until the murders.

I remember the day she came home from school, her second day in the second grade. She was in tears. I was home, when she came bursting through the front doors. "I hate school!" she screamed. "I hate it!"

I lifted her in my arms and carried her to the sofa. I sat down, cradling her in my arms.

"It wasn't my fault, Daddy," she whimpered. "I wasn't the one who was talking. It was somebody else who was talking to me. But she yelled at me and made me stand in the corner, and everyone laughed at me."

"Who?" I asked. "Who made you stand in the corner?"

She stopped crying, pulled herself to look at me. The pupils of her eyes were dark. "Mrs. Ross," she said. "My teacher."

Then she hugged me again.

"I hate her," she said into my chest. "I hate all of them."

*

"Daa-dee," she sings from the stairs. "Come out, come out wherever you are. All-eee, all-eee in free ..."

I press myself into the wall.

*

She came home crying again, one afternoon a week later. Mrs. Ross again, this time in tandem with the school's principal, Mr. Brauer. The two of them had kept Erika after school for being disobedient and insubordinate; I never did find out exactly what it was she was supposed to have done.

Then yesterday afternoon. In the middle of the day, Mr. Brauer called me, pleading with me to come to Erika's school to pick her up.

I went to his office, and could hear my daughter in the next room, sobbing. She heard my voice and shrieked, "My daddy! I want my daddy!" And someone else trying to calm her down.

Furious, I turned to face the man who had called me. "Please Mr. Hartog," he begged. "Your daughter -- "

I could hear her crying for me.

"She's a difficult child," he said quickly. "Our nurse, Miss Gilliam ... today ... all of the children in Erika's class were to be vaccinated today, but she got so frightened, and she refused. She became violently hysterical."

I glared at him.

"She's a difficult child," he repeated. "Its not the first time. She refuses to mind, refuses to do as she's told, refuses to play with the other children."

"What are you saying to me?" I asked. Though I already knew.

"I think," he said, "that you should consider taking her from this school and enrolling her in another school. For ... special children."

I sat for an eternity, watching him grow steadily more uncomfortable. I stared.

Until at last I said, "I'd like to take my daughter home."

We left the school together, and I drove her home. She never said a word to me, and when we got to the house, she ran into her room slamming the door behind her.

That night I lay in my bed, unable to sleep. There was a full moon, and the light shone in through the window opposite my bed, shining in my face. I remember that it was very late.

I heard a soft voice calling me from the doorway. "Daddy?" the voice said.

She came into my bed, nestling herself in my arm. "Are you all right, sweetheart?" I asked her.

She answered me in a cold, low voice. "I hate them. I hate all of them. I hate Mrs. Ross and I hate Mr. Brauer and I hate Miss Gilliam the nurse."

"Erika," I said, "you don't hate them -- "

"I *do*, she hissed.

Then she began to cry. I stroked her hair. "Shhhh," I said. "Shh, baby, it's all right."

She quieted. She lay there for a time, breathing deeply. I thought she had fallen asleep.

Until she said, softly, "Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Do wishes ever come true?"

"What wishes?"

"Just wishes. When you wish for something to happen, does it ever happen?"

"Like what?"

"Anything."

I smiled in the darkness. "Sometimes," I said. "Sometimes wishes come true."

I could feel her body stirring slightly. "G'night, Daddy," she whispered.

She fell asleep. But I lay there, wide awake, asking myself: *Do wishes ever really come true?*

I could not sleep. After a time I got up from the bed, lifted her gently and carried her into her own room. Then I went into the kitchen, and I took the bottle from the cabinet above the refrigerator, telling myself: *One drink. Just one drink is all I need to make me drowsy.* I took the bottle with me into the living room and sat down on the sofa. I opened the bottle and took a drink.

I don't remember falling asleep.

The footsteps pause mid-way down the stairs. There is a note of puzzlement in her voice now. "Daddy?" she says. "Are you down here or not?"

Then she is quiet. Listening. I hold my breath.

A thousand years pass.

Then she says, "Hmmph."

I hear her footsteps going back up the stairs.

*

They found the body of Mrs. Ross first.

It was the very next morning. She was a widow, and she lived alone in a house that she owned. The house was near Erika's school. A neighbor who lived across the street had gotten up early, a little after dawn, and had walked outside to pick up his morning paper. He happened to look up, and he saw that Mrs. Ross's front door was open. There was a light on inside.

Curious, he crossed the street. He walked up the porch and as he reached to push the door all the way open and called out her name, he smelled the sweet-sour, nauseating metallic aroma of fresh blood.

Mrs. Ross was in her living room, ripped to pieces. By something that was very large and very angry, and had very sharp teeth.

Then they found Miss Gilliam, in her apartment.

Then they found Mr. Brauer, in his office.

*

The footsteps pause at the top of the stairwell. The door creaks .Before I can catch myself, I sigh.

"I *knew* you were here," she sings. Her footsteps patter down the steps.

Oh god, I cry silently. *Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god ...*

*

When I first awoke, I did not know about the murders. Not then.

Was that only this morning? This very morning?

I awoke with a foul, sour taste in my mouth. The taste of stale whiskey, and something else. I awoke to the sounds of my telephone, jangling, a cacaphonous sound that caused my head to pulsate with the fierce pain. I sat up on the sofa, and lights danced inside my skull. The room was gray.

I came to my feet and staggered to the phone. I lifted the receiver to make the jangling stop, and I heard a tiny voice calling my name. A man's voice.

A colleague, a fellow instructor at the college. Whose two sons

went to Erika's school; the younger of his boys was in Erika's class. He asked me if I'd heard what had happened to Miss Gilliam, and Mr. Brauer, and Mrs. Ross.

It was then that I recognized the sour taste in my mouth.

I hung up the phone, and staggered down the hallway toward the bathroom. Thinking to myself: *It couldn't be me it couldn't be ...*

I was halfway down the hall, when I stopped outside a closed door. The door to Erika's room.

She was in the room, and she was speaking to someone.

My tongue was thick and furry, and it hurt. I knocked on the door, softly, and called her name. I pushed the door open.

The window beside her bed faced east, and the morning sunlight streamed over her, bathing her in a glow. She was sitting on her bed. Alone.

"Daddy?" she said.

I swallowed, the sour taste burning my throat. "Honey," I said. "Who are you talking to?"

She frowned, a kind of twisted look of chagrin and uncertainty. Then she smiled at me. "My friend," she said.

"What friend?"

"Snuzzlefred."

"Who's Snuzzlefred?" I asked.

"My friend," she said. "'Member yesterday, I asked you if wishes ever come true? I wished for a friend, somebody who'd play with me and wouldn't be mean to me and would do whatever I wanted 'em to do."

I looked at her, not comprehending. Then she was frowning again.

"Daddy," she said, "how come your mouth's all bloody?"

*

The footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs. I can see a light, the beam of a flashlight. It swings around. It lands on me.

The light is blinding.

"*There* you are," she says.

*

"Daddy," she said, "did you hurt yourself -- "

I dashed from her room, back into the hallway, into the bathroom. I switched on the light. It reflected off the mirror above the sink, stinging my eyes. I had to squint to see my reflection.

My mouth was smeared with blood.

My eyes widened in panic. *Oh no! I screamed silently. No no no no no no ...*

I would do anything to make her happy.

I opened my mouth and saw the tiny piece of my tongue torn from the tip. Somehow, sometime

during the night, I had bitten my own tongue. I bent down and reached for the cup that rested on the sink, filled it with water, rinsed my mouth. Then I looked up in the mirror again.

My face was white.

I thought to myself: *No.*

I turned off the light and went back into the hallway. I crouched silently, outside Erika's door. And I listened.

I stayed for a very long time.

*

She comes forward, holding out her hand. I cringe. What's the matter, Daddy?" she asks.

Then she giggles.

*

When the sun went down, I was sitting on the sofa, letting the gloom swirl around me. I could still hear her.

And I knew.

That was when I went to the basement.

*

"C'mon, Daddy," she says. "I don't want to hurt *you.*"

I take her hand.

"That's a good Daddy," she says, leading me toward the stairs.

I start to laugh, softly.

"That's right, Daddy," she says. "Wishes *do* come true."

I cannot stop laughing.

She giggles. "See?" she says.

I stop when I see the shape outlined in the darkness, a huge shadow that moves. The shape writhes, and I think to myself: *Am I really seeing this? Is it really there?*

She is such an imaginative child. She must get it from her father.

Her hand tightens around mine, leading me. We start up the stairs. "*I'm* not going to hurt you, Daddy," she says.

I lick my lips. I can still taste the blood.

"But you have to be careful of Snuzzlefred," she says. "'Cause he bites." Then she smiles and whispers knowingly, "Just like you do."

THE PIECES FIT... ALMOST

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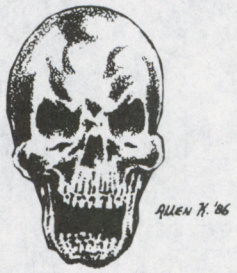

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COMING HOME AGAIN

BY BENTLEY LITTLE
ILLUSTRATION BY ROGER GERBERDING

On the plane ride over, I tried to think of what I would say. The situation was bound to be awkward. I had been trying for over a decade to get my father to go out with other women, but now that he seemed to have found someone he cared about I was torn with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I wanted him to be happy--he was my father and I loved him. On the other hand, I had also loved my mother, and I couldn't help feeling, on some gut emotional level out of reach of my rational mind, that by finding someone else he was betraying her memory.

And he might love this new woman more than he'd loved her.

I guess that was my real fear. What if he found someone he loved more than my mother? What if his emotions found not just a substitute for her but a replacement for her? A woman who would supercede my mother's place in his emotional hierarchy.

It was a babyish fear, I admit. An immature, childish worry. My mother would have been happy for him. She wouldn't have wanted him to live forever in that celibate state of self-imposed social exile that he'd been inhabiting since her death. And I, too, wanted him to be happy.

I just didn't want his happiness to come at her expense.

I glanced down again at the folded letter in my lap. "I have found someone I care very much for," he'd written in his typically formal style. "I'd like you two to meet."

I leaned my chair back and closed my eyes. I wanted to like her; I really did. I hoped I would.

The plane landed in L.A. two hours later. I disembarked, found my luggage and walked across the street to the coffee shop where my father had said he'd meet me. He was standing next to the open trunk of a new Pontiac in the parking lot. He was smiling, and he looked better than he had in years. The gaunt tiredness which I thought had settled into his features for good had disappeared, and his formerly sallow skin looked tan and healthy. As always, he was dressed in a suit--vest, tie, the whole works. My own clothes were nice, and comfortably stylish, but next to him I felt pitifully underdressed.

"It's good to see you," he said, and held out his hand.

"You, too," I said. I couldn't help smiling. He looked so good, so fit and healthy and happy. I shook his hand. Our family had never been big on physical demonstrations of affection, and the pressing of palms was about as close as we ever got to a public display of closeness.

He took one of my suitcases and loaded it into the trunk; I put the other one right next to it. "How are things with you?" he asked.

"Oh, about the same as always." I grinned. "But your life seems to have taken a turn for the better."

He laughed heartily, and I realized suddenly that it had been years since I'd heard him laugh that way. "Yes," he said. "That is true. That is very true."

He unlocked my door and I got into the car, sliding across the seat to unlock his side. "So what's her name?" I asked. "You never did tell me."

He smiled cryptically. "You'll see."

"Come on," I told him.

"We'll be home in ten minutes." He put the car into reverse and looked over at me. "It's good to see you again son. I'm glad you came out to see me."

We drove over the familiar sidestreets toward home. It was not a ten minute drive from the airport. It was not even a twenty minute drive. Our home in Long Beach was a good forty-five minutes from the airport even without traffic, and we happened to be driving during rush hour. But I knew that ahead of time, and I didn't mind. We talked a lot, got caught up on the new gossip, restated old positions and fell into our old familiar patterns.

By the time we pulled off the freeway onto Lakewood it was approaching dinnertime. I hadn't had a thing to eat save an almost inedible lunch on the plane, and I was starved. "Is she going to have dinner ready for us?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "We'll eat out."

I'd been trying to determine, through subtle questioning, whether or not his new girlfriend lived with him, and I gathered that she did. I was surprised. My father had always been ultra-conservative, the most proper of men, and I could not imagine him lowering his concrete moral standards enough to live with a woman outside of wedlock.

He must really love her a lot, I thought.

The house looked the same as always. The lawn was immaculately manicured, the trim on the house was recently painted. Even the house was curled into a neat circle. "The place looks good," I said.

He smiled at me. "I try my best.

We got out of the car, leaving the luggage in the trunk for later. My father found the house key on his ring and unlocked the front door, stepping aside to let me in first.

The inside of the house was demolished.

I stared in shock. Both the couch and the loveseat were overturned in the middle of the living room, their upholstery torn and ripped, stuffing leaking out. Scattered about were the broken pieces of our old dining room chairs and

fragments of the dining room table. The china cabinet and its contents were heaped in a pile in the corner of the room. The walls were bare and covered with crayon scribbles. The living room rug, the rug that had been tough enough to withstand even my Tonka attacks and my G.I. Joe invasions, was a tatter of unraveled threads. Through the doorway of the kitchen, I could see smeared piles of food and bent food containers on the broken tile.

Everything was covered with a dusty white powder.

I whirled around to see my father's reaction. He was smiling happily, as if he did not see the disaster in front of him, as if he were viewing paradise itself. "How does it feel to be home again?" he asked?

There was the sound of something shattering in the back of the house, and a second later a naked boy came bounding into the living room on all fours. He was brown with filth and he smelled horribly. His hair was matted with grime, and his too-large teeth were a moldy green. He could not have been more than ten or eleven. He hopped onto the remains of the china cabinet and grunted wildly, snorting through his nose.

"There you are, my love," I heard my father say behind me, and i felt a sickening feeling of disgusted horror in the pit of my stomach. "I want you to meet David."

With an animal-like howl, the little boy bounded toward us. My father stepped forward and pulled the youth to his feet, hugging him to him. He kissed the dirty child full on the lips. With fast and furious fingers, the boy tried to unbuckle my father's belt and pull down his pants. My father laughingly pushed him away. "Not now," he said.

The boy turned to look at me, and I could see that he had an erection.

My father smiled proudly at me. "Son," he said, "I want you to meet your future stepmother."

The filthy boy looked up at me and grinned. I could see that his mossy teeth had been filed into tiny points. He howled crazily.

***

I don't know what happened next. I guess I was in shock. I don't think I really blacked out, but the next thing I remember is walking down Lakewood Boulevard toward the ocean. It was dark out, night, and I was several miles away from home, so I had obviously been walking for quite awhile.

I was alone.

I didn't know what I was going to do. My father had obviously gone totally insane. I looked up into the night sky, but the lights of Long Beach were bright and I could see very few stars. I wondered what

my mother would say if she could see what was happening. I could not imagine my mother's reaction to this situation. It was totally unlike anything she has ever encountered.

"Why did you have to die?" I whispered aloud.

My father would have to be put away, I realized. He would have to be committed. What he was doing was illegal, as well and there would probably be criminal charges filed against him.

There would doubtless be a lot of publicity.

I thought of all the times my father had let me help him in his garage workshop, giving me imaginary chores to perform while he himself did the real work. He looked tall to me then, and invincible -- the model man whose respect I so desperately craved and tried to earn. The man I wanted to be.

And then I saw him standing there in his immaculate suit, amongst the shambles of our living room, as a filthy wild child tried desperately to pull down his pants.

I started to cry.

I sat down on the curb and let the tears come, giving my emotions free reign, and soon I was sobbing uncontrollably, sobbing not only for the loss of my mother, but also for the loss of my father.

Ten minutes later, I was walking toward home. I would not call the police, I decided. I could not do that to my father. We would handle this crisis on our own. It was a family matter, and it would be settled within the family.

The outside of the house looked deceptively calm. Everything was neat and ordered, in its proper place, just as it had always been. Inside, I knew, chaos reigned. Insanity prevailed.

The front door was unlocked. I pushed it open and walked inside. My father was just putting on his shirt. His pants were still unbuckled. Hopping around the room, laughing crazily, was the boy. The child looked up at me with unreadable grey eyes and suddenly ran forward on two legs, carrying something in his hands. Grinning up at me, he presented his offering.

It was a framed picture of my parents, smeared with shit.

I kicked the little bastard as hard as I could in the stomach, sending him flying. His grinning mouth contracted instantly into an open O of pain, and I was gratified to hear him scream.

"That's no way to treat your new mother," my father said.

I ran forward and kicked the kid again. Hard. He went down, and the hard heel of my shoe connected with his dirty head. Blood poured freely down his brown skin from a large cut above his scalpline.

"That's enough!" my father screamed, but it was not enough. I

was not through. I pulled the kid up by his hair and punched him full in the face, feeling his nose collapse under my knuckles.

And then my father's strong hands were pulling me away. I kicked and screamed and lashed out at him, but he was stronger than I was.

I was knocked unconscious.

*

When I came to, I was laying in a bed, my arms and legs tied to the four posts with a thick coarse twine. My father was seated in a chair next to me, a concerned expression on his face, pressing a cold compress against my forehead. He was talking in a soothing voice--more to himself than to me, I think--and I listened to him silently.

"...more than I loved your mother, but just as much I think. I can't help myself. I was lost when your mother died, lost, and I didn't know what to do with myself. I haven't felt this way in years. I'm learning how to feel again..."

There was a series of inarticulate howls from the front of the house. My father's face brightened. "In here!" he called.

The boy bounded into the room, and a hideous stench assaulted my nostrils. I strained against my bonds, but the twine held tight. The child looked up at me. A crust of dried blood covered the left half of his face, where my foot had connected with his head, and twin rivulets of hardened blood protruded from the pulp of his broken nose. He smiled at me and I saw again his pointed teeth, covered with greenish tartar.

My father drew the boy to him and kissed him on the lips, long and hard and lovingly.

"Father," I pleaded, almost crying. "Dad."

I could not recall ever having seen my parents kiss.

The boy moved forward, whispered something in my father's ear and glanced furtively toward me. My father stood up and drew the compress from my forehead. "I'll see you in awhile," he told me. I watched him step out of the room and close the door behind him.

The boy cavorted around the room after my father had left, grunting and snorting wildly. He squatted in the corner and relieved himself.

"Help!" I screamed as loud as I could, struggling against the twine, hoping some neighbor would hear me. "Help!"

The boy hopped onto the bed, climbing on top of me. He bent his face close to my own, and I spit at him. He let the saliva drip off the end of his nose, not moving, not wiping it off. He studied me for a moment, then said something in a

foreign tongue, soft whispering words. I had never heard the words before, but they frightened me.

He stood up on his knees, and I could see his erection. He bent down to undo my pants.

"No," I cried.

He laughed and said something else in his whispering tongue. He pushed his face near my own, and I could smell his fetid breath. I gagged.

He howled loudly and unzipped my zipper.

"Untie me," I said. I did not know if he could understand me, but he seemed to understand my father. I made my voice as soothing as possible. "Please untie me."

He slipped a grimy hand under the elastic of my underwear.

"I'll be able to help you better if I can move my hands," I said, keeping my voice calm. "Untie me."

To my surprise, he moved forward and began unknotting the twine tied around the bed posts. I lay there unmoving, letting him undo first one knot, then the other. I flexed my fingers, but I did not move or say a word as he untied my feet.

Then I kicked him hard in the chest, sending him flying off the bed. I jumped up, and grabbed his head and smashed it against the wall, leaving a smear of pale blood.

"What's going on in there?" my father said from outside the door. "Love, you all right?"

I leaped out of the window. The glass cut me, but I was protected to some extent by the heavy drapes. I would not have cared if I had been sliced to ribbons, however. I rolled on the grass and jumped up, my arms and head bleeding from dozens of tiny cuts. I ran across the street to Mr. Murphy's house. I did not bother to knock, but threw open the unlocked front door.

Mr. Murphy's living room was a shambles, chairs and tables tumbled over, couch torn apart.

Cavorting about amongst the broken furniture, moving on all fours, was a naked wild boy, covered with filth.

Mr. Murphy stood in the hallway, stark naked.

I ran next door to Mrs. Grant's house, but her place, too, had been torn apart by the dirty boy crawling across her ragged carpet.

I ran out of the neighborhood, out to Lakewood Boulevard, and I did not stop running until I reached a phone. My hands shaking, I fumbled through my pockets for some change. My pants were still undone. I found a quarter and dropped it in the slot.

But who was I going to call?

I stood there for a moment. The police would not believe me, I knew. They would write my story off as a crank call--particularly when they traced it to a public phone. I knew none of my father's

friends outside the neighborhood. I had no friends of my own left in the L.A. area. No one else would believe me because I looked like hell; they'd think I was crazy.

And all my suitcases were at my father's.

Retrieving my money from the coin return slot, I walked down the street to a bus stop where I caught a bus to a motel. I took a hot shower and slept, trying to calm down.

In the morning, I called my father's number, but the line was busy.

The police didn't believe me when I told them what had happened. They gave me a urine test to see if I was on something. I called Janice back in Chicago, but she didn't believe me either.

There was nothing for me to do but use the return ticket in my wallet to fly back home.

*

It has been nearly a month now since I got back. Janice now believes that *something* happened out in California, but despite the continued repetitions of my story, she is not sure just what that something was. She thinks I have had some type of breakdown, and she keeps encouraging me to seek professional help.

I have not called my father since my return, and he has not called me. The bump on my head is long gone, and the rope burns on my arms have faded, but though the physical effects of my experience have disappeared, the psychological effects have not. I dream about the boy at least once a week, and the dreams are getting ever more vivid.

They are also getting scarier.

Much scarier.

In the last dream, the boy lived with me as my wife, in place of Janice. And when I awoke from the dream I had an erection.

LOVER'S QUESTION

BY NORRIS D. HERTZOG

Tonight was to be our night. It was to be the greatest night of our lives: our first night together. But you are gone and I am left all alone Alone to ponder the inconsistancies of life. It is not fair. I have searched so long to find you; to find you alone, the woman of my dreams.

