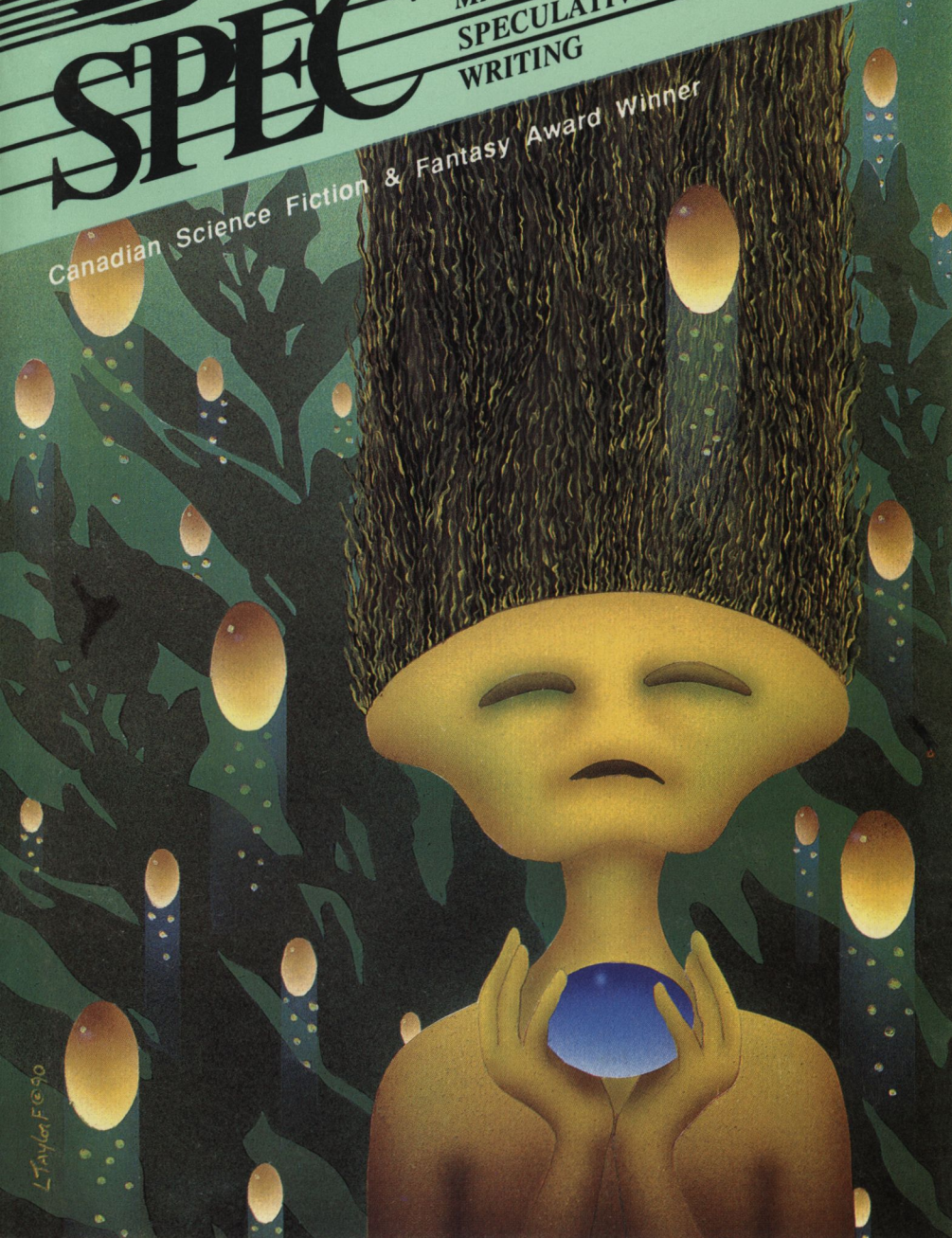


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MAGAZINE OF
SPECULATIVE
WRITING

Volume 2, Number 2
Fall 1990
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EDITORIAL # 4

We're still reeling! At ConVersion 7/Canvention 10 in Calgary at the end of July, *ON SPEC* received the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Award (Casper/Aurora) for Best Work in English (Other). We're still not sure exactly what the category name means, but that beautiful award needs no interpretation. It's a wonderful feeling to know that people appreciate what you are doing and support your endeavours. From all of us at *ON SPEC* to all of you who voted for the Caspers —thank you, thank you, thank you! I must mention also that four of the excellent stories nominated for Best Short Work in English came from *ON SPEC*. Congratulations to **Eileen Kernaghan** whose story "Carpe Diem" appeared in Issue #2 — we really missed you when we passed the champagne around. Sharing in that champagne were **Dave Duncan** ("Boy at Heart," *ON SPEC* #1) whose book *West Of January* won Best Long Form in English, and **Robert Runté** ("The Luck of Charles Harcourt," *ON SPEC* #1) who received the Fan Achievement Award for his promotion of Canadian SF writing. Also present were Editorial Advisory Board members and Casper nominees, **J. Brian Clarke** and **Candas Jane Dorsey**. May the trend continue, amen.

Speaking of awards, it was terrific to hear that Canadian **James Alan Gardner** was the Grand Prize Winner in the Los Angeles-based Writers of the Future Contest. He was published in *ON SPEC* #3, with "Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large." His new prize-winning story will be published in the next *Writers of the Future Anthology*. Look for it!

There are some thank-you's due for services above and beyond the call of dedication to *ON SPEC*: To Alberta writer **Alice Major** for filling in on the Editorial Advisory Board for **Doug Barbour** who was sunning, funning and reciting in Australia. (In the interests of fairness, I should point out that we bought Alice's story, "Dog's Life," back in January, long before we asked her to fill in on the Board. Let no one accuse us of blackmail — at least not in this case.) To the good people of S.T. Con (Calgary) and ConVersion 7 for their hospitality to *ON SPEC* and its staff. A good time was had by all — by me, certainly. And, finally, to all the people who responded with suggestions and offers of assistance to our call in the last issue for promotional ideas. If you offered your services and you haven't heard from us yet, you haven't escaped. We're still debating which little salt mine you'd work best in.

Of interest to contributors: our payment rates have gone up again for both short stories and art. And a special plea: please put a phone number somewhere on your submissions. Besides making it a lot easier for us to get hold of you to buy your story, it could actually mean the difference between being published and not (e.g. "Jena, what do you mean 'we have room for one more really short story and who can I phone?'"")

Of interest to everyone: There will be a new SF news and critical magazine called *Canadian SF Quarterly* coming out of Ottawa this winter under the editorship of Paul Valcour. Do subscribe if you are at all interested in the state of specific writing and fandom in Canada.

Don't forget to work on your humour stories/poetry/art for the humour issue, deadline June 30, 1991. And don't forget to put your pennies (nickels?) aside for the *ON SPEC Youth Issue* coming out one month after our regular fall issue this year.

Oops

The gracious lady who illustrated the plant poems last issue was Lynne (with an 'e') Taylor Fahnstalk. She is also the one responsible for this issue's gorgeous cover. ☛



Thanks

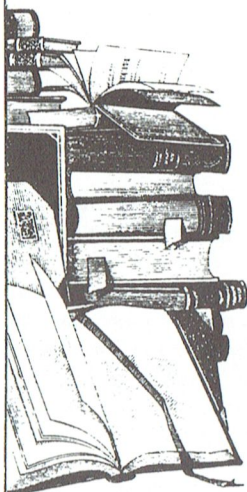
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The Basement

by Edo van Belkom

illustration by Tim Hammell

Mrs. Caputo walked by the basement doorway and made the sign of the cross.

It was a smooth movement, so practiced over the years that it hardly interfered with the rhythm of her limping gait as she carried on into the kitchen.

Five years had passed since she'd found her husband's body, bent and broken, at the bottom of the stairs, his mouth open, his eyes shut and his face covered in blood. Five years had passed since she'd been down there, five years since she had even opened the door.

The basement was an evil place. It had taken Mario from her and left her to live out her life in an empty and lifeless house.

The basement was evil too... because of the noises.

The noises had started a week after Mario died. They were soft slithering sounds at first — the kind of sound you can hear a snake make if you put your ear close enough to the grass. Later, the noises had changed, become more of a skittering sound, like rats crawling over dried and crinkled newsprint. In the last six months however, the noises had gotten worse, especially when the sun set and the streets were quiet. She could hear the creaking weeping of the steps, as if someone were pacing up and down, looking for a way out. Or waiting for someone to come in.

She heard the noises wafting up from the basement, but always shook her head and told herself that the house was still settling down on its foundation. She told herself that, and then she prayed.

Standing in front of the stove, Mrs. Caputo spooned a single scoop of sugar into her espresso. As she stirred the coffee, the big black cat — her only comfort the last five years — rubbed itself against a wrinkled stocking.

AMMELL
©90



"Micio," said Mrs. Caputo, looking down at the cat. "Some milk for my friend?"

The cat was already standing on its hind legs, stretching its paws up against the edge of the counter in anticipation. "*Corri giu*," Mrs. Caputo scolded. A second later the cat was back with four paws on the floor and its tail wrapped around a table leg.

She poured some milk into a saucer and placed it at her feet.

The cat scurried across the floor, its old and unretractable claws clicking a frantic rhythm on the ceramic. It skidded to a stop in front of the saucer and quickly began lapping up the milk. Flying droplets splashed up and landed like snow on the black fur of the cat's face.

Mrs. Caputo limped a few feet and took a seat at the kitchen table. The bottle of Vecchia Romagna rested in its usual spot in the middle of the table. She looked at it for several moments and with an old tired breath blew a spot of dust off it. The brandy bottle had been half-full the last five years, waiting patiently for someone to visit the old woman, for someone to come by to talk and have a shot. But no one came.

Without Mario, why would anyone want to visit?

*

Even the children didn't come around much anymore. They were grown now with children of their own, moved to smaller towns outside Toronto where house prices were cheaper. They called once a week, visited every month or so, but they never stayed long.

She took her first sip of coffee.

The taste of the strong, black liquid reminded her of a time when she made coffee for Mario and his friends as they played *briscola* or just talked of the old country on long summer Sundays. In those days there had been a new bottle of brandy on the table every second week.

She finished her coffee and squinted through her thick, horn-rimmed glasses at the calendar on the wall by the refrigerator.

It was Thursday. The man would be coming to look at the furnace at ten. Margarita would be by early in the afternoon to take Mrs. Caputo, first to the bank, then to the supermarket. Margarita lived on the next street over and took Mrs. Caputo shopping every Thursday. Mrs. Caputo suspected she did it out of respect for Mario's memory; either that or Mario had left her some money and asked her to do it for him. Whatever the reason, she never really seemed to enjoy it. Dinner would be at six and at eight on Channel 47 — *Music of your life Italian Style con Nico Navarro...*

There was a knock at the door.

The cat cut short its post-milk lip-smacking and darted off to the front door, ears upright and curious. With some effort, Mrs. Caputo got up from her chair, placed her coffee cup in the sink and limped

down the hall, making the sign of the cross as she passed the basement doorway. There was a second knock on the front door before she could open it.

"Mrs. Caputo? I'm here to check your furnace." A handsome young man was on the other side of the screen door.

"Hallo, come, come," Mrs. Caputo said, opening the screen door and taking tiny steps backward to allow the man room to pass.

"So what's wrong with your furnace? All it says here is that it doesn't work," he said, looking at a slip of paper stapled to a work order. "When was the last time someone had a look at it?"

Mrs. Caputo smiled back at the man. "I me sorry, I no good English, *parli l'italiano?*"

"Uh?" The man paused. "No mam, I'm afraid I don't speak Italian. But if you like we could send another guy who does, might take a week or so."

"No, no, today please," Mrs. Caputo said, thinking he'd said he'd be back next week.

"All right mam, but I'd still like to know how long it's been."

"Huh?"

"How long? How. Long. Since. Your. Furnace..."

Mrs. Caputo understood a few of the words. "Five," she said, holding up her hand, fingers pointing in five different directions.

"Five years! You know you should get it checked a little more often than that. It might just need a good cleaning but you never know." He paused for a moment as Mrs. Caputo stared up blankly at him. "Well, we'll soon find out. Where's the basement?"

Mrs. Caputo understood the word "basement" and the image of Mario's body lying bent and broken at the bottom of the stairs was brought back sharply in her mind.

"La," she said, pointing down the hall at the tiny door tucked beneath the stairs that led up to the second floor.

The young man walked down the hall and as he opened the door, Mrs. Caputo turned her eyes away. After several moments she turned around and saw the door wide open and blocking her route back to the kitchen.

"*Chiudi la porta!* Close door," she said as loud as she could. "Close door. The cat!" If the cat got into the basement, she would have to chase after it, down to the place where she found Mario's body bent and broken at the bottom of the stairs.

Several seconds passed before the young man clumped his way back up the stairs and poked his head out into the hall. "Pardon me?"

"Close door, close door, the cat, the cat."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the young man said and closed the door. Mrs. Caputo could hear him whistling as he clumped back down the steps

into the basement.

Two hours passed.

Mrs. Caputo helped nudge the time along by baking some cakes for the young man in the basement. He was a little skinny, probably not eating right, probably needed a good woman to look after him.

Margarita came before the young man had finished. Mrs. Caputo heard the old Dodge Dart rattle up the driveway and knew Margarita would be in a hurry. She wouldn't want to wait for the young man to finish. Margarita's son would be coming home from the university at four and she didn't like his supper to be late.

"Tell him I'll be leaving, tell him to take the cakes by the door and lock up when he leaves," she told Margarita in the Emelia Romagna dialect she and Mario had used all their lives, even after they had come to Canada.

Margarita went down into the basement to speak to the young man while Mrs. Caputo wrapped the cakes in a paper towel and placed them in a plastic bag.

Margarita and the young man came up the stairs together. They stood in the hall for a few seconds before Mrs. Caputo called out from the kitchen, "Close door, close door."

The young man closed the door. "Uh, I'm almost finished for today, Mrs. Caputo. Your furnace was pretty dirty, I gave it a good cleaning but the motor was burned out. Strange thing that, looked like a screwdriver or something had been wedged into it." He held up the heavy electric motor for her to see. A section of the outer casing was bent and twisted. "I'll have to come back tomorrow with a new one. Will you be home around ten?"

"Huh?" Mrs. Caputo said.

Margarita translated. When she came to the part about the motor, she gestured to the man to hold up the motor. Mrs. Caputo looked at it for a few moments before lifting her head. "Oh *Dio*, oh *Dio*," she said softly, making the sign of the cross three times across her chest.