You were perfect. You were a dream come true: everything I ever yearned for, every dream I ever dreamed.

Blond-haired and blue-eyed with just a hint of jealous green. Oh how I shall miss those eyes. I shall miss all of you and everything we might have had together.

I wandered through a lifetime of anguish and suffering searching for you, my darling. And then suddenly, out of the blue, you were mine. In a moment I could never hope for again you came to me. You promised me everything I ever needed; all that I ever wished for in a lover.

How delicately I prepared our room; the place where we would spend our hours together, just you and I, away from the rest of the world. Everything was in readiness the night I brought to our own special place. How my heart ached to be alone with you.

I could see the sultry sweat drenching your slowly undulating body. I could see you churning in a wild anticipation of what was to come. I disrobed and prepared myself for you.

And then suddenly, before my very eyes, before my yearning hungry eyes you died. I could not believe it to be true at first. I grabbed you. I shook you. But no, it was true. You are dead and I am left all alone without even realizing my dream for you.

Gently I caress your still, quite form. I rock you in my arms and I moan over your stilled form.

I remove the chains from your arms and legs and remove you lovingly from the wall. I quench the fire which heats the tongs which would have brought your screams of ecstasty.

I lay you lovingly upon the rack which would have been our nuptial bier and then with a sigh I exit the dungeon.

Good night, my love. Tomorrow you shall rest in the garden outside my window and I will cherish your memory forever.

MR. TATE

BY STEFAN JACKSON

Mr Tate waits on the subway platform at Union Square. He is tense, uneasy. Horny. He wants to go to work--he loves his job. But tonight he is off. He works for the city. The morgue. He can get laid there anytime. And such a variety (this sixty year-old man has a spring in his step whenever he's off work).

But tonight he just broods. His goose-like six foot frame stands obliquely on the platform. He doesn't care for the task before him. He broods and stalks, sucking on vinegar gums.

He wants to just walk onto the ward, but he knows Delbrook is on duty and they don't get along. Delbrook is quite aware of Mr. Tate but is unsure what to do about him. He's a doper and not too pure himself. Actually, he's afraid of Mr. Tate more than Mr. Tate is afraid of him. They give each other wide berth but always keep tabs on one another.

A supple redheaded boy asks Mr. Tate if he's lonely. Mr Tate looks him over like cold death and the boy walks on. His over-the-shoulder smirk is white-washed by his air-blown hair, produced by the incoming train. The thought of warm flesh disgusts Mr. Tate--as well as it being male, but warm flesh is all he shall have tonight. He readies himself for the experience. He steps on the train.

Tonight he will use a knife. World War II, German issue. Deep blood-letting grooves on both sides. He was an Army medic during the war and knows exactly what they can do. He will use it well. He keeps it in a secretly sewn pocket in his overcoat which is wrapped around his arm. It is warm in the city tonight.

The blonde girl at the end of the car is pretty. She reminds him of a girl that was brought in a few nights ago. She had been beaten and raped and thrown into the East river (Mr. Tate is not sure if he did it). He likes blonde girls with slender figures. The woman at the end of the car is perfect, even though she has small breasts. No matter. She seems to be asleep but no one really sleeps on the subway. She has very full, suckable lips. They are the only two on the car. Mr. Tate moves closer--one bench away and across the aisle. He wants her now.

He longs to be at work.

Some young toughs enter Mr. Tate's car. Three in all, walking in some ordered fashion, dressed with purpose. The last boy eyes the girl and stops in front of her. He reaches down and squeezes a handful of her tit, painfully pinching the nipple. The girl slaps at his arm, knocking it away. She straightens up and is slapped hard by the muscular five-and-a-half foot frame.

His partners stop in unison as he screams at her:

"Bitch! Yo' ass in deep shit. No lies or I go dear on yanh sorry ass."

The girl isn't crying, but she looks horrified.

"Oscar--baby. I didn't know Pete was there. He came up from behind me--see . . . see this lump--and he knocked me down and took all the stuff . . . I--I ran because . . . Because I know'd I be blamed for it."

"Yo, Oscar," says a larger,tighter and blacker version of Oscar. "Word on the block, Pete got some good skag."

Oscar turns back to the girl.

"You tellin' the truth, I ain't gonna beat you none. Get up. We go talk to Pete."

Mr. Tate feels sudden rage as they walk away with his chosen. No. This will not do. He stands, removes the knife from his coat and steps quickly after the strutting tuffs.

He sinks the knife deep into the kidney of the last tuff. The large black Oscar. White-silver shock traps the cry in his throat. Before he hits the ground, Mr. Tate is severing the neck of the second tuff. There is a whine-gurgle sound and blood sprays the backs of Oscar and the girl. Oscar turns, instinctively pushing the girl aside. He deflects the thrust of the knife but it still slices into his upper chest. A backhand slash catches Oscar across the cheek and upper arm just as he attempts to kick Mr. Tate. Oscar stumbles, the swinging blade making an acute eight-inch groove in his back. He rolls, stands and runs. Mr. Tate does not follow. He grabs the frightened girl and heads in the opposite direction.

Mr. Tate walks the girl into the park. They sit on a bench. She is shaking. Whenever she tries to speak, it is only a dry rasp. Her body seems too small a space to confine all her emotions. She wets herself for the third time.

Mr. Tate has the knife in his hand. He does not try to conceal it from her. He plunges it into her stomach. Hugs her, wraps his arm around her and drills the length of the blade through the flesh. A quarter-inch of the blade emerges out of her back. He feels her warm blood run over his hand and onto his crotch. There is an odd ecstasy mixed with his nausea. She spits blood onto his chest--spurts and globs of it. He pulls the knife out and then quickly shoves it back in. She spits blood again and his cock grows hard. He picks her up and lays her in the grass behind the bench. He sits back down. It is twelve forty-three. She will be dead by one-thirty. Warm, but dead, anyway . . .

Her warmth bothers Mr. Tate, but he gets off. After his second release, he kisses the dead girl lovingly, impaling his tongue between purplish semi-stiff lips. It isn't as satisfying as work, but he thanks her all the same.

They call Mr. Tate early Sunday morning. Delbrook has been arrested. It seems he went out for lunch, got doped up and smashed his car into a corner bookstand on DeKalb Avenue. He has been put on indefinate suspension. They ask Mr. Tate if he wouldn't mind working seven day weeks--starting tonight--until a replacement is found. Shouldn't take long, they promise.

Mr. Tate hopes they never find a replacement. He loves his job.

Keeps him off the streets.

THE SEVENTH VICTIM

BY JOHN B. ROSENMAN

"What cheer, luv. Would you care for a bit of comp'ny?"

He halted on Commercial Street, seeing a woman about forty whose worn features bore the flush of too many gin-filled nights. Slowly, he smiled.

"I always have time for a proper lady, especially a handsome one like yourself."

Her face warmed as his smile lingered. "You know, I said right away to meself that you was a proper gent, not like most blokes who b'grudge a lydy a pint o' stout." She slipped an arm through his, assessing his vest and costly clothes with a calculating eye. "There's a place right up the rowd. dearier, where we can 'ave ourselves a nip and be comf'rtable. And privacy too, if we wants it."

He ignored her barely concealed leer and continued up the street. The East End was shrouded in fog tonight, its narrow lanes and cobbled streets feebly punctuated at intervals by the glare of the gaslights. The air hung miasmic, reeking of stale beer and dank gutters. Now and then he shivered in the late November chill.

"it's terrible what the bloody sod 'as done, ain't it?" she said. "Six 'elpless victims. I tell you, it's a gharstly 'orror! A lydy don't even dare to walk the streets these days or entertain a gentleman. 'Oo knows, 'e might be the one! And the bloody crushers . . . they don't care! As long as it's not them rich West End snobs 'oo get slit like kippers, we can all rot!"

He turned to her, preoccupied. "I beg your pardon. Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of *whom* am I speaking?" she mimicked, her eyes rolling in a semblance of horror. "Why Jack the Ripper, of course! Ole Springheel Jack." She squeezed his arm tightly and snuggled closer. "That rotter gives me the bloody willies, 'e does. Fancy 'im watching me from behind ev'ry corner, just waiting to do me in!"

Now that she had spoken his secret name, the lassitude that always preceded his work vanished, and he felt his throat thicken with anticipation. Winking, he slipped his arm around her and let it stray. "Rest assured, my dear, you have *me* to protect you."

She giggled, not noticing his mustache had slipped slightly in the darkness, and turned to point up the lane. "'Ere she is, the Coach And Four! We're almost there, luv."

Cursing the moist air, he pressed the mustache in place and gazed up at the public house, hearing a quiet swell of laughter. To go in would be reckless, of course, yet hadn't he flaunted himself each time in public before indulging in his handiwork? He ran a hand through the silvery locks of his wig and

touched his makeup. Yes, it was a brilliant disguise. No one could possibly see any connection between a well-dressed gentleman like himself and the dark phantom in a deerstalker cap who had been reported.

Besides, later that night or the next morning when they found what was left of her, it would be a smashing laugh on thickwitted authorities like the Police Commissioner or George Lusk, the pompous chairman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee. Remembering how he had sent half a tart's kidney to Lusk and signed his letter "Catch me when you can," he burst out in laughter.

"Somethin' funny, dearie?"

"Oh, just a thought." He tipped his bowler and smiled politely. "But I'm afraid we havn't been properly introduced. My name is . . . er, Johnathan Cole, at your service."

She blushed like a school girl and fluttered her eyes. "Amelia Weston, sir, and I'm pleased to meet such a gentleman, especially with Saucy Jack skulkin' abaht with only the worst of intentions."

With only the worst of intentions. He frowned. Though her wretched cockney had seemed authentic, something bothered him. The syncopated speech and vocabulary . . . weren't they just a bit off? Could she possibly be a trap? He ran his eyes over her clothes, noting again the sagging hat with its pathetic flower and faded dress of coarse material buttoned close up around her throat. No, he was being shadow-shy and had nothing to fear. She was just another squalid slut with rotten teeth and a diseased, bloated belly who would hoist her skirts for sixpence or a taste of stout. Just another filthy wormhole like his mother who he had once seen doing a snorting swell in an alley with her back up against the wall and a couple coppers clutched in her fist. She died when he was nine, so rotten that the one room tenement in which they lived had smelled for days even after she had been buried in a common grave.

She was watching him with a frown, and he stiffened, aware that he hadn't answered. Swallowing, he opened the swinging door. "After you, dear," he smiled.

Inside the pub swarmed with rabble. A hodgepodge of local residents milled before the bar, and his eyes sorted the women's shawls and bonnets from the billycock hats of shopkeepers and the peaked caps of manual laborers. Yes, his mother plied her trade in tawdry holes just like this, which he had spent all his life rising above. Yet, though he was a respected surgeon, something dark always pulled him back to these sinful origins where he purged in ritual acts something inside him he could not name.

"Seems a bit quiet tonight,"

she said.

He nodded. The usually boisterous Saturday night crowd did sound subdued, its heart not quite in its laughter. Listening, he quickly determined the reason: most of them were talking about him, about when and where he would strike next. The women's faces seemed especially hectic, filled with forced gaiety and the need to find comfort in public places.

Smoothly, he ushered her to a table and obtained a couple pints of stout from the bar. When he returned, a raucous discussion had just reached fevered pitch at a nearby table.

"Godalmightly, Frank, I swear on me mother's 'ead if it was me as found the filthy bugger, I'd cut orf his bollocks an' feed 'em to the pigs!"

"Ah, shove orf, mate. If ole Leather Apron was to come your way you'd split your bloody drawers!"

Guffaws. Oaths. An upraised fist. Smiling, he glanced at them and sat down, setting a glass before her. "The boys seem a bit excited tonight," he said.

She raised her glass and drained a third of it before speaking. "One of the blokes was sayin' Jack the Ripper was a doctor."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She nodded, taking another gulp. "Yes. On account 'e knows 'ow to cut them pore d'vils up and pluck out their 'arts and livers with 'is knife. They say it takes a knowledge of . . . "

"Anatomy?"

"Yes, that's it, 'natomy."

He smiled and took a sip of the dark, bitter brew, feeling his hunger warm as it went down. 'Blood-lust', someone in the penny press had called it, labeling him a monster without conscience. What would that writer say, he wondered, if he knew that monster saved lives every day with the same hands that committed such atrocities?

She was looking at his hands now, and his face flamed. "Something wrong?"

"Your 'and." She reached over and he saw rough fingers with two broken nails touch his long tapered ones. Something in his belly coiled up in revulsion, prepared to strike before he was ready. "They're so delicate and smooth," she said. "Just like a new-born bybe's."

Slowly, he leaned forward. "Would you like to know what I do with them?"

Her eyes widened. Close up, he watched the pulse beat softly in her throat.

"What?"

"He grinned. "I play women's bodies with them, just as I would a fine piano."

She was holding her breath now, her dull eyes almost hypnotized. Then, explosively, the air escaped her and she laughed nervously. "Coo, sir, you *are* a charmer! Sure you woudln't be codding me now?"

"My dear," he said. "How would you like to spend the evening on smooth satin sheets and have your own maid in the morning?" He forced himself to take her hands in his own. "My residence isn't far. I'll give you ten pounds to spend the night with me."

"*Ten* 'ol couter?"

Her eyes were mesmerized now with visions of West End luxury and splendor, and he urgently pressed her hands to his lips, aware that his appearance was beginning to attract stares from the rowdies at the bar. Thanks to him, tensions were high these days, and a finely dressed stranger was bound to create suspicion. Before it went further, he rose and moved to her chair.

"My dear," he said politely as he drew it back, "we can be drinking the best champagne in less than half an hour."

Outside, hald-dazed by her good fortune, she clutched her handbag and looked around for a carriage while he put on his gloves and took her arm. "I know where we can find a conveyance just a couple streets over."

The fog had thickened since they'd entered the pub, and he steered her expertly through a maze of tangled streets that always reminded him of human intestines, until he knew she was lost. It was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead; their footsteps sounded muted, as if buried in cotton.

"Are we almost there?" Her voice cracked, and he felt her hand tighten on his arm.

"Just a little bit further."

They passed a stinking alley, then another. Without looking, he sensed her confusion change to apprehension, could even taste the rising fear she would not yet admit to herself.

"Sir, we must 'ave come awfully far and I'm . . . I'm gettin' cold. Is it much further?"

For a moment he didn't answer, letting her words sink back into her heart. Then he patted her hand.

"Tell me, Amelia, the gentlemen at the Coach And Four think Red Jack is a doctor. What do you think?"

"Sir?"

"What I mean, my dear, is who do you think Jack the Ripper really is?"

Silence. Beside him, her breath was a hoarse rasp in the night.

"To tell the truth, sir, some o' the girls was finkin' he was a Jew."

He laughed. "Oh, but I'm

not."

"Sir?"

He watched realization sink in like an incision and then, just as her mouth started to open, he thrust his hip against her and followed her into the dark alley he had chosen. Covering her mouth with his hand, he lifted the scalpel from his pocket and pressed its point into the soft flesh behind and under her ear, the *sternoclidomastoideus*.

"I'm surprised, *dearie*, that you'd ever think I was a Jew. Obviously you havn't read the verse I sent in. Let me recite it to you." Drinking in the terror of her eyes, he placed his lips against her ear.

I'm not a butcher,

I'm not a yid,

Nor yet a foreign Skipper,

But I'm your own light-hearted friend,

Yours truly, Jack the Ripper.

And he sliced her.

The blood erupted in a red fountain, and expertly he held her to one side so that only a few drops stained his white gloves. He saw her eyes glaze as her life gushed past him in the air, warming his cold skin and spattering the opposite wall. As her legs gave way, he eased her nearly decapitated body down to the dank floor of the alley where he ripped open her bodice, exposing her bloated, flaccid belly' One smooth cut divided her from her collar bones to her vagina Taking a deep breath, he knelt beside her.

Then he did other things.

When he finally rose, she no longer looked like a woman. Gazing down, he wiped the blade on a handkerchief with practiced gestures and pocketed both, then swore when he found he had an erection. He stepped closer, reaching for his scaple again.

"You bitch. You dirty, filty bitch."

Her hand twitched.

He blinked, then laughed to himself. *Getting shadow-shy again. Starting to see things in the dark.* Heart pounding, he turned to go.

Her hand twitched again. Then the other. Numbly, he backed up against the wall, seeing her whole body stir. *It can't be*, he thought, *I cut her enough times to kill FIFTY people*!

When she rose to her feet, her intestines, which he had draped over her right shoulder, fell with a moist plop to the alley floor. Eyes, where there were no longer eyes, turned to him.

He saw her start forward.

Screaming, he raised his scalpel -- an instant to late. With a quick, sloshing movement, she leaped forward, her hand rising, and slipped a needle into his neck.

"Here's something to help you sleep, Jack."

The ceiling was so far above him that for a long time he thought

it was the sky. As the injection wore off, however, it seemed to descend and acquire an oval solidity like the inside of an egg or a church he had entered once as a child.

His throat hurt.

Instantly his memory returned and he leaped to his feet, his hand darting for his scalpel, which was gone. The alley was gone too. In it's place he saw a vast room that arched high above him. Plus a couch, chairs and . . .

A window.

His mouth opened and he uttered a cry -- the cry of a trapped animal. To call it a window was to ignore its awesome sweep and the blackness beyond, which was studded with pinpoints of piercing light. He took a step forward.

Stars.

He was in some kind of observatory.

But as he watched, one of the pinpoints approached and he knew he was wrong. Before his eyes it grew to the size of a shilling, then a crown. As it neared, features appeared: continents and blue oceans. He sucked in his breath.

Before him was a new world.

"It's 'ardly Whitechapel, is it luv?" a voice said behind him.

He whirled. Ten feet away, sitting in some kind of chair, was a woman. She was holding his scapel.

"Or Spitalfields either, Brother Jack," she winked.

He felt his throat constrict and concentrated on staying calm. "Amelia?" he said.

She nodded with a slight smile. "Yours truly, Jack the Ripper, though that's not the name I use here. As a matter of fact, we don't use names." She rose form her seat, and he saw that her resemblance to the woman he had met was only superficial. This woman was younger, harder, vital and voluptuous. She also wore a uniform of some kind which revealed the subtle anomalies of her body . . . including webbed arms and absent navel.

Seeing his gaze, she looked down at herself. "The distinguishing traits of my race we could camouflage, Jack. But I had a beastly time with that cockney dialect." She met his eyes. "I think you almost caught me once."

Dazed, he nodded, the words springing from him without thinking. "How . . . how did you . . .

"Survive your attack and restore myself?" She laughed. "We have ways, Jack, rather sophisticated ones that make death for my species primarily a matter for history books. We can live forever . . . a fact that makes my encounter with you a rather unfair one." She shrugged. "I'm afraid I took advantage of you, Jack."

He looked away, overwhelmed. This woman . . . he had stalked her as his seventh victim, the first of

many more to come, only to have her rise, gutted and gaping, to sink a needle in his flesh. And now, in this strange place, she reappeared as an alien who for some reason had stalked *him*.

He watched her approach and hand him the scapel. "Look out there, Jack," she said. "This viewport opens into the universe, and in this spacecraft we have visited a thousand galaxies.

He stared at her in horrified disbelief. "Spaccraft? You we're actually . . ."

"What do you do when you live forever, Jack?" she whispered, gazing out at the world that was rapidly drawing closer. "How do you fill the void of endless existence?" Her eyes flicked at him. "Some of us go mad or choose death. The rest of us seek diversions. Diversions which in some ways may be even more warped than your own."

Trembling, he raised the blade, driven by a need to erase the insanity of her words and the desire growing in his own body. She saw it and smiled.

"We both love death, Jack, but only my race makes it a cosmic sport. We call it The Games, and we search and search for killers like you: the most efficent, the most sadistic, the most perverted, and the most cruel. And whatever planet we find them on, Jack, we abduct them. No matter how vicious the species, we ensnare them for our games and pit them against each other. And then . . . we watch, watch as the competition unfolds to determine the ultimate winner."

His scapel was against her throat now, and he saw her touch it with a mocking finger. Almost lasciviously, she licked her lips.

"You want to kill me again, Jack? Well go ahead, but it won't make any difference." Her eyes flashed proudly. "I discovered you *myself*, monitered your exploits personally from space, and I think you can win it all. And if you do, I stand to win quite a sum. After all, most of the so-called smart money is on a mean customer from Taurus."

Her eyes -- and lips -- were just inches away now, and she leaned quickly forward and kissed him, a long, lingering kiss that seemed to suck his soul from his body. Slowly, she moved her breasts against his chest while he squirmed in revulsion and yet felt his body respond.

"If you want, Jack," she whispered hotly, stroking his cheek with her hand, "you can kill me again. It will help keep you in practice."

He cursed and lifted the blade above her laughing, triumphant face, knowing it was too late, that he had finally chosen the wrong victim.