"What? What's wrong?" the young man asked.

Margarita gently took the young man by the arm.

"Everything's fine," she said. "She's old and she's alone. She worries about the house, that's all."

"I didn't mean to upset her," the young man said, his face knotted in a look of concern.

Seeing that she had upset the young man, Mrs. Caputo pulled herself together as best she could. "Is O.K., is O.K.," she said, her breath still a little laboured. "Here, take." She thrust the bag of cakes toward the young man and then spoke in her Italian dialect. "You need to marry a woman who can take care of you, you're too skinny, you need someone to make you fat."

"I don't understand," the young man said, a nervous smile on his

"I don't understand," the young man said, a nervous smile on his face.

Margarita translated.

The young man smiled. "Thank you very much," he said.

Mrs. Caputo nodded back at him as he disappeared into the basement.

"A nice boy," Mrs. Caputo said, "but he needs a woman."

"Yes, a very nice boy," Margarita said, trying to get Mrs. Caputo to move along. "Now let's get going. I have a nice boy of my own to think about and I don't want his supper to be late."

*

The house was silent as Mrs. Caputo opened the front door and entered. She placed her shopping bags on the floor, put her keys back into her purse and hung up her coat on the rack by the door.

She looked down the hall. Her stomach and heart seemed to jump up into her throat and for a moment it was hard to breathe.

The basement door was wide open.

Mrs. Caputo made the sign of the cross seven times and began whispering a prayer under her breath. The open hole of the doorway gaped at her. It seemed huge, as if it led not down into the basement but into some other world far, far away.

She called for her cat. "Micio? Micio? *Cicci.*"

From somewhere deep down in the basement came a response. It was a faint meow, unlike any she'd ever heard before. It seemed to float on the air to her. She called again, "Micio, Micio, *venni qui.*"

There was a second meow. Like the first, it was peaceful, contented.

Mrs. Caputo picked out a box of dried cat food from one of the shopping bags at her feet and shook it. The sound of the hard bits of food rattling around inside the box like stones on a tin sheet always summoned the cat, bringing it running, hungry and purring about her ankles.

Except this time there was no response.

Mrs. Caputo moved cautiously toward the doorway. She stopped several steps from the open hole and tried to peer inside. The basement looked black, empty, evil.

She took a few more steps. When she was standing directly in front of the doorway, a sudden calmness overcame her, as if there had been nothing to fear in the basement all along, as if there were joy and happiness to be found in its depths.

She stuck her head through the doorway, steadying herself with an arm on each side of the doorframe. The steps seemed different than she remembered: they were made of stone like the steps which led down the hill from the road at her father's home in Montcastello. At the bottom of the steps there was dirt where there used to be

concrete. To the right, a wagon full of hay rested with its wheels chocked. Further in the distance was the mountain she used to see every morning through her bedroom window as a child. Its sides were vibrant green in the morning sun. Straight ahead was the road that led to Cesena, a road she used to walk barefoot throughout the summer. On that road as a teenager she had sneaked cigarettes during the war. On that road she had met Mario.

"Yolanda!"

For a moment Mrs. Caputo wondered who would be calling her, for she hadn't heard her own name more than five times since Mario had died.

"Yolanda!" She heard it again and suddenly recognized the voice as Mario's. It was young and alive, the way it had sounded when they'd just married.

"Mario? Mario, is that you?" she called down into the basement.

"Yes, yes it is," came the sweet, soft sound of the reply. Mario was there, standing at the bottom of the steps, dressed in the only suit he had ever owned before coming to Canada. It had been the first suit his brother Enrico made after becoming a tailor's apprentice, and it fit perfectly. It was the suit he had been married in, the suit that had made Yolanda fall in love with him the first time she had seen him. "I've been waiting for you, *Cara Mia*, so many years now. Why haven't you joined me?"

"Mario," she said softly as the memories of their youth came rushing back to her. "But you're—"

She pulled herself away from the doorway and slammed the door shut behind her. She made the sign of the cross, fell awkwardly to her knees and began to pray. She prayed to God to take the devil from her basement, to keep her free from the power of that devil and to let Mario's soul rest in peace.

As Mrs. Caputo prayed, the cat came in from the kitchen and brushed past her. She picked it up and cradled it in her arms as if it were a child. The cat meowed once and licked a salty tear from her cheek.

*

Mrs. Caputo stayed upstairs in her bedroom most of the evening, trying to keep some distance between herself and the basement. She had nothing to do there in her room. She didn't read; she couldn't knit anymore and the television was downstairs in the living room. Even if she had wanted to do any of those things her mind wouldn't have allowed it. Her thoughts were drawn too strongly to what she had seen, or thought she had seen, in the basement.

But still it called to her. She tried to cover her ears, first with her hands and then with a pillow, but nothing could drown out the beckoning from the basement.

"Yolanda, Yolanda." The voice whispered up to her bedroom through the cracks in the walls and floor.

She tried to pray, but that only seemed to give the voice added strength, increasing its volume until her name swirled about her, filling the room like music.

"Yolanda, Yolanda..."

Finally Mrs. Caputo could take no more. The endless calling of her name and the curiosity about what she had seen earlier in the day had become too much. She slowly gathered herself off the bed, put on her house coat and slippers and made her way downstairs. A rosary dangled loosely from her right hand as she mumbled prayers under her breath.

She stood in front of the basement doorway for several minutes, praying. She placed her left hand on the doorknob and made the sign of the cross with her right, the crucifix of the rosary swinging wildly from side to side.

She opened the door. The basement was gone.

Instead was the backyard of her parents' home, the mountains of her youth, the smell of grapes ripening on the vine, the light of a thousand happy days.

And coming up the road was Mario.

"Yolanda," he called. "Yolanda, there you are. I've been waiting for you. Why didn't you come when I called you?"

"Mario? Is that really you?" she said, her eyes blinking and blurry with tears.

"Of course it is, *cara mia*, how silly you are. Who else would wait for you so long, who else would call you night after night, who else loves you as much as I do?"

Yolanda's head was spinning the same way it had fifty years earlier. Mario, in love with me. Of all the girls, he chose to make me the luckiest in the village, in the province — no, in all of Italy.

She felt herself young again, as if the sight, sounds and smell of younger days had filled her up and rejuvenated her. Mario was as handsome as she could remember, the land was just as beautiful, everything was precisely the way she remembered it.

Mario was just a few steps in front of her now. His young blue eyes were alive with the promise of a great future, his thick shock of coal-black hair promised his good looks would last forever, his muscular arms and back promised there would be nights of passion once more.

"Come! Now, before it's too late and I have to wait even longer. Come now and be with me." Mario had his arms outstretched toward her.

"I can't, what will papa say?"

"Your father's here, I've already talked to him, he gives his bless-

ing." Mario's face had such a look of love that she knew she would be safe in his arms.

She went to him.

He gathered her up and they kissed for what seemed like forever. At last they turned and, arm in arm, began walking down the road into town.

*

"Hello? Mrs. Caputo? Anybody home?"

The young man had found the front door open and was anxious to get the furnace fixed so he could get on with the day's regularly scheduled calls.

"I'm back to fix the furnace!" he called out boldly, stepping through the doorway and into the house. "La furnacia..." He tried to make the word sound more Italian for Mrs. Caputo's benefit but decided he just sounded stupid.

He stepped back outside, keeping the front door open, and rang the doorbell several times. No answer. He decided to go ahead with the repair in the hopes that Mrs. Caputo would arrive before he was done.

The young man walked over to the basement doorway and reached for the doorknob.

He was startled by something brushing past his right leg. He looked down and saw the cat, sucking up to him just enough for something to eat.

"Are you hungry fella... girl... whatever you are?"

The cat purred in anticipation of food. "Come on," the young man said, picking the cat up and walking into the kitchen. "I'll fix you up. Keep you away from that door anyway. The lady would be pretty upset with me if you ended up in the basement, now, wouldn't she?"

The cat was too busy lapping up the saucer of milk to answer.

Satisfied that the cat would be occupied for several moments, the young man quickly walked back to the basement doorway.

He opened the door.

"Holy shit!" he said.

Mrs. Caputo's body lay bent and broken at the bottom of the stairs. There was a curious smile on her lips.

He ran down the steps and crouched over the body. He placed an ear to its chest and listened for a heartbeat. He placed his fingers on its neck in search of a pulse but quickly pulled his hand away. The body was cold.

"No," he said softly, his own breath and heartbeat racing.

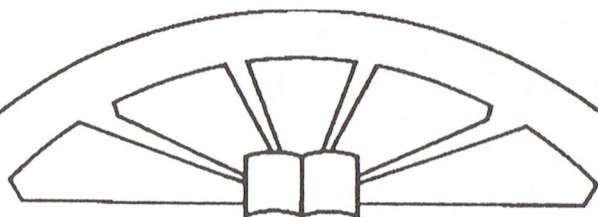
From somewhere in the basement shadows, he thought he heard a sound. It was a quick-tick kind of sound, a hard-soled shoe on concrete maybe.

least where he thought the sound was coming from. "Who's there?" he shouted again as his mind answered the question with a hundred different possibilities.

There was nobody there, only a voice. It was a young man's voice with a strange accent.

"Please clo-sed door when you go." The words seemed to float upon the musty, damp air of the basement.

And from somewhere in the shadows he heard a giggle. It was a young girl's and it was beautiful. ☛



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Please note *ON SPEC* has new submission deadlines:

- **MAY 31** for the Fall 1991 Issue
- **JUNE 30** for the Special Issue (1991 - Humour)
- **NOV. 30** for the Spring 1992 Issue

Oh, Them Dancing Shoes

by Bruce Taylor

illustration by Nadra Chapman

You know how it is, oh, you *know* how it is when you gotta have something so damn bad that you'll do just about anything to get it 'cause you know how it is: oh, sure you do: that red coat you just gotta have. That hat that last year you wouldn't give to your dog you just *gotta* have. It doesn't make any difference really what it is: a car, a boat, a Coca-Cola float — all you know is that right then and there, for whatever reason, whatever care, you just *have* to — you just *gotta* have what you gotta have right then and there and no bones about it no *way*.

And so it was one day when slim and slender Jackie Hutton, age thirteen and a half with the curliest red hair and the most awesome bunch of freckles in the whole seventh grade class of Morgan Junior High School, saw them ankle high, zipper up the side, shiny black boots in the neighborhood Thom McAn store.

Oh, my God, his eyes went wide and yes, indeed, in his size! And he looked in his wallet — seven dollars and fifty-three cents plus a fifty cent bus pass and Vickie Herman's phone number which, while not translatable to hard currency, sure the heck was valuable anyway.

And Jackie Hutton, trying to look calm and composed but with thumping heart, went up to a tall and somewhat bored-looking salesman in a dull brown coat and dull black tie and with dull dark eyes and he looked at Jackie Hutton like he was looking over a cliff at something mildly interesting a billion billion feet below. "Yes," he said distantly.

"Uh," gulped Jackie Hutton, "um — those boots in the window, on display—"



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"Which boots?" said the salesman looking even more bored.

"The black ones with the zipper up the sides."

The salesman looked mildly amused which made Jackie Hutton look even more determined which simply made the salesman more amused. "What about those black boots with the zipper up the sides?" A little smile slithered like a viper across his thin little lips.

"How much are they?" asked Jackie, absolutely sure that he had enough money and could probably buy a strawberry sundae at the Newberry's with the money he'd have left over.

The salesman smiled like this was the most wonderful fun he had had in a good long time, perhaps, maybe, even his life. "Those boots," he said, readying his tongue and lips for the strike, "are *forty-two fifty*."

Jackie Hutton swallowed, managed to say, "Oh."

The salesman, not satisfied with one strike, had fun with another. "A bit out of your price range?" Ah, the smile of satisfaction, of knowing how deep those fangs went and how much poison from one's own deep well one can extract to inject/infect another.

But Jackie was smart and, feeling the poison, decided not to give the salesman the satisfaction of struggle against obvious defeat. Instead, he smiled and said, "Thank you."

The salesman, having the fun of the day and knowing that the dullness in his own eyes had, at least temporarily, gone away, said, "Shall I put them aside for you?"

Jackie smiled. "Yes, please do."

"The name?"

"Jackie. Jackie Hutton."

"Very good. And when will you pick them up?"

"In two days."

"Very well." And slowly the dullness returned to his eyes and he was vaguely disturbed and surprised that this little befreckled jerk played the game better than he. For he knew it was just a game and he certainly had no intention of putting the shoes aside. No, not at all. No way could this kid, Jackie Hutton, no matter *how* thrifty — possibly come up with forty-two dollars — forty-two *fifty* — to be exact. The salesman had his last strike for the day and Jackie, he left and walked on toward home.

Those boots, he thought, those boots. Gotta, just *gotta* have those black boots. And the school dance next Friday and Vickie Herman, yes, she'd be there and she'd think him so cool with those new boots.

And he stopped at the Newberry's anyway and ordered a strawberry sundae and simply thought — what was he to do? What could he do? And he had to pick up those boots in just two days. Two days! What was he to do? He savored the sundae and simply thought — forty-two fifty — how can I — forty-two fifty... maybe Mom—

And when he got home, Mom simply said, "I know how much you'd like those boots, but forty-two fifty—" and she shook her head, "that's one week of groceries and Lord knows where that goes — and don't forget that the money you have — your allowance — has to last you for another week."

"Yes'm," said Jackie, looking down at the floor and inside feeling like things were suddenly bleak.

"You know," his mother then said, in her gentle way, "those ox-fords you have — if they were polished, they—"

But Jackie just sighed. "But they aren't the boots. They aren't ankle high and no zipper up the sides and they aren't shiny and new—"

"Well," his mother replied, "can't say I didn't try. Don't forget that dinner is in another hour now—"

And Jackie just nodded and went out the door to take a walk and you know how it goes when you want something so bad — sometimes things happen that you'd never expect and it was just like Jackie's feet knew where to go and before he knew it, he was in front of a store, on the window of which read, "Shoes". That was all, simply "Shoes." And what was in the window? A black pair of boots, just ankle high with zippers up the sides and Jackie gulped. Even if they were used, they were probably still too much but, you never know — you just never know and he went inside and an old gentleman with a thin face, white hair and very pale-eyes glanced up from where he was sitting and smiled and said, "You'd like those boots."