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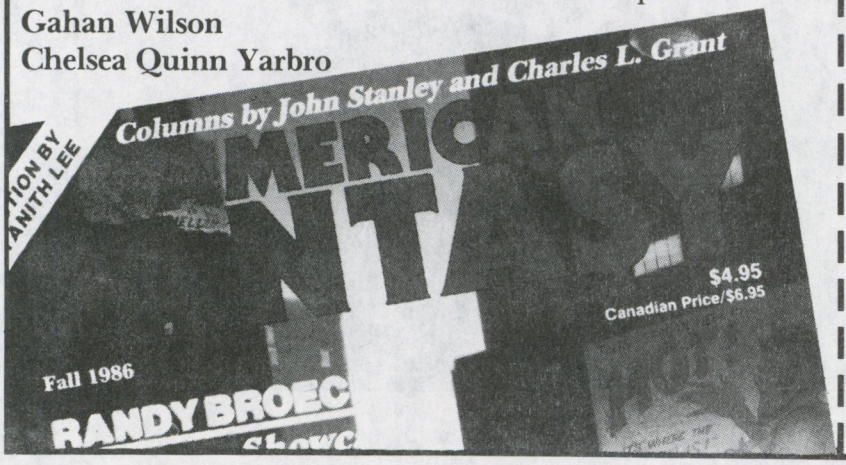

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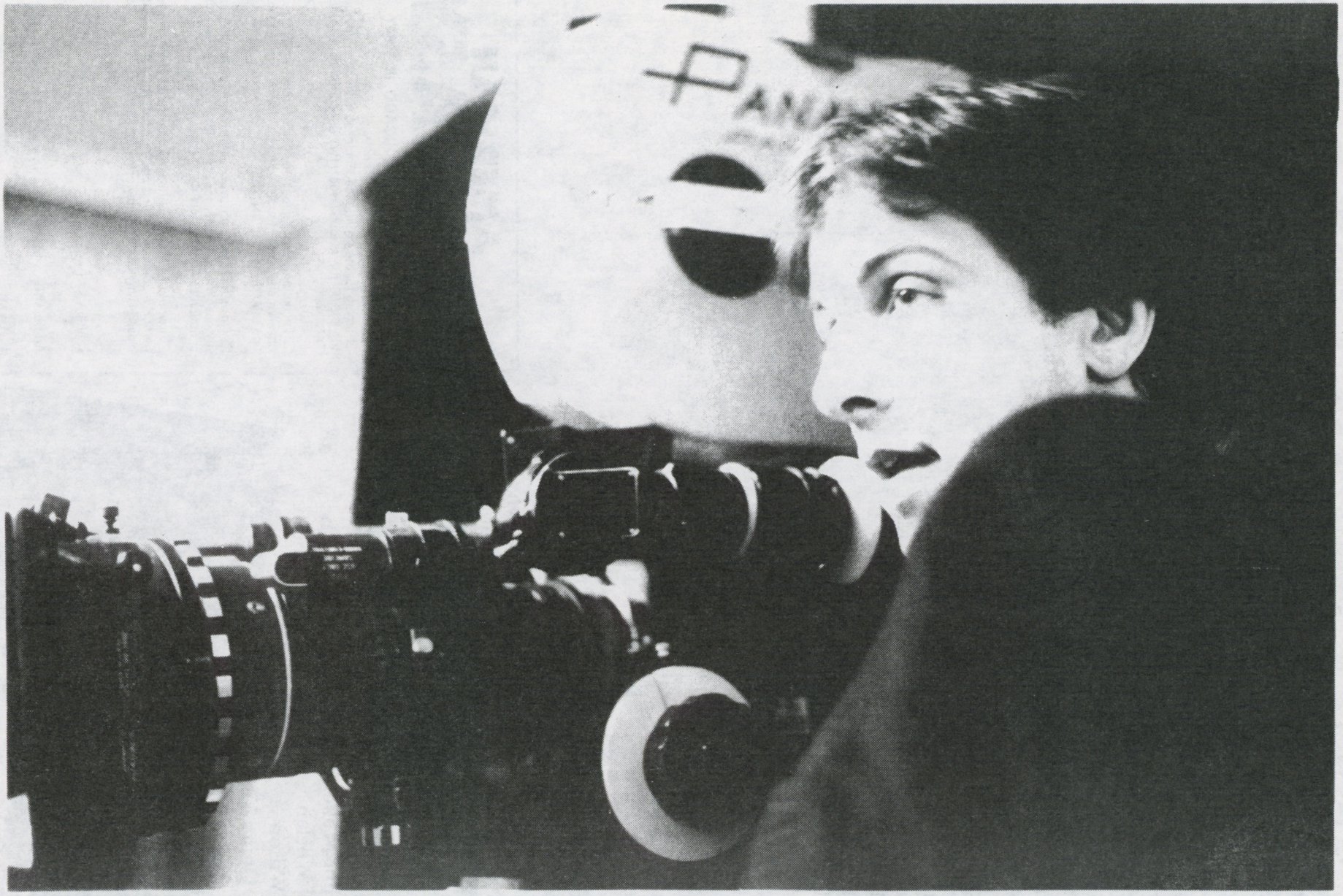

Writer and director **CLIVE BARKER.**

CLIVE BARKER "INNERVIEW"

BY STEVEN NEAL SHAFFER

It has only been a few years since the Books of Blood brought 35 year old Clive Barker to the public's attention. His six volumes of short stories took hoor fans by storm with his unique concoction of no-holds-barred images of dripping gore, sexual madness and nightmare creatures. His descriptive powers often stretch the readers imagination to the breaking point which, in a genre which has often been called glutted, may in part account forhis sudden popularity. He has now translated those hellish visions onto the screen with chilling success.

I met with Mr. Barker at the *Change of Hobbit* bookstore in Santa Monica, where he was signing endless volumes of *Books of Blood*, *Damnation Game* and his recently released fantasy novel, *Weaveworld* -- plus anything else his fans brought in, including a seven foot poster of his movie, *Hellraiser*.

His enthusiasm for his admires seemed as limitless as his imagination as he met each person with a hearty handshake and greeting more appropriate for a long lost friend than an anonymous fan. The autograph party ran an hour and a half; Clive wanted to make sure each fan got the opportunity to meet with him. By the time we spoke his hand was cramped and his voice understandibly hoarse.

SNS: Many critics were amazingly kind to Hellraiser, considering their attitude toward the horror genre in general. How did you feel about what you saw on the screen?

BARKER: *It was a modestly budgeted picture. I'm very pleased with it. It works for the audience, and that's my job. Be it writing or directing.*

SNS: You've written for both the stage and a great deal of fiction. How did you find writing for the screen?

BARKER: *It was quite a pleasurable experience, as was directing. I want to do more, (smiling) much, much more.*

SNS: Your illustrations have received as much attention as your stories. Are you still illustrating?

BARKER: *Of course. In fact I did 17 illustrations in the British limited edition of Weaveworld.*

SNS: Will you ever put your illustrations in a published collection?

BARKER: *I would like to publish a book of illos sometime in the future, but there are no definite plans to do so anytime soon.*

SNS: Any more BOOKS OF BLOOD in the works?

BARKER: *I don't think so. Books of Blood VI will be out sometime next year.*

SNS: The American editions have titles other than Books of Blood: Inhuman Condition and In The Flesh, what will the sixth volume be titled?

BARKER:*I'm not sure yet. "Something"...and the Life of Death, I think. Also, it will contain a new novella.*

SNS: So, what's next on your agenda?

BARKER: *I'm writing a new novel and novella, then I'll start shooting a new movie in the middle of next year. Plus I'm co-writing and producing Hellraiser II.*

SNS: Do you find a difference in expectations between your readers here in the U.S. and in Great Britain?

BARKER:*You saw the crowd here. Some of them in their fifties and sixties, others as young as twelve. There were people in three piece suits and others with mohawks and painted faces--a good cross-section The same is true in Britain. Young, old, all races and professions. No, I really think there's much difference. They all want a good scare.*

SNS: You've been dubbed "The Future of Horror" by you know who. Who do you see as the up and coming writers of the next few years?

BARKER: *Two I can think of offhand. One is Nicholas Royal. He has a story in The Cutting Edge, edited by Dennis Etchison. Another is Peter Atkins. He hasn't published yet, but he's working on the Screenplay for Hellraiser II.*

SNS" Any thoughts on your sudden fame?

BARKER: *I don't think about it, I just get on and have a good time. Fame is like flying. On the ground looking up it appears exciting and romantic. Once in the air its all bad food, stale air and turbulence.*

SNS: Has your life style changed so much that you miss the old one?

BARKER: *I still have my old life. Same friends, not much has changed. I got a new apartment. The movie brought a thrill I didn't expect. It beat out some big studio pictures. I'm very proud of that.*

(Editor's Note: Kevin Locis reports that Clive Barker is quitting horror! Is this his last interview as a horror author?)

THE PARTY

BY LARRY BAUKIN

The young auburn haired secretary with the deep brown eyes moaned with pleasure. She was the sweetest dessert of Jason Gallagher's entire vacation.

Jason lay back on the pillow, basking in the afterglow, thinking: I'll never forget this trip. He was proud of himself for having discovered this lovely little place, a winter mountain resort nestled snuggly by a lake on the eastern slope of the majestic Sierra Neveda, not more than a few miles north of Lake Tahoe.

He felt like lighting a cigarette. But since he'd quit three months before, he glanced at the creamy skinned girl lying beside him, and happily chuckled to himself that it was much healthier to eat then to smoke.

That was when his thoughts of eating melted into images of actual food -- steak, baked potato, beer -- his stomach began to growl for its satisfaction now.

He had come up here for a two week break from the dull office routine of computing and commuting, and after only two days was delighted to discover he'd all but forgotten the depressing hassles of Southern California. He ran his hand down the warm, smooth thigh of Cindy. Was that her name?

"Hey," he asked. "Are you hungry?"

She gave him a sexy little put. "Always."

Oh god, he thought, feeling the blood pumping.

"Listen," he said, "I'm starved. Let's go down to the Lodge Tavern and get old Happy Nick to order us up a couple of steaks and drinks."

Cindy smiled and nodded. Jason glowed inside. Amazing. A winter vacation was what all men needed, he decided. Women, booze, rest, food, women, more booze, and more women. The perfect antidote to city life. Or any life. A little skiing and a little screwing were good for the old circulation. What a girl, he thought, as he gazed at Cindy, languidly stretching her beautiful body along the sheets of the warm bed. What a resort!

Suddenly this mind came back to the stark image of the towering mountains surrounding the tiny lodge, and he vagually recalled the suggestion of a story about the lake, resting only a few yards outside the walls of his room. There was a tale he'd heard concerning this p;lace years ago when he was in college. A legend. Was it about the lake? He couldn't remember. It was one of those nagging memories that lingered at the edge of his mind, picking and teasing at him. Perhaps he'd ask Cindy if she had ever heard of the story concerning --

Just then, he felt a tremor. At first, he thought the movement of

Cindy had caused the bed to vibrate. Then she felt it. They both heard the walls make a low gentle cracking sound.

Then the creaking voices of the building's structure, and the shudder of the earth, abruptly ceased.

They stared at one another for a long silent moment. Each recognizing a small glimmer of fear in the eyes of the other.

Cindy spoke first: "Did you feel that?" Jason nodded. "Yeah. It was a tremor of some sort. Like a shifting of the earth or the rumble of an avalanche."

"An avalanche!" Cindy cried, her voice shaking.

Jason quickly tried to calm her, realizing he had just opened the door to alarm. "No. No." he said, soothingly. "There's not enough snow on the slopes for an avalanche." That sounded like a good one. "Don't worry about it. It's only a minor earth tremor. Hell, we,re only a stone's throw from the lovely quake faults of California." Jason grinned at her. "Come on. Let's get dressed and go down to Happy Nick's. I'm famished."

He pinched her hard on the side of her bouncy left breast, and she squirmed and giggled.

"Maybe later, we'll even get a little time in on the slopes," he laughed

After a couple of slides down the mountain on his skis and on his butt, Jason found himself once again relaxing on a barstool nursing a Molson Ale. Cindy had gone off to her room, or for all he knew, someone else's room, or maybe even back to one of the around-the-clock parties that seemed to haunt the resort like a pack of spirits, whose sole purpose was to raze the living and bring them to life, rather then to worry the dead.

Happy Nick, the heavily bearded bartender, tipped his leather hat back from his forehead, giving Jason the impression, in the semi-darkness of the tavern, that he was standing at an authentic rustic -- a mountain man, or at the very least, a Hollywood stand-n for Dan Haggerty.

Happy Nick was drying some shot glasses when Jason spoke. "Hey Nick, did you feel the earth tremor earlier today?"

"Yeah," grinned Nick, his big teeth gleaming. "I thought it was from you and that P.O.A. getting it on so heavily that you were going to rattle the house down."

They both laughed heartily. Happy Nick was never without a wise-ass comment. Jason loved it. The resort was not a place to take anything seriously, he reminded himself. And thank god for that.

"P.O.A., piece of ass, you can count on that when you're talking about Cindy." Jason responded

gleefully.

Nick poured his favorite customer another Molson and winked.

Next morning, Jason awoke with a screaming hangover. After he had left Happy Nick's barstool, he never should have wandered down the hall from his room to the place of the music and voices, he told himself. It was the old familier sound of the Rolling Stones, the eternal rockers, that beckoned him. Plus how could he resist the long svelt legs of the lively young lady named Diane who now entwined him in the bed.

What a gorgeous P.O.A., as Nick would say, Jason smiled to himself. Only this morning, with the hangover pounding between his temples, she would have to do all of the work as he lay on his back.

Amazing how quickly one can forget the pains of a hangover, he marveled.

Afterwards, they lay in silence, Diane smoking a cigarette, and Jason wishing for one, but abstaining. Will power, he beamed to himself.

That was when he got the odd feeling. It washed over him all of a sudden like a small ripple from the lake outside -- or a brush of a windswept snow from the ski slope.

The feeling had something to do with time. For just an instant, he had no idea what time it was -- not just minutes and hours, but days, weeks seasons, even years. It was as if he'd just then slipped into a place of confusion. A place where time could not be grasped in term of calendars and clocks. For a second, he wanted to panic. "What time of year is it?" he began to mumble to Diane, but caught himself. "She'll think I'm nuts." he murmured.

And then, just as suddenly, the strange sensation of time disorientation passed away.

"Are you okay?" Diane asked, looking concerned.

Jason smiled. "Oh yeah." Forget it, he ordered himself. Maybe it was the girl that temporarily rocked my boat. Sure. Why not?

Later that afternoon, Jason wandered downstairs to Happy Nick's bar for a cup of hot black coffee. He sat down, looked around and noticed the room looking nearly deserted.

"What's up, stud?" barked a gruff voice, startling him to attention.

"Where's business?" Jason inquired. "Everybody must be hung up in their rooms nursing hangovers." Jason paused, and winked at Nick. "Or hanging over nurses."

Happy Nick didn't grin. He didn't look too happy.

"Anything wrong?" asked Jason, sipping his coffee.

"Not good," replied Nick,

"Last night, after that tremor you talked about, somebody from the lodge disappeared."

"Disappeared? What do you mean?"

"I heard it was some guy from Iowa or Illinois, or some damn place like that, went out to get some tapes from his car and never came back. The sheriff's out searching for him now. That's all I know." Nick paused, looking somber. "This kinda shit puts a damper on a place like this, you know." he grumbled.

Just then, the phone at the other end of the bar rang. Nick moved off to answer it.

Suddenly the fragmented memory of that hazy legend from his college days welled up inside Jason like a small mushroom, growing slowly, but growing. He still couldn't put his finger on it. But he knew there was a weird story, a bizarre tale that came out of this area of the country. Was it out of the lake? Or off the eerie windswept slopes of the High Sierra? He only knew that it was something. Not being able to remember was starting to gnaw at him

Maybe he'd ask Nick.

But no sooner had he decided when a large party of resort revelers burst into the bar and Jason soon forgot his train of thought.

The night passed in another blur of parties, faces, voices, and sleek, titillating bodies.

The following afternoon, Jason sat alone in the lodge restaurant picking at his lunch. Why is this room so empty? he wondered.

Awhile later, he poked his head into the larder of Happy Nick. He spied the big bushy beard resting under the floppy leather hat. The bar was all but deserted.

"Where are your fans?" Jason asked.

"Look out the window. Storm starting." Nick answered. "Blizzard, from the north. I guess people are worried about getting stuck here and they're starting to split back home."

Jason sat down. "Hell, I'm not. I'm having a ball. This is my vacation. This is paradise. What's the matter with people?"

Happy Nick handed Jason a Molson and narrowed his line of sight into the eyes of his customer. "There was another disappearance last night," he began slowly.

"What?" Jason said aghast. "Did they ever find the first guy?"

Nick shook his head, no. "And what's worse, this time, they found the guy's camper, but no sign of him. Not even tracks in the snow!"

"What do you think is going on?"

Nick shrugged. "Hell if I know."

An odd, inexplicable feeling

began to sweep over Jason. He recalled the tremor of several nights ago and the strange feelings that seemed to come after. He stared at Happy Nick and told him of the experience of time disorientation he'd felt while with Diane.

Nick listened attentively, stroking his whiskers.

"It was," Jason concluded, "as if the idea of time as I knew it had slipped out of my grasp. Disappeared. I was.....sort of .....lost."

A look of recognition flared in Nick's eyes, as if he knew the feeling Jason was trying to describe. A feeling that he wasn't comfortable admitting.

Maybe I outa get the hell outa Dodge, now Jason told himself. After all, if most people are leaving what am I gonna do? Sit here and watch the snowflakes fall? Fuck it. I'm gone.

"Hey, you guys!" a voice suddenly shouted from the doorway of the bar. "Did you hear?"

Both men turned to see a young red-headed man, half out of breath, speaking rapidly.

'What's that?" asked Nick.

"A girl, mane's Cindy, I think. Something's happened!"

"Wait a second," interrupted Jason. "What's she look like?"

The red-headed man paused, cupped his hands to his chest and snickered. Big knocks. Auburn hair --"

Jason whirled his head to face the bartender. "It's her, Nick, the girl I was with the night of the tremor. Cindy."

"Yeah. Yeah. What happened to her?" Nick asked the man.

The man shook his head. "A couple of hours ago we were having a party in the game room and this girl, Cindy, came in as high as a kite. I mean she was flying. Anyway, all she had on was a big fur coat and a bikini underneath. A real snow bunny. Luscious....."

"Go on!" ordered Jason.

"Oh yeah. She was giggling a whole lot and bet this guy she'd drop the coat and jog to the ski lift and back. And look at it out there, man. It's already snowing." The man laughed in spite of himself. "She's crazy, running off half-naked into a snowstorm."

Nick stared at the red-headed goof. "You say this happened a couple of hours ago?"

"Yeah, and they haven't found her yet. She just didn't jog back. You know, a lot of people are getting nervous about the number of sudden disappearances around here lately."

"Yeah. Yeah." snapped Jason. "Did you notify the authorities?"

"Oh sure," replied the man. "That's why I'm here. They're looking for volunteers for a search of the area."

"Thanks pal," Happy Nick said as the man left.

Jason glanced at the empty doorway, then back to the bartender. "It's her alright. I gotta go help look for the girl, Nick!" he said, frantically.

"Hold on a second, I'll go with you. This place is dead anyway." said the barkeep. "Let me lock up here, and we'll take my Trailblazer."

Within a few short minutes, the two men found themselves cutting tire tracks into the already heavily packed snow encrusted onto the mountain roadway. The winter storm was in full bloom now as the flurries swirled about the Trailblazer like a host of white insects, fluttering and crashing into the roaring metal monster.

Nick's floppy leather hat never budged on his head as he wheeled the vehicle along through the head winds of the storm. He reached behind his seat and pulled out a six pack of Coors. Handing a can to Jason, he said, smiling, "Motion lotion."

Jason gladly took one, thankful for something to hang on to.

The time flew by as the Trailblazer struggled through the snow. Jason popped his third beer, shouting above the din of the blizzard. "We can't even see ten feet in front of our faces, how are we gonna see Cindy?"

"I don't know. Maybe we oughta turn back," yelled Nick.

Jason began to feel an eerie chill climb up his back. "Oh hell," he said, trying to shake it off. "That little P.O.A. is probably getting it on at some other lodge somewhere, while we're out here freezing our asses off all over these back roads."

Happy Nick laughed. "I hope so."

So did Jason.

Just then, Nick pulled to an abrupt stop. "What's the matter?" Jason asked, tense.

Happy Nick grinned his big tooth smile. "Got to empty my lizard. Beer must have alot of water in it."

Jason laughed loudly, hoping to ease some of his tension.

As the violent wind kicked up the snow around the vehicle, Jason could barely make out Nick's form standing over by a large pine tree several long yards from the window. The bartender's figure resemble a hazy character fluttering in and out of sight on the screen of a malfunctioning television. Several times the large man disappeared entirely in a volcanic cloud of whiteness.

Jason opened a fourth can of Coors and rolled down his window. "Hey, Nick!" he yelled. "Don't freeze it off!"

Without warning, an inexplicable sensation of alarm began

to envelop Jason like the blanket of snow outside.

"Hurry up!" he shouted.

But if his companion answered, he couldn't hear him over the howl of the blizzard. He wondered if Cindy could still be outside in this treacherous weather. He shuddered at the thought He glanced in his friend's direction one more time and realized he had lost sight of him completely. Where in the hell is he? "Dammit," he muttered.

After a few minutes more of nervous waiting, Jason climbed out of the vehicle. Immediately, he felt a blast of icy wind slap into the skin of his face. A flurry of snowflakes lifted in front of him and he spied Happy Nick's figure standing next to the tree. A feeling of relief flooded through him as he recognized the leather hat and the full black beard.

"You okay?" Jason called.

Nick shook his head, yes.

"Good," Jason shouted. "You must have a b;ladder as full as a damn oil drum." He chuckled out loud. "Let's go, man. Back to the lodge. I need a warm woman for my cold ass."

There was no response from Nick.

Slowly, Jason trudged through the thick snow, now sucking at the soles of his boots like a cold mouth. As he approached his partner, he once again felt the same odd sensation of time disorientation. Timeslip -- if there even was such a word. His heart banged against his ribs and he wanted more then anything else to get back to the lodge and away from wherever they were now. The icy fingers of panic began to get a vise- like grip on his neck.

The crazy snowflakes furiously slammed into his eyes and he blinked as he tapped Nick on the side of his shoulder. He could barely hear his own words over the roar of the wind. "You married to this tree or something? Let's get oughta here!"

That was when he saw it.

The face -- the face of a man whose mind was gone. The expression blank and insane looking.

This was not Happy Nick.

The pale skin and sunken eyes told him of a face that was beyond fear, beyond desperation, beyond anything human.

Jason reeled back in shock, almost slipping on the sticky, wet ground.

It was then that he noticed the body of Happy Nick lying several feet away, motionless and bloody, half-buried in the newly fallen snow.