Jackie, surprised, simply nodded, but then sighed and said, "But I've only got six-fifty and those boots sell at the Thom McAn store for thirty-five more — my allowance has to last clear into next week—" and he stopped and again sighed.

The old man laughed and sat back in the chair. "Uh-huh," he said, "And I just bet there's a dance next week and a young lady there who you'd love to impress."

Jackie turned a little red and his freckles did not stand out as much, but he nodded.

And the gentleman got up and said, "Those boots, ah, those are special to me — I danced in those boots — yes, those very same ones and though they look new, like just today made — ah, but they're old — oh, yes, very old and so very special—"

"Well," said Jackie, "if they are so special, they're probably more than I'll ever have—"

"Let me finish," said the man, "so special they are — so special to me — that anyone who wants them so badly — you may have them — for free."

Jackie opened his mouth once, closed it, opened it again and closed it again and was finally able to whisper, "F-free? Why free?"

"You're objecting?"

"No — no, oh, not at all — but — but *free*?"

"Free."

"For me?"

"For you."

"Free?"

"Free."

"Why me?"

"Stop asking so much of divine intervention. Just put them on— and I warn you — they are special — are you willing to treat them nicely?"

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed yes."

"Polish them up every day?"

"Oh, yes, certainly yes."

"Wear them only on bright sunny days so the sunlight will sparkle and starburst in the polish?"

"Oh, yes," Jackie said, grinning and nodding and hoping and praying that yes, this was as it seemed and was as it looked and was no joke but the man appeared to be very sincere and his blue eyes were honest as the blue sky of dawn and the man smiled and simply said, "You'll like these boots. You'll like them very much." And he went over to the display case and picked out the boots. "Yes," he said, "sometimes it's amazing what a good pair of shoes can do; opens up possibilities that you've never seen; takes you places where you've never been—" and he looked at Jackie and smiled, "but need to go."

Jackie smiled and nodded and right then and there, put on the boots and *zip-zip* — up the zippers went and they looked just grand! "So comfortable — yes, so comfortable they are — are you sure—?"

And the man shook his head no.

"I can give you something now—"

And the man shook his head no. He then said, "Begone now. I've got to close shop — enjoy your shoes."

"Well," said Jackie, "thank you again."

And he waved as he walked out the door and, in one hand, in a paper bag, carried his old oxfords and he began walking and as he walked, he felt like he was riding the wave, dancing the crest of good fortune — yes, yes, it is true, he thought, when you really want something, it has a way — and abruptly his thoughts stopped. He had meant to cross the street — but it was as though his feet had something else in mind — he tried to stop, but his feet kept going.

He walked and it seemed that he walked for hours, then days, but when he looked at his watch, not all that much time passed — until he looked again — his watch had stopped and still he kept walking; he walked out of the city, he walked out of the country, he walked and he walked — he walked to the horizon — and then walked

beyond, walked past a sunset, and walked through a dawn and walked until stars thinned and then *they* were gone and *still* he walked on and finally, from being alone and scared and dismayed, he wept and wiped his eyes on his sleeves yet *still* he walked and walked — how much time?

A thought came to mind — he'd be late for dinner — but then, since his watch had stopped — maybe just a few seconds had passed — maybe time was going backwards — maybe there was no time at all — maybe all this was timeless — timeless? He thought, *timeless*? And as if at some sort of cue, he saw something distant and as he drew near—

"A tree!" he whispered, "an immense tree!" And then his pace slowed. And then, before the tree, he stopped. "Oh," he said, "but *such* a tree!"

It was like an immense apple tree, but without leaves and the apples gave off such a soft glow. By intuition? By instinct? He touched a near fruit. The glow resolved and Jackie looked upon a scene inside — of a dinosaur slopping about some ancient swamp. He touched another fruit; inside was a view of what Jackie guessed to be Earth — but molten and hot with a moon rising near. Another apple and Jackie looked upon pyramids being built. And yet another fruit and two spiders scrambled in an intricate web. Another fruit: an atom bomb flashing. Another fruit: a man and woman making love. Yet another fruit and the scene of majestic mountain range.

And Jackie touched fruit upon fruit and was spellbound by all that he saw; world upon world yet all of one world; life upon life but all of one life. History upon history — but all of one history — and then something curious. He touched one apple — and there was an image of a boy who looked very much like Jackie Hutton — only the background was caves and tropical rain forest. Another apple showed but another close image and this time — Eskimo. And another apple and the boy looked Aztec and finally one apple and Jackie Hutton looked upon Jackie Hutton staring back with the same intent gaze as the others.

And Jackie then stood back and realized that all that he'd touched was a very small part of what was a very immense tree that towered over him and seemingly reached to the heavens — and he stood back and was amazed, overwhelmed — but then strangely at peace and he did not know quite why.

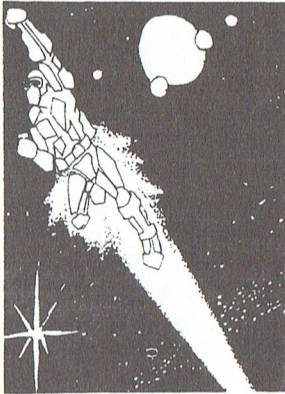
And then he began dancing, dancing about the tree, touching apple after apple, and then he was grinning and laughing and shouting as he danced about that tree and then he knowingly touched another apple — there was a brilliant flash — and when he opened his eyes, before him was an empty lot, grass and broken bricks between two buildings. His boots, those wonderful, special boots by

themselves, went *zip-zip*. And gently, gently, Jackie Hutton stepped out of them, put on his old oxfords and — by intuition? By instinct? He stepped back and *flash!*

When the light faded, the shop with the window that read "Shoes" on the front had reappeared in the lot and in the front window, those boots, those boots, those wonderful, wonderful boots, and Jackie smiled and simply said, "Somehow these shoes I now have are quite good enough," and he let out a long contented sigh. "What's important here—" and he laughed at the thought of finishing what he had to say; he simply began walking toward home at a most leisurely pace, loving the sunlight so warm on his face. ☞

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Mr. Moonlight

by Susan MacGregor

illustration by Dory A. Rikkonen

N ever talk to the moon.
*If you find yourself talking to the moon, always take it seriously.
Treat the night with a lot of respect.
Treat yourself with a lot of respect, also.*

I developed the above recipe for living after attending Gardner's Annual Midsummer Night's Eve party, a function devoted to staying up all night and indulging in erotic, pagan rites. At least, there was always the hope that the rites would be erotic, but due to mosquitos and toxic levels of alcohol, they rarely plummeted to that degree.

Each guest was required to come as his favourite druid, warrior or denizen of Faery. My costume as Cathbad the Evil Wizard had been decided well in advance. I came up with the idea the night before while nursing a bottle of tequila and smoking a joint.

I'd been doing a lot of that lately, drinking and doping, but I felt justified. I hadn't been able to find any work in my ill-chosen career as an actor, and due to my lack of money and enthusiasm for taking on a "practical" job, my girl friend Janice had walked on me three months prior.

Anyway, the next night I got a lift out to Gardner's with my best friend Mike. He was dressed in light jerkin, furs, and bronze plate, and except for the Reeboks, he really pulled it off. When I climbed into his jeep, he gave me an embarrassed look and shrugged. Unfortunately, Janice was with him. They lived in the same building, and she'd coerced him into a ride.

After an embarrassed hello on my part and a curt nod on hers, a silence descended between Janice and me. Mike filled it by rambling on about his favourite hobby — star-gazing. I didn't pay too



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much attention. Janice had a way of making me feel inadequate just by the way she sat.

By the time we got to the party, everyone was in the woods at the bonfire. We parked the jeep at the house and walked down the road. In honour of the occasion I did a little dance, and feeling courageous, called on the Powers of Summer to bless all maidens with fecundity. I sloshed some tequila in Janice's direction, to which she told me to "Fuck off." Janice may not be great with words, but she gets across the general idea.

There were about twenty people at the bonfire, and everyone was well into their cups. I gravitated over to a tight group who were sharing some smoke. Strangely enough, there were two other "wizards" whose costumes resembled mine. We got into an in-depth conversation about coincidence, and personality types, and paranormal experiences, and finally chalked everything up to too much thinking or not enough dope. By then, my tequila was gone, and I needed to take off for a leak.

I stumbled away from the bonfire. The sun had finally set, and the moon was rising like a ripened peach into the night sky. I kept tramping along and watching it, and for some crazy reason I forgot why I left the party. I felt as if the world contained just the moon and me, and the moon was Mr. Happy Face. Mr. Smiley grinning down. Chuckling at the poor human bumbling along in his homemade wizard suit.

It pissed me off. Made me feel small and unimportant, which by comparison to its size and brightness, I was. I mean, the moon is famous. Everybody knows the Moon. People make songs up about it. Couples make out in front of it. And yet what was it really, but a bloody voyeur?

Suddenly, I was standing knee-deep in a swamp. My gown was hiked up in the back by some cattails. I was mooning the Moon.

I looked up and saw the Moon bellow with laughter. It tipped end over end, all belly or head, I couldn't tell which.

"So, I'm a big joke, hey?" I yelled. "I'm your evening's entertainment?" Irrationally, I swung with a fist and lurched to one side, nearly falling over from the weight of my costume. My hat slopped over my eyes and plopped into the water. Dripping, I scooped it from the wet.

"Listen, Moon!" I sputtered, so mad I could hardly spit, "I may not look like much, but I'm a wizard and a powerful one! I don't appreciate the planets hooting in my face like hyenas. Not the sun, not the stars, and especially not you!"

The Moon seemed to wax closer.

I felt something cling to my leg. I grabbed at a tree root and hauled myself out of the water. I whipped up the hem of my gown and clawed at a leech. The Moon sniggered and somersaulted higher.

What are you going to do about it? it seemed to ask, still wearing

that infernal smirk.

"I'll expose you," I said hotly. "You're highly over-rated. I'll tell people what you really are." It was weak, I know, but I couldn't think of anything else.

Some wizard, it said.

"You don't think I can do it?" I challenged. "I make it my life's work to communicate. To reach out to vast audiences and show them things. Make them think. Change their lives."

Make them laugh? it snorted.

"Right. Or make them cry."

That made it take pause. It lost its smile. I'd said something that struck right to its craters. I don't believe you, it said.

"That's your problem."

Even I can't do that. Make them feel. And I reach millions.

"So you're not such a hotshot," I said snottily.

How do you do it? it asked.

"Do what?"

Have an effect.

"It's something you're born with. Either you've got it, or you don't."

It was weird. Seeing the Moon with a reflective (excuse the pun) expression. I wasn't sure I liked this better than Mr. Cheery Face.

I'd like to be able to do that, it said.

You and me both, I thought. I began to wring out my costume.

The Moon looked at me speculatively. Would you consider a change?

I wasn't sure what it was getting at. A change? Of what? Clothes?

It wouldn't have to be forever, the Moon continued. Say, for only a quarter phase — a week. I could be you, and you could be me.

I felt the hairs of my beard prickle with excitement. This wasn't happening. It had to be the weed. What the hell was that stuff laced with anyway?

Think of it, the Moon said smoothly. What wizard has ever been the Moon before? You'd be more famous than ever. And I'd have a chance at mortality.

"It can't be done," I said incredulously. I was beginning to believe too much in my own trip.

Nothing is impossible, said the Moon. A wizard of your stature should know this.

"True," I said quickly, not wanting to blow the ruse. "But what's in it for me? Why should I want to be you? What does your life, even for a week, have to offer?"

The Moon brought itself up stiffly, if such a movement for a round, celestial body was possible. I have very developed perception, it said. I can watch people and things very closely. Daylight is my only barrier,

but it's a weak one. I can hear thoughts. I create atmosphere, settings, mood. It watched me intently to see if I was impressed. I pretended I wasn't.

I have fun with the tides, it finished rather lamely.

One thing I'd always found when I got stoned was to go with the flow. The second you started fighting your own trip, you were in trouble.

"O.K., Moon," I said. "You get one week."

The smile that broke over the Moon's face was enormous. I wasn't sure I liked the teeth.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked.

Just hold still, the Moon commanded.

It grew. Very fast. Like a big, yellow peach pie swelling in the sky. I was tempted to duck, but suddenly everything turned golden, and I was drowning. Then there was a slight wrench, a wet-sounding plop, and I was falling back into the night. The ground wobbled dizzily away, and I was spinning. I threw my arms out to stop myself and found I didn't have any. I panicked. This was too much. If I'd had a stomach, I would have up-chucked. Then after the initial bout of vertigo, I turned buoyant and light. I felt clean and unhindered. As if I were set free.

I could see myself — or rather, the Moon — sitting beneath a willow. It/I shook its head, and then slowly got up from where I had been resting. I didn't really believe in what was happening, but for the time being I was willing to allow reality some leeway.

Be careful with me, I told it.

"I will," it replied, sounding hollow and shaky.

Be back here, one week tonight, I said.

It nodded and waved, then slowly made its way back to the party.

I looked around. The woods were below me, and I could see the house, the road, and the lights of other farms further out. After a few minutes of experimentation, I found I could telescope my vision, varying my range from the width of a gopher hole to the entire county. I pushed my limits as far as my nerve would allow. After about half an hour, the earth had developed a curve and I could see mountains and the ocean beyond. The sight was incredible.

I wondered how Moon was doing. I narrowed my field of view back to the party, and it took me a few seconds to locate him/me/it. He/I was standing in a secluded clearing of firs, and he wasn't alone. Janice was with him. Somehow, the two of them together brought the earlier events into sharper focus. I didn't feel so buoyant or so light.

Janice was watching Moon intently, and he was holding her hands. Her face bore the "why do you do this to me?" look that I'd come to know so well. She was listening to him carefully, as if he were saying

things I'd never said before. It took me a few maddening minutes to learn how to readjust my audio levels.

I couldn't believe it. He was quoting from Shakespeare, from *Romeo and Juliet*. Worse, she was buying it.

Where the hell had he learned that? A satellite that knew Shakespeare?

Yet, as I thought about it, it made a perverse kind of sense. Moon must have spent his lifetime watching the Earth. Might have even listened to the Bard himself, performing at the Globe, way back in the early 1600's. Who could say how long Moon had been soaking up the culture? He was the perfect, never-miss-a-night, Space Potato. Given the chance at turning "Actor."

I began to feel a little sick. Like maybe what had happened wasn't the result of too much tequila or too much smoke. Like maybe the change had been real. Moon was me, and I was "The Moon." And right now, Moon was giving Janice the biggest performance of his/my life.