"Oh my god!" Jason cried, stepping back from the hideous figure now standing in front of him.

In a frenzy, Jason whirled and ran for the Trailblazer, stumbling

over his own slippery feet as he went. The snow beneath his boots pulled at him like tight rubber.

He hadn't scurried but a few feet when he saw them.

Six or seven hazy figures began to emerge from the swirling cloud of snow, appearing in circle around the Trailblazer. Their faces started to become clearer to him the closer he approached, forming into distinct individuals like the images coming up on a Polaroid picture. They appeared to be holding weapons -- long rifles, shotguns.

Maybe they're searchers, like me, Jason hoped. Or hunters? Why not?

"Who are you?" Jason called.

No answer.

Why don't they move? he wondered, almost in terror. They're like goddam statues.

Over the screaming howls of the snow storm, Jason was certain he heard the name, 'Foster', being uttered. His burning mind raced back to the feelings he had experienced during the tremor -- the feelings of a time shift. He felt as though his heart would explode out of his chest as the thoughts of Cindy, and the missing vacationers passed through him like an ice filled river.

And the long forgotten memory he had heard during his college days forced itself into his conscious mind like the figures materializing from the twisting snow before him, crystalizing into the horror that now stood but a few feet away.

The faces. The faces of ravaged and destroyed souls.

And the memory. The college memory of that misplaced legend, now risen from his subconscious mind; a brilliant colored painting covered the wall inside his head with a mural of the story he had tossed aside in his thoughts years ago.

It was the tale of a group of people. Eighty-seven people who left Independence, Missouri in the summer of 1846, headed for the wonders of California. Only they never made it. In late October, marooned in the snows of the High Sierras, they spent the winter here at this pass, and by the lake, where presently stood the popular mountain lodge of Jason's pleasures. He recalled that early snow had trapped them, and their limited supplies soon gave out. He remembered the tales of the cold, and their suffering -- suffering that finally caused the hunger maddened Donner Party to feed upon the flesh of the living and the dead.

He realized that the tremor had somehow triggered a passageway from a hundred and forty years ago to now.

As the ragged and half-frozen figures loomed before him like shadows from his own nightmares, he recognized that they also had been caught in the strange, unexplained

disruption of the tremor, and its violation of the interface of time.

Jason could see in their ravaged faces that they too were as lost as he was.

In some way, these dying, starving creatures had slipped through into Jason's easy world without knowing how or why, and now, in their hungry desperation, they no longer cared.

It didn't matter anymore.

Only one thing mattered.

Oh god, Cindy, what happened to you? It can't be real. It can't be! He screamed like a little boy in his lonely terror.

Food. Yes, that was it. Food. Of course! I'm an idiot! Why didn't I say it?

"I've got food!" he yelled. "Come with me. I can help you. Come with me. I'll feed you!"

The sound of the raging storm filled his head like an expanding detonation, drowning out his own voice. From the exploding cloud of snowflurries that clothed him now, he watched, horrified, as the man called Foster unsheathed his hunting knife.

The dim figures shrouded in the thick white fog appearing and disappearing in front of Jason's burning eyes, were moving towards him.

Lost, shivering, lonely, afraid and insane from starvation, they stood before him. They gleamed in his terrified eyes, as he surely must have, in the hungry pit of theirs.

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SWEET VENGEANCE

BY ERSKINE CARTER

Julie Henderson felt like a cool vigilante as she hurried down the basement stairs of the Life Sciences building. The dead school yard outside was so alive compared to this morgue of a science factory , she thought. Tonight, she would finish it off.

By the time she reached the lab, the prospect of sweet vengeance had risen inside her and wedded with the sensational throb in her dry throat.

A thin smile broke across her blemished face and she laughed so hard her taut nipples burned against her Levis workshirt. She palmed a dissecting scalpel affectionately and slapped it against her thigh as if she was stropping a razor.

She would fix that bastard Mr. Peters once and for all. he should have thought twice before flunking her on three mickey mouse tests and then reading her plagiarized essay on nuclear war to the whole snivelling class. How was she to know he had read the original in Omni?

His supposed policy was never mentioning whose essay it was. He didn't have to. The prick just stood by your desk and read it out loud while you gurgled like a seal with it's throat cut. Then he had the balls to keep her after class and tell her what great potential she had and how she was going to seed, while all the time his dirty old man's eyes were triggered on her crotch, probably he'd like to plant some seed of his own, the wimp.

Peters had crossed her, so it was tough cookies to him and his lab. He shouldn't have centered her out, but that was his mistake. This would teach him to play tricks on the wrong kid.

Getting inside was easy. Almost too easy, Julie thought, remembering the time she stole into the Friends of Oslo hockey rink back in Duluth and torched it to the ground, ice and all, after they tossed her out for leaving her skate blade in the balls of an oversexed ice warden. And they never even nabbed her for that one. They blamed it on some snow shoveling drifter who confessed for the free room and board in the county jail.

Compared to that caper, the science lab was a breeze. She just busted the opaque glass in the door with twirpy Foureyes Freddy Bronson's textbook, twisted the brass knob from the other side, and walked in. Except for the cheeching of Alley Oop and the squealing of Bilbo, Frodo, Gollum and Gandalf, the lab was as quite as church on a Monday.

Now for the fun.

A warm trickle invaded her palm. She stuck her hand in her mouth and tasted saltsweet blood. Delicious. She sucked it away and the thought of giving and receiving hurt numbed her. But only for a

moment.

She stood in the pitch black chamber and plotted her course. The lad animals could wait. Their startled cries might attract attention but she savored dealing with them for the grand finale.

She touchtoed from memory to Peters' desk and switched on the oscilloscope. The apparatus purred like a horny cat and the checkerboard screen lit up with a sonar-like pulse beat.

The Oscilloscope cast a bluish-green glow across the room, highlighting her acne-ravaged face. Reaching behind to the master control panel, she adjusted the sweep until the electron beam broadened and the brilliant wide trace reached into all the lab's hidden recesses.

A jingling like wind chimes whirled her around and she found Dr. Bones grinning at her. He hung from the ceiling, suspended three feet above the floor, tinkling rhythmically to her own heartbeat.

Peters once told her that Dr. Bones was originally all there until he sold his soul to the booze devil and his body to science for three hundred long pissed away dollars. Tonight, his bones were bleached, dried, and getting on her nerves. She glared at his shrieking smile and the birdhouse eye sockets gawked indignantly over the brass pins and knurled nuts attaching his hips to his joints. Here was one old fuck who would never talk back to her.

"You'd never make it through a metal detector, brother," she whispered.

She flicked her almost dead Bic and peered into the chemical closet, which was carelessly left ajar, as usual. She removed the pint bottles of nitric acid, glycerin and a jar of flowers of sulphur, and stashed them in her purse which she left by the door.

Moving along, she unhooked the periodic table from the wall and laid it on the cold tile floor. She jumped on it. Two solid stomps were enough to send it beyond salvageability.

Her thighs began to grow warm, as they always did when she took sweet vengeance.

Inside the apparatus compartments, the evenly banked rows of testubes and beakers stared back at her just like Uncle Jimmy's moonshine equipment. She hunched over, nudged one shoulder behind each and thrust the compartments forward. Alley Oop screeched.

Julie broke into an angry sweat. "Hold your piece, you ignorant ape. You'll get a turn."

Shards of glass avalanched across the room like silver dollars escaping from a one armed bandit. She hauled the transparent globe off Peter's desk and tossed the earth into the whirling maelstrom. Then

she flung the solar system after it for company.

After all, this was a party. Might as well do in the whole goddam galaxy.

She fished out the dissecting kit she had ripped off from Foureyes Bronson's locker. It was a beauty. Made for slicing. The leather carrying case came apart like an uncoiling rattler and the Swedish steel glinted in the pulsating light.

Julie surveyed her tools with the detachment of a tree surgeon. Stretched out before her were two scalpel handles with ten assorted blades, dissecting needles, surgical scissors and a blowpipe. The last item usually made her giggle, but not tonight. She fitted a curved blade into the receptacle of a scalpel handle. Four eyes probably never had the balls to use this, she thought, but maybe somebody had used it on his once.

The slim haft weighted nicely in her palm when she experimented with the blade on the face of the nervous system chart. She ambled toward the animal cages, recollecting a story she had read in a detective magazine a few years ago about an elusive murderer in L.A. or Chicago dubbed The Slasher because he specialized in victimizing young women, slicing them to tatters with his tender, stroking edge.

But she had always believed the papers were wrong. Only a woman could truly understand the needs of her sisters, and what was more caring than one woman offering the gift of a sharp, loving edge to another? And lovingly, caressingly, out of calculated spite for her plight, no less.

Julie warmed to these thoughts and moved down to Biology.

Alley Oop was getting on her nerves with his banana calls. She would make the ape wait and stew in his impatience.

"Monkey ragout," she said with a giggle

The aquariums were child's play. Julie toppled them on their side and watched their colonist slither and swim across the murky floor. And Peters once told her salt and fresh water fish don't mix! The wimp ought to be here tonight watching them dance with one other.

An armada of displaced hermit crabs scrambled between her feet as she planted her toes in front of the rat cages. There were four of the white wretches tonight, two less than a week ago when Micky Silverstone, the class clown, zeroed them with a homemade flu vaccine.

Boom! Boom! and there went Merry and Pippin flat on their backs and deader than Tolkien in less than two minutes. It had been a rough day in Middle Earth and only Bilbo, Frodo, Gandalf and Gollum remained at their posts. You should have seen

that little prissy Amy Ryan and her cheerleading friends go all white, Julie thought. Jesus, she hated that bunch. What she would give for a fresh go at them with her cutter.

Peters had stuck Bilbo and Frodo in the breeding cage this afternoon. The door was on the front, so she tipped the screen box on its rear, making escape impossible. She released the latch, thrust her hand inside, and secured Bilbo around the midriff. Frodo raised himself on his puny haunches and desperately tried to propel himself over the side. Julie stared into Bilbo's re-rimmed eyes and inserted the scalpel into her furry throat.

The blade disappeared like a kid slipping under a circus tent and almost magically reappearing at the base of her tail.

Within a heartbeat Bilbo was wearing a red and white Santa suit and losing all of her tight fitting packages. Julie turned Bilbo over and squeezed her entrails into the porous cage bedding, the same way she got the good stuff out of cherry turnovers, then tossed her gutted sack back inside for Frodo to bawl over.

"Enjoy your wedding night, dears."

Then she paid a visit to Gollum and Gandalff who were furiously trying to flee on their treadmill. A futile ploy. Gollum was already pregnant. Julie grasped her pencil-stick tail and held her over the Vaughn collapsible cage while she slit her apart from her ratsvagina to her quivering pink jaw. The blood bruised over her hands like a frothless cream soda and she laughed at Gandalf who cowered under the rain of his caeserian section, dead children. Satisfied, she snapped the door to and turned on Alley Oop.

The chunky chimp ad retreated to the farthest corner of his wire and straw jungle. Julie measured the fear in his eyes and laughed at his gibbering chatter. Gripping the scalpel tightly, she approached him. It was hard to tell if he was expecting the murderous lunge she had promised or not. It didn't matter, though. A dull glint of steel betrayed her anyway.

"Goddammit!" she screamed as Alley Oop clamped down his fierce teeth and tore through her heavy workshirt. It shredded like month old hot dog tubing and a hot bolt of agony shot up her arm. The fucking ape had cut her!

She muffled another scream and wrenched her arm free. She ha to give up her scalpel, thought, and it earned her a quilt of fiery striations along her right forearm. Sporting an erection, Alley Oop crouched on his haunches while she cursed him and pretended to retreat across the demolished lab.

"You dirty fucking ape bastard! I'll have your balls!"

Wracked by hot waves of excruciating pain, Julie shuddered, reached into the dissecting kit, and furiously extracted another scalpel.

he rotten chimp! Not since the night her two cousins took her cherry at the point of a pitchfork had she crested on such deliciously excruciating peaks. There was more than ordinary moisture between her sticky thighs now as she shakily selected an amber bottle from the chemical closet and stealthily returned.

She tried willing the pain from her mind the way she'd seen an indian fakir do it on TV. For a moment, she was blinded by a prism of colors that crystallized in the back of her head and shattered into Tiffany spangles. It worked. The pain disappeared as did it's singularly distracting pleasure.

She unscrewed the safety cap and poured the bottle's contents into an unbroken beaker. Alley Oop matched her cunning advance with sneaking retreating steps of his own. Julie's breath was fast and hard and Alley Oop was whining and screeching with no time to breathe. They both ran out of maneuvering room. Alley Oop rose to meet Julie's gaze, faltered, then found it.

He shouldn't have bothered, she thought, flinging the sulphuric acid smack into his face and roaring with laughter when he collapsed and played epileptic on the cage floor.

"Still want a banana, fuckface? Wait till your daddy sees you Monday morning!"

The sweet smell of sulphur danced in Julie's nostrils as Alley Oop's face melted away. His hair and skin evaporated like a ten in a cokehead's pocket, leaving unplugged sockets and a vacant hole where his eyes and mouth used to be.

Dr. Bones was jingling from the ceiling. She would show him something he could really go ape over.

She retrived her original scalpel and selected a pair of Playtex gloves above a deep sink. She pulled them on painfully and slapped the scalpel into her right hand. She stretched her bloodstained arm into Alley Oop's cage and dragged his squirming lump to the straw-littered threshold. Alley Oop pawed at her feet and she stepped on his hand and crushed it until it crunched with a dull thud. Then she firmly stationed his disintegrating head and drew a deep faultline between what remained of his eroding ears.

It was time he learned to shave.

Alley Oop twitched in the throes of her frenzy and his wracking chest heaved up chunks of sputum and pus. Just one last detail, she decided, suddenly cutting off his balls and cock shoving them into his startled mouth, Mau Mau style.

There, the bastard. That

would teach him.

She yanked down Dr. Bones and smashed him to bits on the wet floor.

And now the science lab was indeed as silent as a crypt, except for the steady bleep of the oscilloscope. Julie fixed that with a blow from the Triple Beam Scales and stood in the darkness. It was time to go home.

Turning on the gas jets was too risky. She didn't want to chance blowing up her works of art in the science gallery. She got her purse and shivered deliciously at the pangs in her shredded right arm. If she got bored before the weekend was out, she had enough acid left to fix up a present for Peters' wife's pretty face...

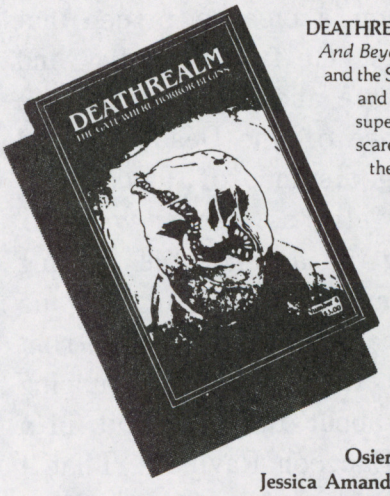
...But before that, maybe, just maybe, she would let Peters ball her. And make sure he ate her out. And reamed her hard, so hard it hurt them both with delicious pain. She had Aids. Before this was all over, she might be able to infect half the school, including the faculty, where she could swear she caught it.

She closed the door to a tinkle of deputtied glass, laughed once for the sweet vengeance, and hurried into the cool night.

The banquet lay behind her. There was still cleaning up to do and chemicals to stash. And a world to fuck. But so far, all in all, not a bad even's work.

Deathrealm

THE GATE WHERE HORROR BEGINS



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DOUGHFOOT SANCTUM

BY JAMES WILLIAM HOLZER

I could smell the blood *cumup*. It's the sixth day of the eleventh month in Judea and one above zero. SevroSquadron 999 has been diddybopping on a cleanup sweep that began on the Gulf of Aqaba and ended where we are now, Sedom, on the south shore of the Dead Sea and within spitting distance of Jordan.

Night fell, so there was no point running it around the rolling hills the terrain computer told us were sand heaps. A Ta'amire Grunt we rolled up while he was grubbing food told us about this shortcut in a place called Raccoon Ravine. That'll put us about thirty-five klicks from New Jer*USA*lem, but Moseby smelled ambush. The Grunt lied. We capped him good. *Real good.*

The war would be over by George Herbert Walker Bush Memorial Day, Sergeant-Major Moseby promised us. And I believe him.

999 broke out the carbon epoxy quonsets and struck a firebase under the cover of some overhanging cliffs, a windfree alley that'll keep the sand blowing off the Negev out of your mouth and nose. I put out the moisture collectors for the nuke reactor we tote around that makes gallons of non-radioactive waste water, then doused the drippings with halozone purifier, just in case. Tastes as good as we call it, Bam-Bam Juice.

Two hours later we're a Free Fire Zone. GEN computers probed the wave of black faces running us and the figure them to be UAR Grunts and Wacky Jacks---Turks, Libyans, Moroccans, Pakistanis, Iranians---*Number Ten. The Worst.* Twenty thousand, tallied GEN. Mostly Wacky Jacks. A real wave. 999 really had to bust caps at those Wacky Jacks because they really ran it back at us.

I'm a B-gunner on a MaxiFire Team working off a four-wheeler flatbed armed with a HBV-6, a twenty-millimeter AutoCannonade, that's five, seven-barrel Gatling turrets that fire thiry-two thousand rounds per minute. Fire's so thick it'll vaporize missiles, jets, Slicks, waves. Problem is you tap *The Beast* in one minute and you need a good day for a reload. So you hop off the flatbed and close with the unfriendlies. That's when you begin *building the dream.*

Most of our guys carry Chinese Army 126 silenced machine guns because the plastic disc baffles suppresses the noise and keeps the crummy sand out of the works. This war's sure hell on the ears: *ha ha.* So, you've spent your only sixty round clip and you whip out your K-Bar to slice and dice the Grunts. I'm an ear collector, nothing unique. Won a bone-handled Bowie last June with a 999 record, three hundred confirmed kills. That's unusual. That's six hundred ears. I did a trade-up with that Bowie, got a ten-

year packet of peas and carrots buzzed with Gamma Colbalt 60 to keep it fresh. Great eats, I'll tell you.

Ear collecting started as a rumor two years ago. Someone said that the first Gook to take ten thousand pair got shipped by COMBANK to Monaco for a month's R & R. COMBANK picked up on it and started offering all kinds of incentives.

One lousy Dragonfly Slick broke the back of the Wacky Jack wave, greasing for good the dragasses we drove into the Ravine. Dropped a petroleur/ether mist set afire on top of them. Daniel 8:4 is always talking about some valley in the Bible filled with bodies and blood stacked up as high as a horse's bridle. He was really looking forward to seeing it.

The whole fireflight lasted ten minutes. Long Lips and Flak Jack Borry got put down by Doctor Croc. Nice guys, not scuzzies, knew them slightly. They weren't ear collectors, always railed against it. Funny how those anti-ear types seem to get selected early by Doctor Croc .....

Heard by accident some scuzzie scheme to take easy ears from those burned Wacky Jacks in the Ravine. I went dinky-doo when I heard that, I wanted to frag those 999 scuzzballs good. See, ears don't count except in pairs and only those taken hand-to-hand. I had a good laugh when those scuzzies got there and found black goo up tp their ankles where Wacky Jacks used to be. Seems the KIA data bank completed the body count and dispatched a SHADOW rotocraft to drop twelve tons of Blue Snow on the corpses. That damn computer sure has a fetish about contaminating diseases. Made that bloody mess mud in seconds.

November 30. Took a hundred pair of Grunt and Wacky Jack ears this month. Average. Best thing I could win was a thousand gallon blivet of diesel fuel HALO'ed and abandoned in the East Negev. I still had a bad taste in my mouth having run out of diesel during the Siege of Revivim. Luck has it that 999 won't get a fuel drop for two weeks and I'm sittin' on a gold mine. I traded-up for stuff you wouldn't believe.....

999 moved real easy, resting and re-arming. We ended up at the Caves of Engedi, near the Dead Sea and about sixteen klicks south of New Jer*USA*lem. I hear that the New City is a staging area for UAR regulars we call Kings. Kings wear blue and grey uniforms trimmed with gold braiod. A King's ears with matching braid are worth twenty times a Grunt's ears. *Twenty times.*

It was a great earthquake at the beginning of the war that did the most damage to the New City, laid

the whole Middle East flat besides--you could diddybop for months and not find a wall standing anywhere. The Libyans added insult to injury, dusting New Jer*USA*lem with a piperdyl glycolate mist. This made the citizens totally *fugazzi*, so crazed they emulsified each other with extreme intolerance. Then Wacky Jacks swept in to cleanup and started crucifying corpses for revenge. If you can picture twent-five thousand *SABRAS* up on stakes you can see why 999 calls those scuzzballs Wacky Jacks.

Nobody knows for sure who to pray to over here for victory. There's Allah, Jehova, Krishna, Lenin, Buddha, Mahavir and good old J.C. I've got this theory that God's either an Iranian or a Pakistani because they're winning this war. The Soviets and Red Chinese havn't sent replacements to 999 in two years. They lost heart after the Ukraine got dust-bombed with anthrax and Beijing was blanketed with Sarin and GB nerve gasses during the third week of the war. I like 999 the way it is, ninety-nine percent all-American. We've got the remaining force of the Israeli *Saiyeret* who taught us more than we want to know about the desert warfare. And five *Tojoe* Zappers who sleep the day away in Conex body containers to build up their visual purple for night recon. Those guys could be the only living Tojoes in the world, but you know that story. They won't collect ears, but I hear that COMBANK would have to buy them prime beach property on the French Riviera if they ever let the KIA databank tally their total confirmed kills. They never carry Chinese burpguns, only long, sharp K-Bars. To tell you the truth, they scare the crap out of me.