Suddenly she was playing Juliet to his Romeo. She threw her arms around his neck, and when she kissed him, I think I blacked out.

I regained a clear head just as the sun was about to set. There was no doubt in my mind now — the change had been real. And I had one week to be the Moon. I started to panic but remembered how easily Moon had made the switch with me. It would be all right. I could do the same. So, I decided to enjoy the view.

I watched as Sol disappeared beneath the western horizon like a golden yolk about to be poached by the Pacific. The sky was glorious — with bacon-like bands of amber and red, and washes of indigo coffee soaking in. I wasn't hungry, but this sunset was my "morning" and old breakfast habits die hard.

The stars came out like spilled sugar, and the Earth floated blue-green amongst them. Excited, I played with my Super Moon Vision, this time pushing it to its limit. I was like a kid with a new toy — I had the Earth bouncing back and forth like a ball on a paddle-board.

When I tired of that, I concentrated on the tides. They seemed to be set by some kind of internal clock that I couldn't affect; like an infinitesimally slow heartbeat, they rolled in and dribbled out, following my orbital path like static electricity. I'd never done well in science at school, but I knew they were influenced by my mass, or our shared gravity, or something. Overall, they were a great disappointment.

By midnight I had to admit, I was growing bored. I began to suspect that maybe trading places with the real Moon hadn't been such a good idea. I should have taken his offer more seriously. But there were still a few hours left of my "day," so I decided to do what I thought Moon did best — check out the real action on Earth.

Below, I could see the Great Wall of China on my left, and Japan

was slightly to my right. Tokyo was lit up with neon like an all-night bar and grill. I telescoped in on the Ginza and found it like any other major district in a huge city, with its nightclubs, hotels, restaurants, and bars. It was an amazing head-trip — seeing these places firsthand without paying a cent. The freebie vacation appealed to my sense of insolvency. Out of professional interest, I wanted to find out where the Kabuki or Nō theatres were. I scanned the street signs, but of course, everything was in Japanese.

I remembered Moon had said that the sun was his only barrier, so I assumed he could see through walls. After a few test runs, I found he could, and what I saw going on in some of the geisha houses was very interesting, though some of it very weird. One elderly gentleman had purchased a scenario that involved himself, a lady Sumo wrestler, and a gong. From the grin on his face, I'll never again believe that money can't buy happiness.

For the next several nights of my Moon-term, I did a whirlwind tour of Asia and Europe — forty countries in only four "days." I checked out Bangkok, Istanbul, Delhi, and Rome. I did Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, and Madrid. And inevitably, after visiting all the touristy spots and viewing some good theatre, I would always end up watching the beds of the nations. Call it perverse curiosity. Yet after a while, even those antics began to pall, and by the time I reached London, I knew Margaret Thatcher would be an incredible bore.

By the close of the week, I was really tired of being Moon. I missed being me. I had taken myself for granted, and I wouldn't do that anymore. I was ready to put some effort into making an effort. Into being the best I could be. I'd never felt so resolved in my life.

The next night, I waited for Moon to show up at Gardner's. The fields were a soft-muted grey, courtesy of me, and the air was clear and cool. I watched as pairs of headlights made their slow progress down the county road, but none turned in to the farm. I waited for what seemed like hours. The stars rotated their positions, and still Moon did not arrive.

Without a doubt, I was being stood up. The realization made me pale, which was going some. Moon hadn't had any intention of returning — even from the beginning. My life, as useless as it was, had been better to him than no life at all. And what an easy mark I'd been — too stoned most of the time to take anything seriously.

Where the hell could he be? I checked my house, but no one was home. I checked Janice's on the off-chance they might be together, but the place was empty. Desperately, I scanned all my old haunts — Banditos, Murphy's, Sally's All Night Java — but without any luck. Finally, out of sheer masochism, I checked the four live theatres in town.

I found Moon all right. Acting at the Met. Playing Don Quixote

from *Man of La Mancha*. Janice was half-way down aisle "K," centre section, watching him.

I shriveled right down to my lunar core. He was playing the part magnificently — I was playing the part magnificently — with all the passion and sensitivity the role required. I don't know how he managed it — the lead had been cast months ago. I had auditioned, but my reputation had preceded me. In spite of that, somehow, Moon had wormed his way into the part.

I watched him to the bitter end. The finale brought the audience to its feet, and I noted that as Janice stood clapping, tears were streaming down her face. She'd never looked so happy.

I'd never felt more ticked off. I waited for Moon and Janice to leave the theatre. I followed them home. I watched as they made love, for that's all I could really call it, and then I waited until she fell asleep. He must have sensed I was watching them, because he got up to close the drapes.

Time's up, Dick-Head, I said. I didn't feel like Mr. Happy.

He smiled, gave me the finger, then closed the curtains anyway.

My maria must have turned purple.

You can still hear me! I screamed. I'll make your life miserable! I'll never give you a moment's peace. You think you've got it made, but you've got nothing! You'll lose *La Mancha*, you'll lose Jan! This I promise you!

"Good night, and sweet dreams," he sighed. The sun was breaking on the horizon.

Janice stirred and asked a sleepy, "What... who?"

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep," he crooned. Possessively, he pulled her into the crook of his arm.

Damn him to hell!

In spite of the sun, I tried to infiltrate his dreams with visions of violent death — me squashing him like an ant, or me sprouting teeth and chewing off his head, but he seemed immune. At one point he even chuckled in his sleep. Finally, with a wracking headache, for that's exactly what it felt like, I gave up. I knew I'd be stronger later. I resolved to take up the battle that night.

I came at him full force during the second act of *La Mancha*. As loud and as off-key as I could muster, I screamed:

*Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle,
The Cow jumped over the Moon,
The little dog laughed to see such fun,
And the Dish ran away with the Spoon.*

He was in the middle of a touching scene with the female lead, Aldonza. He grabbed his head and faltered mid-line. After a second

or so of confusion, Aldonza covered for him beautifully. The entire incident gave a new depth to the scene I hadn't considered before.

I hit him again. But this time he was ready. He kept going as if nothing else were in his mind. I should have known. My old theatre training was taking over. Reciting nursery rhymes in your head while speaking your lines is an old concentration exercise. He was using my ability to deal with my interference. Damn, he was good. I was good. And how could I fight me?

Still, I wasn't ready to give up yet. If he wasn't vulnerable on the professional front, I'd strike him in the personal arena.

I waited until he and Janice were back at home. They raided the fridge and made themselves a snack of cheese and strawberries and some dessert wine, and headed for the couch. I let their shared jokes and kisses fire my indignation and just when things began to get heated, I pulled. That is to say, I pretended Moon was the Pacific and the tides were going out.

He choked mid-kiss and grabbed for his chest. His face had turned a pasty-grey, and he was drenched in sweat. He rolled off the sofa and lay gasping for air on the rug. A gratifying sight. And also an oddly disturbing one.

"Jack! Are you all right? What's wrong?" Janice looked ready to administer mouth to mouth.

"What you do to me," Moon choked, not looking at her but at the ceiling, "you do to yourself..."

The words shook me. Immediately, I let go.

"What are you saying?" Janice demanded, really worried.

Now I was frightened. What kind of damage had I done to myself? Moon's colour began to improve, and his breathing leveled out.

"Jack?" Janice asked again.