The COMBANK directive for the Engedi mission read as follows: Clean the caves of unfriendlies, destroy/confiscate found caches of weapons/supplies (we cop them), and assult New Jer*USA*lem to destroy the Muslim shrine on Mount Moriah, The Dome of the Rock. 999 always ignores that last directive. It crops up once a month without fail. COMBANK says do it, it'll demoralize the enemy once and for all. 999 knows better. Touch The Dome and you'll have a suicide wave running at you, revengeful as wolves. *Pass.*

Messin' with The Dome is how this friggin' war started in the first place. Some Zealots wanted that same spot on Mount Moriah to build a new temple to replace the old one razed by the Romans in biblical times. They wanted this new temple as a house for an Englishman named Malcolm Fox-Godfrey, who they swore was the Messiah. (Daniel 8:4 thinks the guy was the Antichrist.) The Muslims wouldn't budge so some dinky-doo called The Hammer flew a Slick over the Dome and bombed it with a hundred gallons of hog blood,

redwashing it good. Now Muslims feel about hogs like 999 feels about rabid palm tree rats racking up in our quonsets. It made them real irate.

There are about one billion Muslims in this world, so you can see how they could foot an army of two hundred million Kings, Wacky Jacks and Grunts anxious to converge on Isreal and grease anything kosher. America, Japan, Russia and Red China rushed in to help the Israelis---you may have seen the Siege of Meggiddo on teevee. I was there.

That was three years ago. I hear that things are pickin' up in America. There's no chance of a UAR invasion now and there's a higher ratio of women to men, about three hundred to one. The two coasts are still hot with anthrax bugs but they've done a good job controlling those fungus spores from drifting incountry What's left that's human lives in the Four Corners, that's Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. It's nice to know that the war is contained and North America is on the mend and the twelve hundred troopers of ServoSquadron 999 are out here making things safe for the world.

December 17. Rumor has it that Bob Hope's thinking of giving a USO Christmas show down in the Gulf of Aqaba next week. Shine it boys. 999 is going to stay in Engedi to burn Grunts.

Ta'amire hill Grunts armed with NightSun blinders and carbon dioxide lasers hit our Ground Mobile column between a red sunset and the edge of night. The firefight lasted eight minutes---I counted. Fifteen troopers, good guys, lost their retinas, forgot to wear their quartz amber visors. They're getting court-martialed besides---I guess they forgot regulations and how to see in the same day. Ha Ha.

Before I knew it Sergant-Major Moseby sent me and those five Tojoe Zappers into the mountains near Jericho to emulsify some rabble-rousing Iranian Kings that put those Ta'Amire Grunts up to that blinding assault. By Christmas I took twenty pair of King ears and braid but them Tojoe Zappers took a hundred times my tally. Two rucksacks full. Tadashi gave them to me. Now I'm no scuzzie and I won't take credit for another trooper's ears. It was real hard to resist because those rucksacks would've put me over the top in December for that freeze-dried pasta and hot sausage.

I figure those Tojoes felt bad about leaving me alone during the day while they meditated in their holes. So, I dug a hole of my own. They liked that in me, I guess. See, they're not ear collectors. Never have been. Makes me think twice about rumors now.

January 6, 1999. It took us

three weeks to clean Jericho before we could get back to Engedi for cave cleaning duty. It's all by the numbers down here. You can diddy-bop up a slope to a low cave or shout down a Dragonfly Slick to LZ you on a ridge so you can rope-rapple down the headwalls to the high caves. A three-man team begins the takedown with a flashbang stun grenade to buy you time while you bust caps with your wheelgun. You always aim for the head, two shots for male Grunts and one shot each for females and their offspring. COMBANK started an ammo incentive, saying we waste brass the way we cap the Grunts. *Strakshit.* There must be a hundred thousand holes in this sector.

With luck you can go the easy route. Find an unexploded Dragontooth pod out in the desert, rewire it with a proximity fuse and chuck it into a cave, especially one filled with fugazzi Wacky Jacks. A Dragontooth's filled with forty-eight hundred plastic and metal shards that blasts through a cave the way anhydrid phosphorous roots through bone marrow. I remember seeing a SHADOW drop a thousand 'tooths on a wave of Grunts working themselves into a fit near El Thamad---talk about blood rising as high as a horse's bridle! My buddy Troggy was never the same after seeing it. Doctor Croc took Troggy out the hard way last May .....

The desert heat greased our mascot camels last July. I don't know why I wrote that, it just popped into my mind.....

Food fantasies are big in the 999. I'm on a corn dog, taco and jelly bean fantasy this month. A single contraband chicken bouillon cube went for two hundred gold certificates today. Most troopers grub off the land or off the enemy. The safest stuff to eat are figs, camel (like venison) and Bam Bam Juice.

Let me tell you about the ides I pitched to COMBANK that got me three dyas R & R in Sardinia. I figured that we could store water in the oversize tires of our Ground Mobile vehicles instead of those tankers that always seemed to disappear in a firefight. I even devised a way to transfer the tire water storage to spare tanks, rerimming and remounting the tire, all in five minutes flat. Not bad for a guy with a seventh grade education.

My buddies are dearer than life to me, the best things this war has given me. There's Sex Pretzel, The Chic Concept, BRO-21x, Burnt Offerings and Daniel 8:4. Some names. My name? Some of the troopers call me the Hump since that water-in-the-tires brainstorm. Names don't matter anymore because I'm different now. Real different.

March 1. Daniel 8:4 is going dinky-doo on a regular basis. He's got the notion that he's going to find

the long-lost biblical scrolls in one of those Engedi caves written by J.C. himself. He did find some rotten reed paper but it blew to smithereens in a stiff *Sharray* wind. He got worse after that but went totally fugazzi the first time we did-dybopped through Bethleham. He was frothing because he couldn't find a cave, a manger, a nativity scene...*nada*. It took me three hours to bliss him out. Explained to him that the place was but a wide spot on the road two thousand years ago, that they had only one motel back then, right? Daniel 8:4 will listen to logic, as long as there's a biblical slant to it.

Don't let me forget my best buddy, Sex Pretzel. He's an expert on *Stet gorilla* war having read a bunch of three dollar novels about a war called 'Nam. Sex Pretzel's the one who dubbed the troopers of 999 Gooks since he feels that the 'Cong really kicked American tail back then, and he likes to identify with a winner. Americans used to be called Wa-Ky Jakes by the 'Cong (we say Wacky Jacks), Grunts and Kings. Now we call the enemy that for good luck. 999 wants to win this war. Sure, the Pretzel's a frontrunner but he's a buddy just the same. He wanted to dub us The Budda Heads but Daniel 8:4 threw a two-day fit, so we settled on Gooks. Rumor has it that the Pretzel tipped COMBACK on the ear collecting scheme, but he refuses to take credit for it. That's the type of guy he is, a gentleman. A real historian.

COMBANK hasn't paid up on the ear grand prize yet, but we all know they will. There giving us goals at least, hope. Monaco, *Casino De Monte Carlo*, the dolls....*ultrareality*. I've got this theory that it's the ultrarealities that give us Gooks the desire, the hunger to survive that makes 999 real revengeful in a firefight. The Red Chinese and the Soviets never had that in them. Commies don't like incentive programs, see? That's the great thing about a World Bank runnin' this war, because once it's over the twelve-hundred Gooks of 999 are going to each get a four-bedroom adobe equipped with NBC deterrents and a 1999 Red Chinese four by four diesel with plastisol paint, all courtesy of COMBANK. That's gratitude.

Daniel 8:4 says his Bible predicted this war, the Four Horseman, the plagues, the greasing of two billion, the nuking of Japan. Calls it Armageddon. But what the hell, we've gone through all that and we've got a thousand year kingdom of Heaven coming to us. Paradise. Combank says that they'll pay for Paradise, and I believe it.

Sex Pretzel tells me that at the end of the 'Nam war all a trooper got was a plastic discharge and some medical benefits---*no won-*

der they lost! No incentives. He also told me about "Nam troopers they called Double-Vets. (We call them scuzzies in 999.) They strangled, shot the enemy, then had sex with them. *Fugazzi.* They used a lot of drugs back then too. We had a druggie bunch in the 999 that got emulsified, *maybe fragged,* at the siege of Revivim. Good riddence. 999 is stoked and alert, all-american in our habits and that's the way it's going to stay.

May 9. Something happened two weeks ago that really bothers me. I'm sitting on a slope near Beer Ora eating dried camel jerky when some Ta'Amire Grunt, musta' been older than Allah, caught sight of me, started dancing, real joyous-like, holding out a honeyed-locust and a handful of wheat. *Peace.* one tooth in his black gums but, all in all, a real squared-away bedouin. I didn't think. It was a reflex. I put three caseless ten millimeter slugs in his hand. *tap-tappity-tap.* Easy. Like it was nothing.

Nobody in 999 ever talks about dying, death, even says those words. Bad luck. When a trooper describes our killing ways he'll say emulsified, cleaned, burned, zapped, greased. When one of our guys gets burned we'll say "*Didya' hear? Doctor Croc took out the Boychild last night!*". Nothing more. That started during the Nubian Desert Campaign in '97 when some nasty river croc's caught some of our guys napping on the banks of the Nile near the WADI HALFA. a croc will take you apart before you can scream. Just like Doctor Croc. You'll never see him, smell him, but he's always there.

You must be wondering why I'm penciling my memoirs, me a seventh grade graduate. The Sandbag Ambush is why. I'm finally out of this war. Writing is my way of doing something other other than peeing blood into a bedpan, a souvenir of my tour so that someday my son can read how it was for his daddy to face down Doctor Croc and work for Doctor Croc, twenty-five hours a day. The kid may think his Daddy's dinky-doo, maybe fugazzi. That's O.K. by me.

Yeah, the Sandbag Ambush. I remember every minute of that day, May 17. Me and my buddies are taking our daily float in the Dead Sea---talk about ultrareality! The salt is so velvety and dense that you can float on all sides of your body. Forever. Problem is some guys fall so deep asleep that they float out a mile and nearly drown. Or you swallow a mouthful of Sea and puke for a day afterwards. Your skin gets as tough as croc hide, but it's worth a bath to get the sand out of your crotch and ears.

The Chic Concept swore that it was so relaxing his soul flew out of his body and went to Monaco without him. I told him that I'd be-

lieve it when he brings back a doll or a casino chip to me.

The Sandbag Ambush was sort of a letdown for me. I'm diddybop-pin' on a recon west of the Sea and I come upon a freshwater *wadi*, so I have no choice but to squat on it, break UHF squelch and have 999 bring up the column to fill the empty tires. It was dark so I set up an electronic perimeter, a people sniffer and two acoustic trail sensors. Nothing would get within twenty meters without me hearing their steps in my earphone. Just my luck that some Wacky Jack Zapper's got herself wired into a Black Hole Sensor Suppression System. She's stalking me, and what am I doing? Filling sandbags to make a chair so I don't have to dip my dainty ass in the wet *wadi*. Dumbo. So, I'm shovelling and filling and before I can scream I've got a four-point-five millimeter tumbler in my gut. That was her first and last mistake. She's wired, but so am I. Troopers on solo recon wear a custom set of body pressure point collars, so if you're zapped your body can absorb the initial impact of the bullet or the knife, slowing the bleeding, saving the strength you need to react. She had one shot and I've got my collars tight and ....*whump!* My K-Bar's stickin' out of her eye. Like I said, if you want to put them in Wacky Jack heaven fast, go for the skull.

Three weeks later I wake up in a Swiss hospital in Monaco, right next door to the newest casino in The Acropolis! Doctor Croc nearly took me out. I'm seventeen pounds lighter and ...lordy, the war's over! It ended on George Herbert Walker Bush Memorial Day, six P.M., June 12, 1999. I swear, that Moseby must be psychic or something!

All my buddies are in town, intact, except for Burnt Offerings, who broke his ankle coming to see me, slippin' on the wet marble floor of the reception area! Wild. They tell me that Europe is the Paradise COMBANK promised us, that most of it was spared in the war while the rest of the world is Number Ten. The Worst. COMBACK moved out of Dallas and set up permanent shop in Brussels. All the guys want to settle down in Utah, since they hear that the women there passed a bunch of pro-polygamy laws. They decided to share than go without. Smart. I hate to break up a team, but I'm partial to Colorado, a ranch by the river, fishing; farmin' and loafin'. I hear some foreigners in this ward write off America as if it were a leper colony or something. Me, well I like the idea of playing frontiersman as long as COMBANK's willing to pickup the tab.

It's not that I'm deserting my buddies. I never would've made it without them, never survived this war. *Get this:* they took an unanimous vote, saying they wouldn't step

into a casino or out with a doll until the day comes when I'm able to stand and go with them as a team---three weeks, a month, no matter how long it takes for me to get my walking papers.

That's just the kind of guys they are, true-blue. Solid. Squared-away. They kill me.....

#

777 Dispensary Lane was the address of York Memorial, a hospital only six months old if you consider the two years of renovation that transformed a crumbling wreck into a glittery glass and steel complex rimmed by six, five-story surgical towers. All that remained to remind the many of the past was a solitary orange-brick power plant surrounded by construction rubble, ringed by a high link fence crowned with razor ribbon.

A perfedt place. A place easily overlooked. A place inspected twice a year whose only function was to support the Department of Power and Water as it scrambled to fix a downed power line or ease an overloaded circuit.

A hiding place. In front of a mass of cables and meters a ten by five by five teakwood trapezoid *samadhi* tank brimful with one hundred and eighty-five gallons of chlorinated water held at a constnt ninety-six degrees. A twenty-five percent saline of Epsom salt solution supported the ossified floater on a bed of endless sleep.

Rubber-clad feet shuffled in, sensible, hopsital shoes. A single two-hundred watt blue bulb, suspended form the ceiling by a frayed extension cord, swayed and flikered at the touch of Mike Moseby's shoulder. He went to work immediately, switching on a twenty-five watt bulb within the tank, opening the latchless door smoothly to check his experiment. In his haste he found a moment to hang a rusty, discarded sign found on a junkpile marked HEAD SCAN/ULTRASOUND/NUCLEAR MEDICINE/RADIOLOGY.

Mary Lou Goings was not amused. Her slate-grey eyes, as hard and intimidating as hot lead, flashed sparks at the mocking display.

"You're one hell of a paramedic Mike," she seethed. "Can't you get it through your head that you arn't qualified?"

"Fleming, Ehrlich and Pasteur weren't physicians either." he shot back, his gloved hands deftly replacing the prior day's programming with fresh input into the ports of the multiple sound cassette console he built from scratch. New fantasies. War stories. Moseby called it *building the dream*.....

Moseby looked at those fer-

rety, armor-piercing eyes, wondering if she could go the distance. "We're doing nothing wrong Mary Lou. You know I care. If you're looking to lable me, think of me as a *sublimi-nalist."*

She nodded grudgingly, handing him the results of the morning's blood testing. "Weird. It's usually High Blood Cortisol in the morning and low blood levels at night. Our boy reverses this pattern at will."

Moseby sighed. "He's merely resetting his cerebral clock, the day/night cycles, to stay in sync with the time frame of the fantasy pro-grams."

Floating on top of the Dead Sea, me and my buddies, my belly's stuffed with sweet figs and Bam-Bam Juice....Paradise. Pretzel, heep your nose above the water! Chic! Daniel's out too far.....

"I wish I could be in his hand, *building that dream."*, said Moseby wistfully. "Free of guilt. Dreams evolving as a real dimension. Blue lights, white lights flashing in the sybaritic cell of the mind. The fi-nal, soaring release from the Su-perego. Ultrareality."

Soft, strong hands flexed ner-vously. "I'm happy that you can wax poetic about a borderliner when I'm the one who has to change his dia-pers every hour, no less find a way to get him back unseen to sub-inten-sive care by six A.M."

Moseby shook his head good-naturedly, turning his attention to the curled mounds of graph paper churned out in their absence by his crude diagnostic moniters. A combi-nation Votmeter and Oscilloscope measured brain wave trains, a Poly-graph measured muscle tension.

"We have Delta here at one hertz," he began to read aloud. "Then sporadic Theta a five hertz, then REM, the dream state." A pause. "REM at fourteen hertz, shifting back to an Alpha harmonic. Beta is non-existant in him."

He could imagine those REM eyes shifting rapidly beneath those blue-veined eyelids. "Hypnagogic Theta is the state we must porlong so he can use the knowledge assim-ilated in the Alpha state to create his own free-flowing fantasy script. "An awkward silence, then euphoria. "Look at this! A tripling of Alpha amplitudes for eighteen seconds! He's relaxed! He's attentive! He's identifying!"

"Swell," Nurse Goings droned, kneading her aching neck muscles. "I'm up for a day post in Orthope-dics. I'd rather hear the slipped discs wailing then watch the border-liners wast away in sub-intensive. Hearing Sonnyboy crying *No! Don't pull the plug*, while Momma screams, *Don't let Poppa suffer any longer!* then the long faces of the doctors, the lawyers, the state officials, in the middle crooning To Pull Or Not to Pull? Keep that money machine

rolling along."

Moseby wasn't listening. "One morning three years ago this guy's changing bus tires and in the afternoon he's a botched lobotomy. A faulty tire explodes, a two-piece rim becomes a rocket-powered guillotine that takes off a part of his head. The Prefrontal Lobe is mostly gone and the Neocortex is hamburger, yet he still listens, he dreams! Isn't the brain a wonder Mary Lou! As long as the motor and sensory centers are left intact, his mind will function without a measurable decrease in intelligence."

The nurse regarded him mistrustfully. "He's never been well-fed. They cut his food and water this morning. They asked me to put him down Mike. I won't do it."

"Then you'd better kiss that *Orthopod* job good-bye," Moseby snorted his ridicule. "Get envolved Mary Lou. Feel for this guy! No friends, family. A specter living in the same furnished room for twenty-two years. I've been to that rathole, I've seen how this ciper lives, and you know what? He lives for war, for the screaming glory of it. He's got hundreds of books where a family should be, all about war. Especially Vietnam. The funniest thing is that he never served a day in uniform. The board aced him. High blood pressure."

The nurse's grey eyes kindled. "Those tapes are about Vietnam?"

"A war, Mary Lou, a war that never happened but could occur in twenty years becasue war is inevitable, don't you agree?" he questioned vaguely. "A war of lunacy as is the *Number of the Beast."*

Point-eight volt charges were relayed from a handheld stimulator console to the electrode package attached to the shaven scalp of the experiment. Buttons were pushed in sequence, light emitting diodes flashed over plastic strips marked URGES, EXCITE, JUDGEMENTS, EVALUATIONS.

"Emotion is the key to remembering," Moseby began. "Let's hope that his Hippocampus within the Limbic can convert the scripting into a long term memory."

Mary Lou jumped, stunned. "Heartbeat's up fifty beats! There's no discernable muscle tension on the Poly....*he's going Mike!"*

"Live Gook! Live!" he beseeched, chattering, "I'll stim his Prefrontal---that's the center of personality, oversees his goals, his limits of perservance. Then I'll zap his Hypothalamus to create a moment of sublime ecstasy, follow that with twin charges to the lower Temporal Lobes so he can relive these positive sensations many times. *Hang on Hump! Run it back at Doctor Croc!"*

REM and mid-brain Theta interspersed in violent convulsions on the Oscilloscope's fluorescent screen. Fantasies played havoc with

the near-end mind. A sudden shift to a calming Alpha harmonic. Moseby was out of breath, but relieved.

"Why didn't I realize that before? The Prefrontal is the jailer holding back the savage rat and reptile of the Limbic region from escaping through the human neocortical mantle. Our boy doesn't have a properly-functioning Prefrontal. He may react in the fantasy I wrote for him with violent moodswings, or laugh, cry at inappropriate times in his dreams. He may be unable to understand the consequences of his actions, no matter how savage, how immoral."

Nurse Goings face flushed the color of her pink apron. "Then he could be having a non-stop nightmare, filled with death, killing...*insanity?*"

"War is all those things," he replied strongly, his soft brown eyes aflame with the memories of a time best forgotten. "I know about that kind of insanity, of being a gunner in 'Nam, hanging out of Huey Slick bay doors mowing down villes and dinks with my trusty twin-fifties. So I'm like a lot of guys who got a Soviet round in my back who can't move their legs but promised God that if He lets me walk again I'll save lives, not take them. So here I am Mary Lou, Mr. Blue-tailored jumpsuit, Rolex watch, amber aviator shades, Cabretta leather jacket, AKA Mike the Paramedic. A guy with a future. Maybe. But all our boy has is a bunch of well-intentioned types deciding when and who's going to pull his plug!"

The nurse clucked her tongue rapidly. "You think that by filling this guy's head with atrocities you're helping him?" You're the one whose dreaming Mike!"

Moseby shrugged, sleepily. "That's what he wants Mary Lou. Most men never make closer friends during their lifetime than the ones they make sharing a war. Together. Closer than their wives, their kids."

"Hump, you're going to make ot bro'--- can you hear me? It's Burnt Offerings and The Concept. You really burned that Wacky Jack good. No, you can't have no water for a belly wound...the Slick's coming, you're only six klicks from a surgeon. Hump! Start building the dream!"

It was a sideglance borne of habit that brought the flat waves on the monitoring screens to her attention. She said the words many times, on cue. Too many times. "He's gone Doctor.....Mike...."

Mike Moseby managed a gallows laugh. "Didya' hear? Doctor Croc took down The Hump last night."

Mary Lou Goings began the tidying up, using her capable arms to lift the hundred pound corpse out of the tank and into a small plastic wading pool filled with a cool, biodegradable wash. She brought the

body to its feet, slippery dead weight, losing control of her grip, allowing the body to collapse and fall to the concrete floor with a sickening thud, impacting its already damaged head.

A bloody nose, that's all, she groaned inwardly, sprawling the body in the wading pool to scrub it clean of the telltale salt residue. Maybe I'll get that Orthopedics post now, she mused as she scrubbed. Maybe it's better to pull the plug than go through all this bullshit again.....

"Build that dream. *Ultrareality."* he mumbled to himself. "Be a brave young man Michael. Accept death. It's just Gook, a Buddha Head."

Platoon Sergent Michael D. Moseby wept.

#

Juy 23, 1999. Let me spit out the bad news first. Rumor has it that some UAR Kings are using Cyprus as a staging area to launch a final counteroffensive in the South Sinai. Must be a wave of Wacky Jacks because Kings have the sense to know when a war is over. I also hear that some fugazzi Iranian Grunts have a vendetta going against 999 and are recruiting a wave of Pakistani Wacky Jacks down in Hyderabad to hunt us down. Just an hour ago I hear that COMBANK says to ignore that talk, the war is *kaput. Finito.* Like I said before, I'm out of this war for good, but I'm not against re-upping, if you get my drift.

Somebody once told me that bad news comes in threes. That was Sergeant-Major Moseby, the resident swami of 999. Seems that those five Tojoe Zappers commited suicide last week, chomping down on their tongues and bled themselves dry. BRO-21x tells me that some scuzzies in the 999 razzed them Zappers during the truce, told them that they were valuable commodities that could make a million gold certificates on an exhibit tour of Europe. I don't buy the freak show angle---sure, they were proud, but logical. I think they just wanted to go on emulsifing Kings forever. I think they never forgave the Libyans for igniting that H-bomb in the light atmosphere over Japan that cleaned that nation of every living thing. They have a nice name for it now, *dust asphyx*....whatever. Man, those Tojoes loved to burn then Kings! Now peace broke out, took that pleasure away from them. They had no county to go to, no family---no future. I guess that counts more than I care to admit.

Now for the good newa---I'm getting my walkin' papers tomorrow! And I'm getting married! In two weeks I'll be back in the Four Cor-

ners with my wife, my buddies--can you believe it? Her name is Mary Lou Goings. (as in comings and goings: ha ha.) She's the nurse whose been showering, shaving and trying to put twenty pounds on my skeleton these past two weeks. She's not exactly my dream girl but she's tough, fair and she cares about me. I like a doll who cares. Mary Lou's got those grey, grey eyes that look right into you. Like a Tojoe Zapper K-Bar. Only sharper.

Of course, my buddies think I'm dinky-doo for fallin' for the first American doll I've seen in three years. They're still building the dream of going to Utah and having harems of dolls like some UAR King. What they really need is one doll like Mary Lou, that's all. *Get this:* she told me today she's willing to go to Utah and share me with any number of dolls as long as I tell her every day that I love her---can you believe that? Guess I'm going to Utah after all.

Tomorrow is July 24. That's Pioneer Day in Utah. Could it be an omen for me? I should ask Moseby to look into that for me.

My buddies and me are going to set up a closed community in a place called Herber Valley. We're going to build a permanent firebase of two-story log cabins for our families and stay together like it was meant to be. *Forever.* paradise. I'll grow veggies, watch the Polestar and have eight kids with Mary Lou and Mary Lou alone. That polygamy stuff sounds harassing to me. It's like that Double-Vet crap that went on in 'Nam years back. Either *you want to or you* don't.

Let me tell you the best part of leaving this war. It's spittin' in Doctor Croc's mouth knowing knowing that's all he got of me this time. Sure, he'll get me someday. Doctor Croc works in mysterious ways, like he did with those Tojoe Zappers. Who knows? Someday Doctor Croc may give The Hump a little push in the shower and.....

ALLEN H. '87

A FEELING OF DARKNESS

BY BOB WARNER
ILLUSTRATION BY ALLEN KOSZOWSKI

He looked down again at the small child that had been washed in on the tide, and his mind and heart filled with an overwhelming sense of darkness.

"Why?" he asked Chelso, for the hundredth (thousandth?) time. "Why?"

"Dunno," said Chelso, shrugging his wide shoulders. "But it's gettin' worse. This is the second one today, just on this stretch of beach. It's the same all over, you know."

Yes he knew. He and Chelso were called out at least once a day to investigate a child drowning. The reports were almost the same: a child, or sometimes a group of children, just walked into the water and drowned. He and Chelso had seen the results of at least a hundred such drownings. Sad, pitiful, futile results which made him feel helpless inside, bringing on that crushing feeling of darkness.

This child had been reported missing five days before, but not locally. When the description had been called in to the Department, the computer matched it with a missing child report from a small town seventy miles away. A large, heart-shaped birthmark on the child's abdomen made the match-up easy. Apparently the child had walked cross country from the small town to the coast -- and kept right on walking into the ocean. An old man fishing off one of the rickety piers had seen the child walk into the water, had seen the tide take him in its bosom and catty him out to sea. The old man called the local authorities, who had, in turn, notified the Department.

After they left the beach, they stopped off for coffee. Chelso, wedged into a booth, leaned forward on his elbows and grimaced.

"The ocean does the damndest things to somebody who's been in it for awhile, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, lighting a cigarette and recalling the child's wide-staring , sightless eyes and plaid flesh. That senseless look of watery death: limp, slightly bloated, puckered and soggy-looking. "Yeah," he said again, smashing the cigarette in the ashtray.

It was the same all over; at least in all the places you got news from. A worldwide pandemic of young children, from three years old to six years old, who were, for some insanely bizarre and totally unknown reason, drowning themselves. Some filled bathtubs and submerged themselves. Some waded or jumped into rivers, creeks, streams. Others threw themselves into open wells, cisterns, swimming pools -- any place with water deep enough to drown in. And, of course, there were those who walked calmly into the ocean and let the tides and currents sweep them away.

" -- heard on TV last night,"

Chelso was saying, "where a four-year-old in New York stuck her head and shoulders into the commode and drowned -- with her parents not ten feet away in the next room. Damn!"

"Yeah," he said, clinking his spoon in his coffee cup. "Damn is right. Seems like all the kids in the world are damned -- and nobody knows *why*. Not even a decent *guess.*"

Janet was terrified; most mothers were. So were most fathers, for that matter. There had been fifteen child-drowning victims in their neighborhood in the past three months, and he and Janet had every right to be afraid. Stacy Ann was four and a half years old -- squarely in the middle of what the damn newscasters called the "The Vulnerable Years!"

Chelso gulped his coffee and signalled for a refill. Chelso was a bachelor, had never been married. Didn't have any children. But he could see that it upset Chelso a lot, too, when they were called out to investigate another child drowning. He could see Chelso's concern each time they reported for duty. "How's Stacy?" Chelso would ask. "She's fine," he would say; and Chelso would nod. "That's good. She's gonna be okay, that little princess is."

Janet was getting worse, keeping Stacy Ann in the house all the time and watching her like a hawk. She had insisted he move Stacy's bed into their bedroom, and made him put a padlock on the bathroom door and take the handles off all the water faucets. They used pliers to turn the water on and off. Even with all that, he thought, checking his watch and draining the last swallow of coffee, Janet was probably a lot less paranoid about the whole thing than most mothers.

Let's go," he said, picking up the check.

He got home a little after 1:30 in the morning. He and Chelso had had to go up to Yandro, a small coastal town twenty miles north of the city, and help the State Troopers break up a domestic quarrel that had turned into a senseless bloodbath. When it was all over, there were three civilians dead and two more in critical condition. He was dog-tired and wanted nothing more than to drink a couple of quick beers and get some sleep.

At that time of the morning the house was quiet. He liked that; the quiet meant everything was all right.

He opened a can of beer and sat in the darkened living room. He was tired, but not the least bit sleepy. He got up and switched on the TV, turning down the volume. *Voice of the A.M.* was on, with an-

other of those Special Reports on "The Vulnerable Years." He watched for a tense few minutes as a prominent sociologist and an equally prominent psychologist bickered back and forth, compliments of satellite-live, between Chicago and L.A., each trying to out-theorize the other as to the *real* causes of the "child-suicide syndrome."

He listened only long enough to learn that, for all their fifty-dollar words and million-dollar theories, they still didn't know why the hell the kids were killing themselves. What they were saying was, in effect, what everyone else was saying: It was as though some overwhelming force was calling the children, luring them back into watery wombs where they would find the senseless oblivion of death this time, not the promise of life.

He opened another beer and stood in the kitchen recalling the hundred or more faces of child-death he and Chelso had seen the past three months. During his six years with the Department he had seen a lot of deaths; but never had he seen anything like the senseless ones he was seeing now, every day. All the kids -- destroying themselves. Quietly, calmly, deliberately, with no fear, no hesitation. And with never any indication that anything was wrong, beforehand. One day a child would seem perfectly normal; the next, someone would be fishing its body out of the water. It made no sense to anyone. Least of all to him, who witnessed the results of "the syndrome" so often.

He saw in his mind's eyes Stacy Ann's round, smiling face, surrounded by her fine, corn-silk hair which she had inherited from Janet; and suddenly he strangled on the beer -- seeing another vision. One of Stacy Ann's small, palid body, was floating in on the frothy tide, her cornsilk hair swirling obscenely over her face like limp strands of seaweed...

Trembling, sweat running down his face, he suddenly realized he had crumpled the beer can in his hands. He shook his head, trying to clear away the visions of wide-eyed staring, palid bodies; trying to shake off the feeling of darkness that crept over him each time he saw a dead child. That same feeling of darkness he felt right now, telling him that something was wrong in the quiet, early-morning house.

Stacy Ann! his mind screamed. He dropped the beer can and rushed upstairs, burst into the bedroom and shouted:

"Janet!"

His wife awoke with a start and sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes against the sudden glare of the overhead light he had switched on.

"Roger?" said Janet, throwing back the covers and swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

He crossed the room in several swift strides, took his wife by the shoulders and shook her. He glared at her in anger -- and desperation.

Janet was crying, and he knew why. *She's trying to keep it from me! She's trying to act as though it hasn't finally happened!* But he knew.

He pushed her away, ran from the room, down the ha;;way to the bathroom, feeling the awful darkness growing in his mind, aching in his heart. God, why hadn't she told him! Why hadn't she called in -- left word of what had happened!

He stared at the padlock on the bathroom door. It was locked, securely, as though everything were all right.

Janet was shouting from the hallway behind him, but he had no time for her now. He snapped his revolver from its holster -- it came free with a damnably loud popping sound -- and stepped back, holding the weapon in both hands, aiming it at the lock.

He squeezed the trigger, fired six bullets at the lock, smashed it and splintering the upper portion of the door. The gunshots echoed fearsomely, drowning the shouts and screams behind him. He hit the bathroom door with his shoulder and stumbled into the dark room. He slapped his palm in the was basin; it was empty, dry. He knelt and felt for the commode, and his hand touched the cloth covered seat. It was down. Then he turned toward the bathtub, reluctant to put his hand inside, knowing what he might touch.

When the bathroom light came on, he whirled around and saw Janet and Stacy Ann standing in the doorway.

"Roger...?" said Janet.

He sat down heavily on the toilet seat. The gun fell from his fingers and made a dull thud against the bathmat.

"Oh, God," he said, looking at Janet, then at Stacy Ann. "I don't know what happened. It's getting to me Janet. I imagined -- "

Janet knelt beside him and put her arms around his shoulders. "Shh," she said. "Its all right now. It's going to be all right."

They went downstairs and Janet heated coffee water while he held Stacy on his lap. She fell asleep inside if five minutes.

"I'll lay her on the sofa," he said, then took Stacy Ann into the living room. When he got back to the kitchen, the coffee was ready.

He and Janet talked for awhile. He kept explaining how bad it was getting, what it did to him each time he and Chelso had to answer another drowning call. She held his hand in hers across the table, telling him how worried she

was that -- God forbid -- Stacy Ann would suddenly be affected by the disease, or whatever it was. He kept expecting to get a call from the Department, or to hear the front door bell ring. Surely some of the neighbors had heard the gunshots and had called the police.

Both of them were aware of a strange sound

Janet jumped up, knocking over her chair. "It's water running -- running in the bathtub!" She clapped her hands to her mouth.

"Stacy Ann!!" he said.

They ran to the living room to check there first, and wasted precious seconds. Then Janet ran up the stairs, in front of him. Her foot caught on the edge of a step and she lost her balance and tumbled back into his arms. They ended up in a tangled heap at the bottom of the stairs. More precious time wasted.

He pushed Janet off him and scrambled to his feet. There were tears in Janet's eyes and she was holding her left arm. "I think it's broken," she said, gritting her teeth. "Dammit, Roger -- go see about *Stacy!*"

He flew up the stairs, three steps at a time, ran down the hallway and skidded to a halt in front of the bathroom door.

"Stacy!" he called. The door had been pushed shut from the inside; and when he tried to open it, it wouldn't budge. He could hear the water gushing full force from both bathtub faucets.

Putting his shoulder against the door, he shoved it inward. The light was still on, and he saw that the clothes hamper had been pushed in front of the door.

As he stepped into the bathroom and moved toward the tub a sudden panic gripped him. Time seemed to slow, to almost stand still, damning him into slow-motion. His left foot struck something hard, and he glanced down and saw the pliers laying next to the tub.

His breath caught in his throat as he knelt beside the bathtub, clutching the rim and staring in horror.

Stacy Ann lay face-down in the slowly rising water. Her head fell forward. He lifted her higher, and her head flopped back so that her eyes stared sightlessly at him.

He forced himself to remain calm, to remember his CPR training. *Lay Stacy on the floor, tilt her chin up, listen for breathing. Feel for a pulse.* There was neither, so he knelt over her, rhythmically pressing against her sternum, then blowing breaths into her mouth,

"Roger, what's wrong? Roger, *answer me!*"

He realized it was no use. Dizzy with grief, he turned from Stacy's body, put out his hand and grasped the rim of the bathtub for

support. His hands slipped on the smooth surface and he fell forward, slapping the water with his face and upper body.

He started to pull himself up, the realized how warm, yet how cool the water felt. He felt wonderously bouyant. He let one hand float to the surface, then swung it sideways in the water. The water pushed pleasantly against the back of his hand as though caressing him.

He had a vision - but it was oh so much more than that. It was tactile, mental, spiritual -- instilled in him like instinct. *As the seas gave up her children to crawl from the Mother-waters to walk upright for a time on dry land, but always with the urge, the desire, the need to return.*

his latest cycle, only one of a vast many. Now that cycle had come to an end; the children of the seas must return, even though to return meant death. The young felt the inexorable coming of the cycle first, not knowing what they felt. The waters merely drew them back. They felt a vague hunger, a *need* which could not be denied...so they sought out the source, immersed themselves with a final joy of fullfillment in the watery darkness.

The sudden understanding -- knowing -- seared his mind like an exploding sun. For a brief, agonizing, wonderful moment he knew that soon not only the children, but everyone would be called back. He felt the mother/water/life tides flowing through him with an eternal call that could not be denied...as he stared at his submersed hand....

As one in a sleepwalker's trance, he took Stacy Ann from the bathroom, holding her tightly to his chest, and started slowly back down the stairs. He was vaguely aware of someone screaming. It sounded a little like Janet. But, no, it couldn't be Janet. Not there on that lonely stretch of beach that he suddenly found himself upon, with surging waters so near.

"Call Chelso," he said, as the darkness settled upon his mind for all time. "Someone please call Detective Chelso and tell him to get out here right away. I've found another one..."

IDENTITY CRISIS

BY THOMAS F MONTELEONE

Elliot Binnder huddled in the corner of the dark supply room, caressing the business-end of a linoleum knife.

Outside, in the main corridor, the sounds of the hospital blended together: the paging system loudspeakers, the creaking wheels of gurney carts, offhanded laughter of passing student nurses, the occasional footsteps of someone passing close by the supply room door.

Dressed in hastily stolen hospital garb, Binnder appeared to be just another surgeon in the huge hospital. The pale green O.R. cap and matching pajama-like tunic and pants covered his street clothes; the surgeon's mask concealed his stoical features.

The shift changed, he thought; I'll wait until the change of shift. Lots of confusion then. No one will noticed me...

The blade felt keen and sharp as he edged it with his thumb, following its menacing curve down to the point. In the darkness, it reminded him of the talon of some horrible creature, and he smiled. He checked his liquid crystal watch, and smiled again. Not much longer now ...

Balding, thin, and yet working on a double chin, Elliot Binnder did not normally appear very threatening. In fact, he was quite meek-looking, and had always thought himself the perfect stereo type of a timid bank clerk. In fact, he was a timid hardware store clerk.

Sitting in the dark, his mind drifted back over the chain of events that had brought him to his present state on mind and place in the cosmos. *It was the hardware store ...*

... where he had worked for almost twenty years. Twenty years. he store had been owned by Leo J. Benford, Sr., a kindly old gentleman who understood the faithful service and loyalty of good employees. Elliot had worked for the old man from the beginning, and gave the owner an honest day's work every day, year in and year out. Things went along pleasantly and made the manager of Benford's Hardware -- earning a good salary and making the payments on his bungalow. Mr. Benford was very happy with his work, and had even loaned him the money for the down payment on the little house. Elliot Binnder was a happy, contented man.

That is, until the owner's son Leo J. Benford Jr., started coming down to the store after school and on Saturdays to "learn the business." Still a teenager, the young Leo Benford had already acquired a hard edge to his personality and an envious glow to his eyes. He looked like a vulture waiting to descend upon soon-to-be-carrion, and even back then, Elliot knew enough not to

trust the owner's son.

As time passed, Leo Jr. spent his summers home from college in the hardware store, and he became an increasing source of annoyance and irritation to all the employees -- especially Elliot Binnder. No matter how diplomatic, or "nice," Binnder attempted to be with Leo Jr., there was no getting around the young man's obnoxious nature and know-it-all attitude. Leo Jr. was contemptuous of Elliot's authority and took every opportunity to ignore his suggestions and disobey outright his requests in day-to-day business.

But Elliot had been a patient man, and he hoped that perhaps Leo Jr. was just another young man feeling his oats, as they used to say, and that time and maturity would change him into a more agreeable, reasonable person. Thus did Elliot avoid speaking with the father and owner of the store about the problems experienced with the son. *Perhaps I should have said something . . .*

But he didn't say anything, and the situation became increasingly worse until, inevitably, Elliot and Leo Jr. hated each other -that was apparent to all the other employees, but unfortunately not to Mr. Benford Sr., who was spending more time in his greenhouse and less and less time at his business. In fact, the only thing that kept Elliot sane and whole had been the casual mention by Leo Sr. that he intended to open another hardware store in the next town, and that he would be making Elliot a *full partner* -along with his son, of course. The papers, the old man told him, were being drawn up by his lawyers, ans everything would be official as soon as his attorney came back from a trip to the Bahamas.

Time passed quickly it seemed, at that point, and Leo Jr. graduated from college, married, and was often seen with his pregnant wife carrying about the next generation of the Benford line. Elliot hoped that this coming responsibility, plus the inclusion of both into a business partnership would finally thaw out the relationship between he and the impetuous Leo Jr.

But it was even less than wishful thinking. On the same weekend that Elliot had told his wife of the elder Benford's plans, he received a phone call from Mrs. Leo. J. Benford Sr. The woman was on the brink of hysteria as she struggled to tell him that her husband had been killed in an auto accident only an hour previous. Elliot had been shocked - it was as though his own father had died and the sense of loss and sincerely felt grief was almost overwhelming. He could think of never seeing the old man again, and was therefore not thinking of what further consequences might follow that unfortunate and very untimely demise.

Naturally, Elliot closed the store until after the funeral; and although he attempted to contact the son several times, he was unsuccessful. When he saw Leo Jr. at the funeral service, the young man ignored him completely.

But on the day business reopened, the young man was more than eager to speak with him. Elliot was not surprised to see the young new owner seated behind his desk that fateful morning. To tell the truth, Elliot had even expected it, and the demotion that would surely accompany the gesture. But he was surprised by Leo Jr. in a way he could not have expected.

"Good morning, Binnder, I've been waiting for you." the son had said.

"Have you?"

"Yes, and I'm afraid I have some bad news for you." The young Leo was almost grinning, unable to contain the obvious joy surging through him at the moment.

"What kind of bad news?" Elliot said.

"Oh. . .the worst, I can assure you. I'm afraid its 'pink-slip' time for you, old man. I want you to get all of your shit out of here immediately. It's over and I never want to see your simple face around here again."

"What!" Elliot had said, his voice carrying all the shock and disbelief and pain that such cruelty could summon. "You're *firing* me You're letting me *go*?"

"Oh yes, absolutely." Leo Jr. had smiled at that point. Perhaps it was the smile, the certain enjoyment the son had displayed then, or perhaps it was the years of resentment and hate finally bubbling to the surface . . . Elliot would never know for sure, but he did know he would extract his revenge on the young bastard who sat grinning before him. He *hated* him at that moment as he had never hated anything in his life.

And it was only the beginning of the ordeal.

Every place where Elliot applied for work, having cited his managerial experience at Benford's Hardware, he was quickly denied employment. One prospective employer volunteered to Elliot that he had received a "less than glowing" reference from Leo Jr. It was apparent then, that it was not enough for the young son to simply dismiss Elliot in disgrace. No, Leo Jr. clearly intended to ruin him.

Elliot ended up working in a lumber mill, making half of his previous salary and sliding slowly under a wave of bills, loan notes, and other economic pressures. First he had to pull his son from private school, then he second-mortgaged the house and had the car repossessed and the phone disconnected. His wife became disenchanted, then enraged at his inability to support her

in her accustomed manner. The pressure continued to build until he thought he would go insane without some kind of release, some of kind of catharsis.

He was going to hell in the old handbasket, and he decided that maybe he would take someone with him.

He would take his revenge. Leo Jr. would pay for his injustices, and he would suffer as no man had ever suffered. And so Elliot Binder descended into the maelstrom that is the chaos of the broken spirit and the tortured mind, knowing that he would never return.

The only piece that remained to be fitted into the jigsaw picture of madness was the act itself, which came to him in a moment of pure inspiration - when his wife told him that Mrs. Leo J. Benford, Jr. had given birth to a baby boy the day before.

Acting with quite deliberation , Elliot went into his basement and carefully selected the proper instrument - a linoleum knife from Benford's Hardware. Yes, he had thought with a smile. This is perfectly It would do nicely.

He took a cab downtown to the hospital, took an elevator up to the Maternity Ward, walked the halls as though he might be an impatient expectant father, and waited for the moment when he was unobserved. When it came, he slipped into the supply room and quickly searched through the shelved stacks of linens and gowns until he found the proper disguise . . .

. . .and now the time has come.

There were the sounds of increased activity outside the small dark room, and Elliot arose quickly, concealing the linoleum knife beneath his surgeon's gown. Opening the door, he slipped out into the corridor unnoticed by the stream of white-uniformed nurses and orderlies.

Yes, this was the perfect time.

He walked down the hall, past the rooms of new mothers, to the glass windowed nursery. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest and his spit tasted like paper paste, but it was not from fear, rather from the feeling of approaching triumph. They can't catch me! he thought and the certainty of that knowledge elated him with a rush of adrenalin. They can't!

Striding purposefully, confidently, he pushed through the door to the nursery, where a charge nurse sat at a small desk reading a copy of *People* magazine.

"Just a minute, Doctor," she said. "Can I help you?"

He moved swiftly, striking her in the jaw with his fist. She went down immediately without a sound, and he rushed past her, into the brightly illuminated, warm room

where the tiny clear plastic cribs were arranged in two neat rows. There were at least twenty newborn children, and Elliot knew that he must act quickly.

Each baby had a little bracelet, and it would be a small matter to search out the one with the Benford name on it. Or so he thought. Frantically as he held the tiny, pudgy little wrist of the nearest infant, he tried to make sense of the numbers and letters on the bracelet.

Christ, it's some kind of code! No names!

There was the sound of someone stirring behind the door. *Not much time! I've got to do something!* in the glass window of the nursery, and beyond the glared images of several of the staff watching him with growing horror. He realized that he was holding the linoleum knife in plain view. *Don't panic now! Think . . .think!*

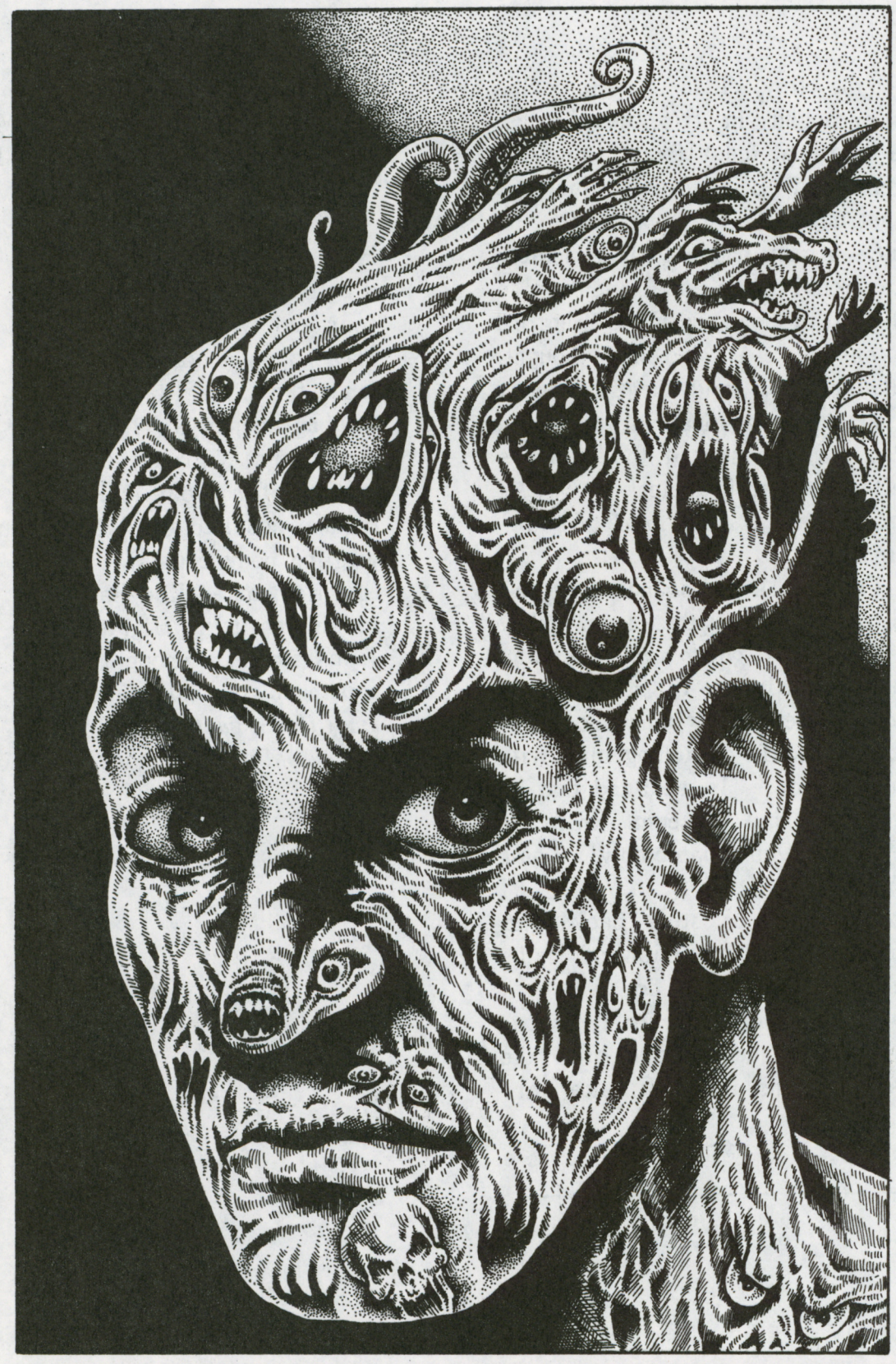
Taking one step back, he looked over the collection of cribs and knew what he must do.

It's the only way to be sure, he thought, as he stooped over the first crib. And it won't take very long.

HANGING OUT WITH RHYME AND REASON AND COMING UP REAL SHORT

Hum a hymn for the 70's
a bellyful of Nam,
four and twenty young grunts
greased on a hill;
when the CS settled-
the bags began to fill,
wasn't that a grungy sight
to set before your ma?
Lyndon spooked the White House
juggling body counts,
Charlie wasted Khe Sanh
zapping thru the Highlands;
Jesus stoned a chopper
spitting blood and prayers...
Isn't this a nasty poem
like napalm in the morning?

By Bayla Winters



WHEN TAT RIDES HIGH

BY ANNETTE S. CROUCH
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLEN KOSZOWSKI & RON LEMING

Reno lay torn and mangled beside the fallen Sportster, his arms and back a mess of exposed nerves where once there had thrived healthy, brown skin scattered decoratively with an assortment of tattoos. His blood leaked onto the black leather jacket with the Red Moon logo, turning the embroidered scene into a gruesome caricature of Armegeddon. The jacket had been cleanly sliced from his shoulders as he futility tried to escape the sweeping blade of the straight razor. Everything dimmed as Reno turned to low, lost his balance and was thrown rudely to the filthy earth of the alley.

Nerves and muscles pulsated slower, collected soot and insects. Even now the big, black flies were landing and licking, laying creamy white larva into the waning warmth of oozing pulp. He sighed, trying desperately to overcome the nausea and drowsiness. His right hand reached for his crotch, came away bloody.

"Fuck." A wave of dizziness hit him and he took a deep breath, struggled to remember why he was lying here in the alley. In the half-light. Alone.

He heard a bike start up in the distance. No, not just a bike. A fucking Kawasucky. He fought to recall what his attacker had looked like, shuddered when he remembered the feel of metal cutting into his forearm, the yell of triumph in the bastard's voice when he peeled off the Harley Davidson "Live To Ride" tattoo. The face was somehow familiar and it nagged at him. Reno groaned, knowing his life was ebbing too quickly, feeling incompetent because he had been the one to insist on making the beer run. *And he hadn't even bought the God Damned beer!* His parched mouth craved a Coor's. Hell, even a Beer beer.

"Shit"

The high rap of a mufflerless Beer-can engine came closer, spraying thick, oil-rich fumes which reminded Reno of Greyhound buses. A face hovered above him, laughing, swinging a familiar leather pouch, now dripping with sticky, crimson blood. *His blood.* The face was covered with tattoos which seemed to breath and stretch. A face he knew on sight.

"Vinny," he croaked.

"I said I'd get you for burning me, Reno."

"I killed you."

"Do I look dead, asshole?" Vinny revved the engine, laughed louder. "I started with you, Reno. But I won't be done until I get them all. Every fucking Red Moon."

Reno fought to clear the face from his blurred vision, to think of his brother, Tuscon, his friends. Anything but the grinning bastard he thought he'd knocked off for screwing his chick. The crazy mother-fucker people called "Tat";

best damn tattoo artist in the state -- maybe the nation. And the craziest. The deadliest. *Deadest*, he corrected, and chuckled hoarsely, blood trickling from the side of his mouth.

"I'm going to get all the Red Moon's for what you did to me. All of the bastards. You think on that Reno. ...While you can!" The tattooed mad man took off in a cloud of dirt-filled dust which threw Reno into a coughing fit.

He crossed blood-crusted arms over his ripped chest and closed his eyes against the numbing pain. He could see the chicks waiting for him, feel their breath hot on his face, almost touch the rigid nipples that beckoned him closer. As he reached in his tortured mind for the redheaded nymph with the huge tits, a blowfly squatted on the mounded pulp which used to support his dick. To Reno, it felt like the blonde with the shapely ass had just mounted him. He sighed deeply, convulsed once, and followed the crowd of tattooed ladies into the wild passions of Fire Lake.

##########

"Reno"s dead. My *brother*!" Tuscon pounded the royal-blue, metal-flake gas tank of the big Harley Hog, glared at the ring of milling bikers. He dismounted and crossed to where Rocky, the Red Moon's self-proclaimed leader, stood fondling Sylvia, his latest bed-mate.

"What do you want us to do, man? We don't know who did it. If we're gonna kick ass we gotta know who's ass to kick," grumbled Rocky.

Sylvia wriggled free of Rocky's roving hands, a vacant, half-smile on her pock-marked face. She stopped only inches away from Tuscon, her large, sagging tits thrust close to his slitted, brown eyes.

"Rocky's right, Tuscon. We can't go off ... half cocked." She laughed, low and easy. A nice laugh. Tuscon wondered what kind of lay she would be, decided she'd be damn good if he didn't have to look at her. "I'd like to help you, if you want me."

Tuscon tweaked Sylvia's right nipple, causing her to flinch. His eyes casually roamed the expanse of bustline, lowered to her exposed navel, lingered on the tight lines of her pussy.

"Oh, I want you, all right," he said, low enough so that only Sylvia could hear. Then, for Rocky's benefit, "I can use all the support I can get."

"Keep eyeing my old lady like that, bro, and you'll need more than support. You'll need a whole fucking erector set." Rocky strode to Sylvia and pulled her roughly by the

hair, knocking her to the ground with the back of his free hand.

"Leave me the fuck alone, Rocky, you bastard! I'm not your God damned property."

"You share my bedroll, you're my property," he growled. "Remember that, bitch. You want to change rolls? It can be arranged."

Sylvia thrust out her chin, shook back scraggly, blonde hair, and spit. The rank looking slime caught the side of Rocky's's face and stuck there, glistening. "Fuck off, Rocky."

"You little..." Rocky hauled Sylvia up by the strap of her thin halter top, ripping the red cotton and causing her tits to flop out. He backhanded her, hard, leaving an imprint of his hand on her pale face. To his surprise she started laughing.

"Leave her, Rocky," said Tuscon. "She ain't worth it. Hell, you can do better. Let's get back to the business at hand. Forget the slut."

"You're right bro." Rocky wiped the spit away with an ugly grimace, brushed his hands across the seat of his Levi's and shook back a tangle of dark brown hair. He turned to stare at Sylvia. She was still on the ground, trying to remove the shredded halter top. Rocky's reached her in two angry strides, ripped off the shirt, exposing a collage of tattoos which included a new one; a heart with his name on it.

"You still here, bitch? Go change your clothes. You look like shit."

"Sylvia staggered to her bare feet, hands limp at her sides, blue eyes like the base of a burning candle. The men ignored her as she headed for camp, unaware of her increasing rage.

"Help me find Reno's killer, Rocky. We have to avenge him. He was your friend...my brother. We have to..."

"You don't even know where to start! Do you have any clues? Anything to go ? You said..."

"I *said* a lot of shit, Rocky. To the cops, to my mother..." Tuscon spit a trail of brackish, green slime. It landed on Rocky's boot. "Sorry, man. Bad aim."

"Fuckin' right." Rocky scraped the toe of his boot in the dirt, smearing the spit around.

"You know the first thing I noticed about Reno?" Tuscon lit a Marborough with an old, silver eagle lighter. He took a deep drag. "His tats were gone. Know that, Rocky? All of them. *Gone."*

"All of them? Are you sure?" Rocky looked deep into Tuscon's dark eyes, his jaw twitching nervously. "Even the one on his..."

"Yeah. Even the one on his prick. The fucker sliced it clean off! And from what I could see of Reno's body the killer wanted his tats. Nothing else. He was clean

except where the tattoos used to be." Tears stood like puddles in Tuscon's eyes and he pounded the seat of the Harley with such force that the big bike would have toppled if Rocky hadn't been there to catch it. Tuscon dropped his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, smeared it into the sandy soil with one heavy, black boot.

"I'm going to mangle the son-of-a-bitch that hacked up Reno. With your help -- or without it."

Tuscon seemed to notice the brothers for the first time, saw them murmuring.

"Hey, you guys listen up!" There were a couple of "fuck you's" and the normal amount of back talk, but after a moment the men turned to Tuscon, quieted. "There's some crazy bastard out there ripping of tats. We gotta find him. He's already killed Reno. Remember Reno? My brother? The one went after the brew last night? There was a surge of angry voices, some mumbling, a few remarks about laying off the accusations. "Ok. I want you bro's to remember something just in case you don't feel like helping out. And I want you to think on it *hard*.

"Reno wasn't the only Red Moon with a tat on his prick."

Rocky turned a sick shade of green. "All of us man. The red moon..."

"That's right. And there's only one person I can think of who'd do something this fuckin' kinky." Tuscon had their attention now. All the bikers were watching him, apprehension like beacons in their eyes, waiting for the words that would mark Tuscon as crazy. But he had to voice his suspicion -- his fear. He remembered the promise that Vinny "Tat" DeNunzio had made on the night Reno had killed him. He'd sworn to get even with the Red Moons for shaming him. And now, a full year since Vinny's death, it seemed he was carrying out his threat.

"Who it it, Tuscon?" asked Rocky.

"Vinny DeNunzio."

"Tat? The fucker has been dead for months!"

"A year, Rocky. A year yesterday." The clearing was hushed. Some of the Red Moons were drifting away. Others stood, legs wide apart, studying Tuscon like he'd just sprouted a second nose.

"I remember Tat," said one of the bikers. "Sliced up your brother's chick, right?" Tuscon nodded. Vinny took off with that broad, Cindy..."

"Mindy," corrected Tuscon. "Her name was Mindy."

"A bad ass scene. A lot of bad blood that night. I think I passed out before it was over. I can't remember..."

"I remember," said Tex, a

tall, skinny guy with bad teeth and thread-bare Levi's. "We buried him at the run. Him and Mindy both. I was glad to bury the bastard."

"But if he's dead..." Rocky fidgetted with the chain-link belt he favored, scratched a sweaty armpit.

"You remember what he did to Mindy before he killed her, Tex?"

"Yeah." Tex spit sluice across the dry ground, watched it pool and sit there like a fat, black leech. "He cut her up."

"That ain't all he did, Tex. He sliced off her tattoos. Remember? The fucker said he collected them! Had a whole fucking collection of the damn things in that old van he used to drive. And his own tats looked really weird. Remember how they used to kind of *breathe?"*

"I never did like the asshole. But you can't kill a dead man," drawled Tex.

"And dead men don't kill other people, either," added Rocky, kicking a lizard that tried to pass his bike.

"No?" Tuscon got a strange sort of smile on his face that scared the living hell out of everyone that saw it. And all the Red Moon brothers came up to Tuscon to let him know they were with him all the way. Whenever Tuscon had something to go on, they'd be there. That's what they said.

Tuscon watched them in silence, knowing that their sincerity was born of fear.

####################

Rocky didn't notice Sylvia's absence until late that night when he made it back to his campsite, more tired than he could ever remember being. It pissed him off to realize she'd deserted him for the night, but he knew she'd be back. Nobody walked out on Rocky. He was the leader of the Red Moon bikers. Leaving had always been *his* option. He turned over in the ragged blue sleeping bag, his strong muscles stretching, aching. He wanted a lay. Needed a warm cunt to penetrate -- relieve his tension. *Damn the bitch!* She'd never had it so good... There were other chicks who'd be happy to fuck him... He smiled into the night and drifted into a fitful sleep.

It was past sunup when Rocky groggily opened one eye, reached for Sylvia to give him his morning head, and remembered he'd slept a;one. "Stupid bitch. She'll pay for this." He strutted off to his emerald-green Triumph, ripped off the sheet of thin, prachment-like paper Sylvia always seemed to be scribbling on.

"Nobody treats me like shit. Suck yourself off, Rocky," he read.

"The lousy cunt!" Rocky crumpled the paper and threw it to the ground. He mounted the cold bike, got it going on the third try,

and roared out of camp. He headed downhill, figuring to find her on the road back up, all whiny and apologetic. He'd let her grovel. Make her suck him off and swallow it. He knew she hated to swallow, said it made her sick. "Bitch." Something in the bushes near the bottom of the road caused him to brake sharply, turn too close. He slid sideways on the dirt road, black boots scraping gravel as he slid into the side of the mountain. He shut the Triumph down, slapped dirt off his tight, button-fly Levi's, and parked the chopper on the side of the little-used road.

It was a quiet morning and he could hear the drone of bees close by, saw flies the size of marbles swarming around the sagebrush. He took a long draught warming air before braving the walk into the thick bushes. He didn't like the ominous near-silence and he'd always hated insects. "Fucking bugs!" He shooed them away with a calloused hand, stepped into the closeness of the brush.

Sylvia lay in a tangle, her long hair wrapped around her throat, dull, blue-grey eyes staring skyward. Flies congregated on her pitted cheeks as Rocky stared at her exposed body. Her cut-offs had been slashed from the navel to the crotch and blood was crusted around the zipper. Stiff, white breasts were covered with greenish bruises and above each one was a hacked off area where tattoos had been.

Rocky, his face set as stone, turned Sylvia's unresisting body over. It made a sick thud on the dry, desert ground and Rocky covered his mouth as flies rose angrily from the putrifying flesh. Her tight pants ha been sliced cleanly down the ass where a deep gash was carved in the shape of a quarter moon.

"Holy shit." Rocky pivoted, stumbled backwards against rough bushes. Bile rose in torturous waves into his dry mouth. He puked until his stomach cramped and he coughed up blood. Then he drug Sylvia's frigid corpse from the brush and strapped her to the Triumph with his chain belt. It was rough going; he had to snap her backbone to make her sit, and the sickly-sweet smell of death made him gag. It was only the mind-image of Sylvia's silently screaming blue lips and knowing that, however insane it was, Vinny had to be the killer, that spurred Rocky back to camp. He vowed to catch the bastard that sliced up his woman, even if she *had* been a bitch. And he'd get the fucker, even if he was a damned ghost!

Nobody fucked with Rocky and got away with it. *Nobody.*

Rocky parked the Triumph against a wide oak tree, hopped off and shoved aside half a dozen bikers to reach Tuscon. He saw him

coming, staggering beside the jailbait he'd picked up the last run. A scrawny brunette who wore far too much-makeup and said her name was Nina.

"I got something for you, Tuscon. On the bike. Come on." Rocky turned, led the way back to the bike where he unstrapped Sylvia's near naked corpse. Most of the Red Moons were gathered around it, making rude comments, trying not to puke. Rocky grinned as he pushed the body to the dusty earth. He couldn't seem to stop the smile in spite of the fact that he felt like screaming. The body stayed pretty much in a sitting position, eyes glazed over, hungry beetles and ants crawling all over her. Rocky watched in disgusted fascination as the insects chewed on the greying skin.

"Christ. I thought she was ugly *alive*." shouted one of the bikers. Nervous laughter followed the remark until Rocky ended it by telling everyone to get the fuck out of there.

Tex was the only Red Moon besides Tuscon that stood his ground. Nina took off with the others, obviously anxious to leave.

"I thought you wanted help," Tex drawled.

"It's a personal thing," said Rocky. He kicked Sylvia's corpse and a slew of bottles scattered away from his boot. "You could bury her, though. Before the damn coyotes cart her off."

"Sure, Rocky. I'll find a shovel or somethin'" He spit, wiped his mouth with his T-shirt sleeve.

"Thanks, bro."

"You know, Rocky, you aren't the only one's got a vendetta against Tat,"

"What do you mean?"

"My sister, Carmen. She used to go out with him."

"We'll be in touch, bro. I'll want to see you when Rocky and I get back. We're gonna check out the place where she died."

Bury her deep, Tex."

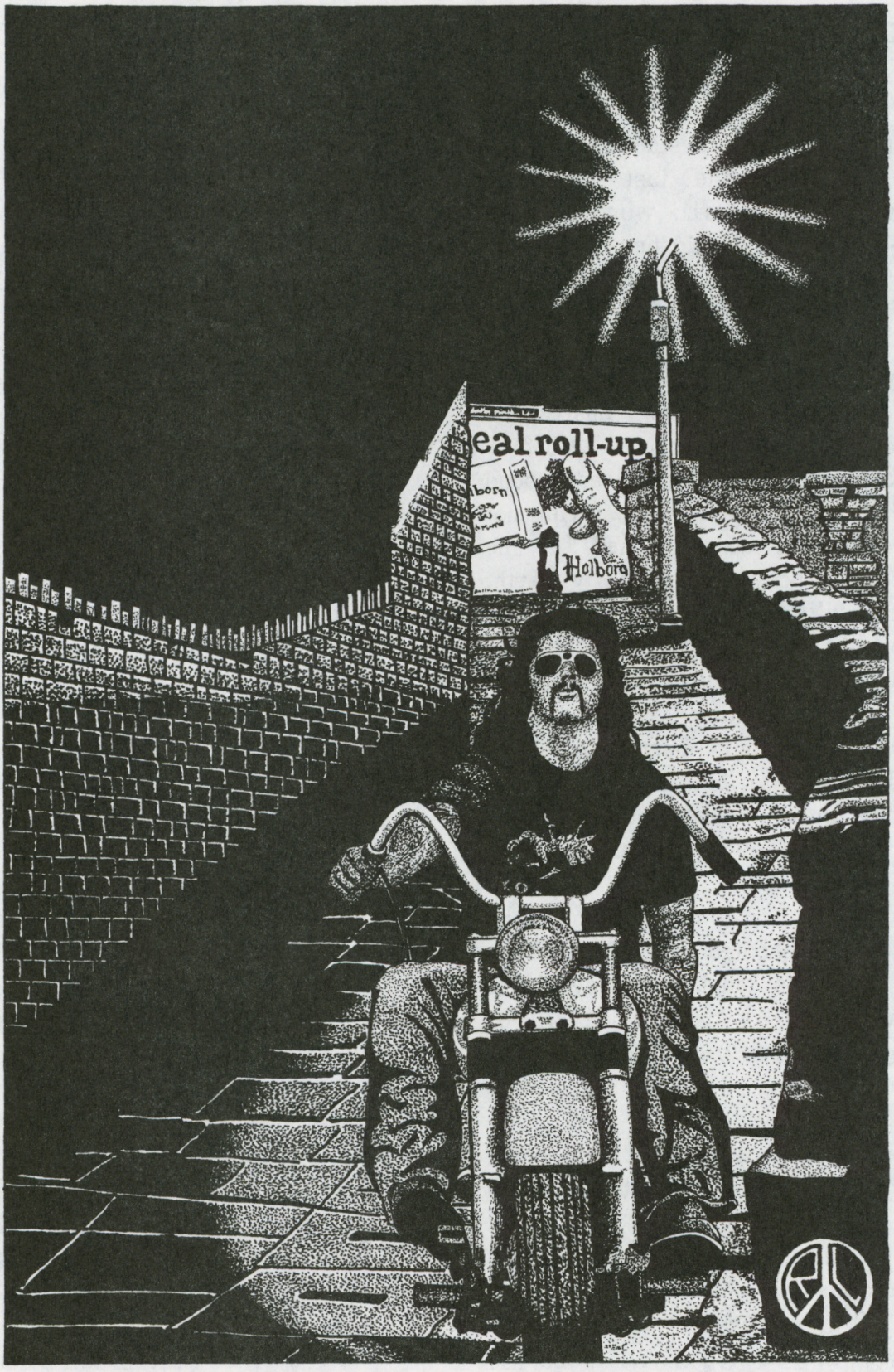
##########

The grove was just as Rocky had left it, untouched except for where he'd had to drag Sylvia's body through the brush. Rocky and Tuscon scoured the area, taking not of the spot where Sylvia had been murdered. It was past noon when Tuscon found something.

"Rocky, look at this."

"What..." Rocky's jaw dropped when he saw the grisly piece of ragged, waxy flesh. He recognized it immediately. It was curling, looking more like leather than Sylvia's pale skin, but the name on the heart was unmistakingly his.

"Christ." Rocky started to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turn, was stopped by a word from Tuscon. "Look." In Tuscon's outstretched palm lay what appeared to an ordinary pouch, the fringed, brown sued kind you find at swap meets. But this one was subtly different. It carried the nickname of it's owner, and around the name were seven stars.

"Tat. That's his pouch." Rocky felt dizzy, touched a sweat-damp hand to his forehead. "It's true... You were right. I didn't want to believe it, not really... *Shit.* What can we do, Tuscon? How do you kill somebody that's already dead?"

"I don't know. But we gotta find the son-of-a-bitch. And we gotta do it fast."

##########

"I did it Rocky. I buried her for you." Tex spit across the dry grass,wiped his mouth with the back of a leathery hand. "She's under the tree."

Rocky glanced at the mound of new earth, wiped sweaty palms on his dusty jeans. "Thanks, Tex."

"You guys find anything?"

"Just these." Tuscon handed Tex the pouch and the curling tattoo. Tex took them hesitantly, turning each of them over like a jeweler examining a rare gem.

"It's him for sure, isn't it?" Tuscon and Rocky exchanged guarded looks, nodded in silent agreement. "How can I help?"

"Tell us what you remember about Vinny. Who he hung out with... that sort of thing." suggested Tuscon, lighting a cigarette.

"He used a van, I remember that much. I guess you guys must remember it... weird fuckin thing, all decorated with phony-ass tat pictures, and the whole inside was covered with those sheets of tat designs like they use in the shops. He used to hit all the bike runs and the van runs, too. Said all the best chicks went on runs." Tex adjusted his hat, a black suede hat with a peacock feather stuck in the band. "My sister used to go out with him a lot, that's how I know about the bastard. He used to ride a Kawasaki or some such shit. He lived outside Lancaster in an old, abandoned house."

"Where's your sister now?"

"Dead. Some kind of rare skin infection, the doctors. She was only seventeen. A beautiful chick before she got hung up on Vinny. Been dead almost two years now..."

"I,m sorry, man. I didn't know." Tuscon took a last, deep drag off his cigarette before crushing it out with his boot heel.

"Can't help wondering if her dyin' had something to do with the tats Vinny gave her. She was so proud of them. Looked almost like applique's. One thing I'll say for

Tat. He was damn good at his work... It was crazy though, about those tattoos he gave Carmen." Tex got a remote, far-away look in his hazel eyes. "When she died they were gone. They just... disappeared."

"Where's the house, Tex?" asked Rocky.

"You know the old Simpson place?"

"Out in the desert?"

"Yeah. Out in the sticks. All alone."

"But that place is..."

"Haunted?" Tex laughed, a harsh, brittle sound in the approaching dusk. "Yeah, it's haunted alright. But not by ghosts. By tramps. All the fuckin' hobos and degenerates hang out there, or used to. And so did Vinny."

"Let's go," prompted Rocky.

"Not yet, man. We wait for light or we don't go at all."

"Come on Tex. You turned chicken-shit on us?"

"Let me tell you somethin', Rocky. You don't want to see that place at night. Not if we're hunting for Tat. Not there."

##########

They pulled up outside an old two story, faded glory mansion. It had been someone's dream house once, but now it sat haggard and scarred with age and neglect, its owners long since dead. The tired picket fence was bared to the wood from violent desert winds. Shutters hung on rusted hinges down the sides of the place like sagging eye lids. Tuscon, Rocky and Tex parked carefully beneath an ancient Eucalyptus tree, each of them moving slowly, mechanically, unsure of their next action. One thing was certain; they were thankful they'd waited for daylight.

"You sure this is the place?"

"Yep, I'm sure, Tuscon. Had to pick Carmen up here plenty of times. Scared the shit out of me, let me tell you. Used to be a pack of winos out here, but Vinny may have got rid of them.

"The garage is out back. That's where he kept the van."

"Show me," said Rocky. "Let's get it over with."

"Great choice of words," grumbled Tuscon.

"This way." Tex picked up his pace, sidetracked the sagging fence as he strutted round back. Tuscon lagged behind Rocky, glancing right and left as he walked. It was still early morning. They'd left camp just as the sun peeked over the mountain. Tuscon's chick, Nina had complained that she'd be bored without him. "Play with yourself, baby. I've gotta find a fucking murderer." She'd rolled over, pouting, and Tus-

con told Rocky later, he hoped the bitch was gone when he got back.

"This is it."

Tuscon looked up from the dead grass he'd been studying and was confronted with the sight of an ancient garage, its weather-wasted sides leaning at an unnatural angle. It was greying and paint-chipped. Through the slats he thought he could detect a dark shape -- the van.

"What the hell we all standing around here for? Let's open the sucker up and see if Vinny's in there." Rocky pushed past Tex and pulled on the rusty-hinged door. It broke off in his hands and he cursed in astonished disgust as a barrage of fat, black flies billowed out of the murky garage. "Shit!" The flies swarmed, then scattered, a black cloud spreading across the abandoned house. Tex and Tuscon got up from their shelter on the ground, straightened out, shuddering their revulsion as Rocky stepped boldly into the foul breath of the decrepit building.

The van filled most of the dirt floor which had obviously been used as a camp. Beer cans, cigarette butts, and several opened cans of *Dinty Moore Beef Stew* littered the ground. Sagging wooden shelves housed dusty, grease-encrusted tools, canned soups, and assorted wrappers from long gone *Baby Ruth candy bars*. Rocky kicked over a stew can and gagged as a pile of writhing maggots tumbled out. He was overcome with a sense of nausea as the heavy stench of decay and feces came to him. He noticed the incredible concentration of beetles, flies, and maggots in the small garage. He stumbled, wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Over here," said Tex in a choked whisper. "I found him."

Tuscon followed Rocky to the back of the garage, squinting because the place was shaded and it was hard to see in the half-light. He heard Rocky gasp, saw him stumble against rotting shelves. Curiosity overpowering his common sense, Tuscon inched forward.

The partially decayed body of a man lay on the floor, half under the rear bumper of the van. It was covered with squirming maggots. Assorted beetles played hide-and-seek inside its collapsed skull. But by far the most horrible aspect of the body was the condition of the tattoos. *They were still fresh. Still breathing.* And they were crawling off of the body toward Tuscon, Rocky, and Tex, seemingly intent on attaching themselves to living flesh.

"Lets's split, man! We can't..."

"No, Tex. I have to see the van." Rocky bypassed the slithering tats, tried in vain to open the side doors.

"Check his pockets, Tuscon. I need those keys."

"I can't..."

"Get the God damned keys!"

Tuscon held his breath, reached a timid hand into the lump of clothes, trying to avoid contact with what remained of the flesh. He checked one jeans pocket, then the other, with no success.

"Try the shirt."

Tuscon stared at the sunken chest which crawled with insects, held his breath to keep from puking. He could feel bones give beneath his probing fingers, touch the cold, stiff chest cavity. He closed his hand around something smooth and slender... the neck of a Mogen David wine bottle.

"Rocky. Christ! It ain't him. It ain't Vinny... It's some fucking wino. Oh, God, no..." A large Harley Davidson "Live to Ride" tattoo was crawling on the back of his hand, clinging to his skin with tiny cillia-like tendrills. It felt like it was sucking the juices from his body. He was dizzy, swung the bottle into his hand, again and again he swung, and screamed. He was falling onto the decaying, putrid body of the corpse.

"Tuscon!" Rocky leaped from around the van and grabbed hold of Tuscon's shirt only moments before he would have hit the corpse. He was unconcious so Rocky leaned him against the wall. Tex ran over and said he'd stay with him while Rocky got the van open.

Rocky grabbed the tire iron, a triumphant gleam lighting his dark eyes as he swung full-force into the passenger window. It gave way in a burst of glass which flew outward, defying gravity, and spread like a crystal blanket over Tex and Tuscon. There was a sound like grating metal, a low humming from underground. Rocky stared in horror as the van's side doors opened, revealing a giant of a man crouching inside, his left arm draped possessively around a petite blonde. They were both covered from head to toe in tattoos.

"Vinny."

"Christ," whispered Tex. He stood to his full six foot height, stumbled away from the still-unconcious Tuscon. Glass shards fell from his hair as he staggered forward to stand besides Rocky. "Vinny...*Carmen*... Jesus fucking Christ! I thought you were dead."

"You killed my old lady. You butchered Reno. You son-of-a..." Rocky"s words were torn from him as Vinny sprang from the van, a death's head grimace on an illustrated face. The tattoos seemed to breath harder, move around in a sort of dance as Vinny jerked Rocky up by the shirt collar and held him at eye level. Rocky pulled back and spit in Vinny's left eye, tumbled back into Tex as Vinny released him. Shrill, hysterical laughter filled the garage. Rocky shook free of Tex, backed against the shelves.

'Tex, run!"

"Tex, run," mimicked Vinny. "Run and hide. Just like your cunt of a sister used to do. How do you like her now, Tex, baby?" His laughter rocked the building. As Tex pulled back a tight fist to crush Vinny, Carmen leapt lightly from the Chevy van.

"You thought I killed her, didn't you, Tex? Thought she was dead like me. But the joke's on you, baby. She may be dead fuck, but she's still... *breathing*."

Rocky gaped at the jean-clad woman. She was armored with an outrageous assortment of tats. Every color and shape imaginable. He peered closer, afraid to breath.

"You see it, Rocky? See the red moon? It was Sylvia's. A good lay, but damn ugly. I thought you'd do better than that."

In the far corner, Tuscon moved, tried to sit up. Rocky saw him fall back against the wall again and close his eyes.

"Why, Vinny? Why did you kill them?"

"For me," said Carmen, a smile lighting her grimy face. "It was the only way. He needed their tats. And the Red Moon's owed him."

"I don't get it," said Tex. "You're *dead!* I went to your fuckin' funeral!" He was tearing madly at his sandy hair, pacing the small near the front of the van. "You're *dead!*"

"Not really, Tex. And you could join us! Become a Tat Rider. Vinny's the leader. He says it'll be a nation wide soon. Won't that be great?

"Tex could join the Tat Riders, couldn't he, Vinny? He's my brother..."

Vinny sat down inside the Chevy, wiped his chin with the back of a greasy hand. "Sure, baby, sure. But if he don't want to join, he's dead meat. You know the rules."

"I ain't joining nothin'. You ain't even fucking *real*!" Tex ran for the open door. It slammed shut, the broken half welding itself to the frame of the building. The humming got louder and Tex turned to ask for help from Rocky, but Rocky was busy fighting off a tat that had separated itself from Vinny"s belly. And Tuscon was just sitting there, slouched against the wall while hundreds of tattoos crawled onto him, turning him into a Tat Rider like Carmen and Vinny. He was alive with pulsating tats.

"It feels so good, Tex. When they... connect. Like fucking, you know? I used to think it was gross, the way they sort of itch, at first. But Vinny helped me. And he showed me how to collect the good ones." Carmen unsheathed a razor-sharp boot-knife from her belt. It gleamed in her hand, pulsing against

her palm where the tattoo of a serpent writhed and hissed. She jumped from the Chevy, lips red and hungry as her brother backed slowly against the garage doors. He screamed in disbelief as Carmen slit open his stomach. Grey, slimy intestines spilled to the dust at her feet.

"No!" Rocky raced to Tex, yanked Carmen roughly away. The knife fell from her hand and he grabbed it, thrust it deep into her chest.

Carmen laughed as she pulled out the bloodless blade. Rocky gasped as the tats surrounded the gaping wound, covered it with new patterns until it was impossible to see where the knife had entered.

Tuscon was lurching across the floor, closing in on him. Rocky shoved Carmen aside, knocked Vinny down in an adrenalin-powered move to reach the open van. He hopped in, hitting his head on the low ceiling, slammed and locked the doors, and flipped on the ignition without stopping to check if anyone was trying to stop him. The van sputtered and coughed, then started in a burst of flames and backfire. Rocky threw it into second gear and it leapt like a cannonball through doors that opened ahead of him. He heard raucous laughter as he sped across the gravel path, past parked bikes, and onto the little-used back road which led to the highway.

He flipped on the radio, relaxing somewhat and wondering what to tell the Red Moons. He leaned back in the big seat, right hand tapping rhythm on the padded armrest. In the back of the van, in the built-in ice box, jars of preserved tattoos rattled. Sheet of dried tat skin designs hung seductively to the walls. Vinny's old Kawasaki lay on its side, heavy, tired, and waiting.

Rocky sped on. He scratched the back of his head. It felt like something was crawling back there. Rocky figured it was lice. Vinny'd always been a dirty bastard and Carmen had looked none to clean. "A dead fuck. *Christ.*" He chuckled thinking of how he'd outsmarted Vinny and Carmen. He scratched his crotch. Funny, it almost felt good. "Fucking lice."

It was getting hot in the van so Rocky rolled down his window. He noticed how there didn't seem to be any glass in the vehicle. Strange. He checked the gas gauge. It was getting dangerously low. He was feeling light-headed when he spotted a gas station. It was an old one, probably the only one for miles. He checked his pockets, remembered he had a five dollar bill in his wallet.

He pulled off the main road, into the tree-lined station. Sweat filmed on his back, his forehead, his palms. He watched the gas station attendant approach the idling van, a look of concern on the pimply, youthful face. Rocky turned down

the rock music, opened the door, and fell face down on the hard, hot asphalt.

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"Is this the guy?" A stocky California stater with heavy, black motorcycle boots kicked at Rocky's limp form. He lay there, not breathing, sprawled half out, half under the parked van. "He's dead?"

The attendant nodded, sweat making his acne-scattered face shine in the intense heat. He scratched the back of his neck, thinking how weird the guy had looked with all of those tattoos on his face and arms. "What ya gonna do with him, mister?"

"Take him to the morgue. Unless *you* want him?" The big cop guffawed at his own joke. The kid looked fit to puke. And it was no wonder. The stater flipped Rocky over, marveled at how these biker-types went so God damned ape shit with tattoos.

"What about the van? There's a bike in there, too. Old, but nice. Do you, uh..."

"If nobody claims it, it's up for grabs," said the cop. "I'll leave it here for now."

"Uh, thanks. Could you maybe hurry it up on getting this guy outa here? My dad..."

"Sure, kid." He scratched his leg, thinking of all the big bottles that seemed to be around lately. "Help me get him into the squad car."

####################

The van sat in the cooling shade, waiting, like the bike inside. Like the dried tattoos on the walls, in jars... waiting. And when they tired of waiting, they found their way out of the van, safe under cover of darkness. They knew what to do. What they craved. And Vinny came to their aid when they needed him. It wasn't much of a ride to the Red Moon camp. And there was plenty of food on the way...

THE BOOTH

BY WAYNE RILE WILLIAMS

Darkness
'CLINK'

The needle hovers an inch from Gilbert Mallory's eye. Pressure of straps holding him fast to the table. The inquisitor stands before him . . . his face divided into Picasso-like multicolored geometric patterns . . . he is asking him something. Gilbert doesn't understand. The needle moves closer. Gilbert isn't frightened. A death sentence already hangs over him. Leukemia Torture? He's already suffered that at the hands of well-meaning doctors . . . therapy.

Gilbert hears a piano playing the same discordant notes over and over . . . punctuated by whispers.

. . . CLOSER . . .

His wife has offered other tortures . . . she doesn't understand . . . not her fault. He has hidden his illness from her. She sees only his abusiveness/meloncholy . . . long silences from which she is wholly excluded.

A door opens before him . . . Darkness swirls in a tornado of negative light, which dissipates into stars.

***

. . . CLOSER . . .

No memory of coming here. He wears a black suit and pants . . . face/hands painted white. He glances about the room. Through a window, he sees a kite flying a little boy on a long string . . . The landscape includes both cactus and glacier.

. . . CLOSER . . .

The rest of the room is lined with mirrors reflecting distorted images of he and the inquisitor. The latter's costume undulates with color . . . geometric patterns shifting with kaleidoscopic fluidity. The inquisitor questions him in what sounds like English in reverse . . . every third word spoken normally. Gilbert dosen't answer. The needle punctures his cornea. He screams. Then . . .

DARKNESS
'CLINK'

Gilbert awakens . . . scent of blood/humorus on his cheek . . . shock . . . remaining eye bleary . . . he can make out a sobbing woman next to the inquisitor. The inquisitor is saying something. Gilbert catches only, "Your wife". It is Mara. Gilbert struggles. How can they do this? As he watches, hooded men

rape her. The question is repeated. The inquisitor puts his hand around Mara's neck . . . begins to twist upwards. The neck grows thinner, thinner. Desperate, Gilbert pleads. Again, the question is repeated. The inquisitor squeezes her neck . . . and . . .

DARKNESS
'CLINK'

Mara falls to the floor. Gilbert stares at her beheaded corpse with sorrow . . . impotence . . . shame. Why couldn't they kill him? He is going to die anyway.

The inquisitor asks the unintelligible question repeatedly. Each time the decibel in his voice increases until he is mouthing words beyond human hearing. Gilbert grows dizzy . . . nauseous . . . his heart pounds . . . blood trickles from his ears and mouth . . . he blacks out.

DARKNESS
'CLINK'

The tiny booth is warm. Gilbert fumbles in his pocket for more change. As always, he has traded his meager pay check for coins to use in the booth.

. . . THE PAIN . . .

The booth is one of many that stands in rows in back of the adult book store. It is little larger than a coffin. Such cubicles are for those who require . . . special titilation. For Gilbert, the booth is a necessity. Prescribed pain drugs don't work. Diabilitating side effects.

. . . GROWING WORSE . . .

Mara hadn't known about the booth . . . thought he was seeing another woman . . . but he was here . . . all the time . . . here.

. . . HEAD POUNDING . . .

It was well that she had divorced him . . . won't have to watch him wither/die . . . never know the agony . . . fear that drove him to escape . . . to the booth, with its electronic diversions of fantasy.

The booth scourges him of concerns with simulated pain, but the succor is brief . . . He must return often.

. . . GROWING WEAKER . . .

He had drank when his infant son died. Alcohol is too mild a torture, now.

. . . WEAKER . . .

Coins, where are the coins?

He finds one last quarter . . . adjusts the sado-link . . . drops the coin in the slot.

DARKNESS
'CLINK'

The spindle turns rapidly on the lathe. The cutting tool flays Gilbert's skin gradually as he spins upon it. The depth of the cut is adjusted. Blood covers the cutting tool. Gilbert drools slightly, his pupils dilate in ecstasy of pain . . . one. . . last . . . time . . .

DARKNESS
'CLINK'

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