"I'm fine," he said, favouring her with a wan smile.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure — maybe a panic attack."

"A what?"

"Panic. So much has happened lately. I think I love you. I'm not used to being vulnerable..."

I gagged. He was lying. He didn't love her. And I'd never told her that, but for me, it was true. In an instant she was on the rug beside him, cradling his head in her arms.

"Maybe we should take you to Emergency just to be sure," she said.

"No, I'm fine," he insisted. Then he pulled her into another greedy kiss.

I couldn't watch. Jan's happiness only honed my misery to a fine point. I had failed. Terribly. And unless I could think of some way to convince Moon to switch from my human body back to his celestial

one, I was doomed to circle the Earth like a dried-out round of Brie forever.

If ever I needed a friend, now was the time. But who, other than my previously stoned self, would believe he was actually talking to the Moon? And that the Moon wasn't the Moon but was me?

If I'd had feet, I would have kicked myself. I had a friend, who was not only a friend, but the only amateur star-gazer I knew. I'd forgotten about Mike.

His jeep wasn't parked in its stall, which meant he had to be out. And I didn't think he was dating anyone lately, so that left two possibilities. Either he was making a late-night raid on Wong's Lucky Chance Chinese, or he was out in the countryside somewhere, with his eye glued to his telescope. I remembered vaguely that he'd been talking about some comet that appears only once every forty-nine years while we'd been on our way to Gardner's.

Wong's was closed. I spread my vision out and concentrated on the city's periphery, methodically scanning the surrounding farms in ever-widening rings. I guessed I had about two hours before dawn. The night was clear and still, and I was in three-quarters phase. Not a great night for watching the stars, but I knew Mike had to be out there somewhere, searching for that comet in spite of my light.

After half an hour, I still couldn't find him. I didn't know much about astronomy, but I knew that cities and towns shed a lot of interfering glow. Mike would have chosen a site well away from any centre of population. And possibly up high, or as high as he could get. Within a hundred-mile radius, that left only a few possible locations — Pike's Peak being the best one.

I swung my attention to the south. Pike's Peak didn't look like much from my perspective, nothing more than a dark pimple on the landscape, but I narrowed my field of view. A silver ribbon of road climbed steadily to the apex. The jeep was parked on the plateau, and on top of it, standing on a home-made platform was Mike. He was stooped over his telescope. The tube was aimed in my opposite direction.

Mike! I cried in relief. It's me, Jack! I need your help!

He straightened, glanced around with a frown on his face, and then returned to the eyepiece of his telescope.

Mike! I yelled. I'm here! Up here!

He ran a hand across his forehead. I could tell from his thoughts that he'd heard me, but refused to believe what he was hearing. He'd had no luck with finding the comet and thought that he was overly tired, that he was hallucinating.

You're not! I told him.

Now he was blocking me. He was about to take down the scope. Let's look at the Moon, I suggested. I know it's not that spectac-

lar, but it's possible that the unusual might be missed because we take it for granted. The night's almost over anyway. One last glance before we head for home.

That got a result. He swung the lens to point directly at me.

I need your help, Mike, I pleaded.

He let out a yell that must have echoed for miles.

He sat sprawled beneath his tripod with a look of frozen horror glazing his face. You're not going crazy, I reassured him. I then proceeded to divulge the whole story, throughout which he never moved. Finally, when I was done, he croaked, "Jack? Is that really you?"

I wish it wasn't, I said.

Slowly he stood up. "This is incredible," he muttered. "The implications are enormous. The fact that the Moon is sentient completely blows any previous theories about its origins right out of the sky..."

Mike! I whined.

"Sorry, sorry!" he said. "Okay. So, you've got to find your way out of this mess. All right. Now listen. From what you've told me about Moon taking your place, it seems he can do anything you can do — maybe even better. He's bored with being the Moon. But what if you showed him a few new tricks? Showed him some alternatives he hasn't considered?"

Like what?

"I don't know. It'll take some effort, because he's been around for 4.4 billion years."

I groaned.

"Look, I don't know if this is any help, but there's a solar eclipse coming up in a few days. The darkest part of the shadow will pass just a few miles from here. Maybe you can do something with that."

I don't know anything about eclipses, I complained.

"Jack, you're an actor. Throw yourself into the part."

Well, it was something. He'd given me hope where before there had been none.

Tell me about eclipses, I said.

At sunrise, we parted. Mike promised he'd see what he could do about arranging to have Moon and Janice join him in watching the eclipse. The rest of the show would be up to me.

Over the next couple of days, I forced myself to stay awake for lengthening periods in order to acclimatize myself to the Sun's glare. We seemed to be drawing closer together. I was overcome with a sense of inevitability and oppression. I felt as if I were being scourged by the light — I couldn't look at the Sun directly, but I got the feeling it resented my intrusion and reciprocated with an over-abundance of solar flares. I became the Space Scapegoat, the Pallid One scorched

by the Fire of the World.

The morning of the eclipse arrived. I trailed across the bright sky like the condemned marching to his execution. The Sun boiled with radiant fury. No slouch when it came to playing my opposite — it gave me all its energy and more.

As I passed overhead where I hoped they were waiting, I heard Mike's thoughts drift up to meet me like a benediction. We're here, Jack, we're here. I was grateful for his help and support. I breathed him my thanks, then submerged myself into the part.

The Sun rolled forward, flinging arcs of flame before it like outstretched claws. A beast of prey, it roared.

I shriveled and cowered. I began to whimper, knowing that most on Earth wouldn't hear, but hoping my efforts would have a subconscious effect.

You dare defy me? the Sun demanded, ready to pounce.

Mercy, Oh Great One! I cried.

Death to the Usurper!

Aaarrrgh! I shrieked. I had blotted him completely, and I went into my death throes. For seven minutes I wavered and writhed, and managed to produce not one diamond ring effect, but five. The Sun's flares crowned me with a pentagon of stars.

I think after that I fainted.

I rose the next night, a shadow of my former self. I was feeling homesick and hopeful, so I wasted no time but stared down at Gardner's. I caught my breath. Moon was there. Standing beneath the willow.

"That was some performance," he said, looking up.

I didn't have much time to prepare, I replied.

"You were a little melodramatic."

The audience didn't think so, I said.

"I would have played it differently."

You? I snorted. You've been the Moon for over four billion years. How many eclipses have you had in that time? Don't tell me you could have come up with something original. As far as moons go, you've been pretty useless.

"As humans go, I could say the same about you," he replied.

We eyed each other dubiously. Now was the real test.

I understand there's a comet soon to enter this sector, I said casually. I'm looking forward to doing something really unique with that.

"What, more fireworks?"

Oh, I don't know. Maybe a near-miss that gets everybody below worked up. Or rings. I could grow rings. Jeez, what an idea. Why should Saturn be special?

"Rings?"

Just think about it. My own halo on a full-phase night!

"You're not serious."

And as I wane, I could disappear — going, going, gone — but leave the rings glowing like a great doughnut ad in the sky.

"That's tacky."

So, who asked you? Besides, it doesn't matter what you think. I'm the Moon, now.

"You're a lunatic."

Maybe, but at least I'm not boring.

"Look, maybe we were better off as we were. Being a human has been a real experience for me. It's given me a new perspective. But I have to admit, this body of yours, though at times pleasurable, is very restricting."

You mean, you want to change back.

"Something like that — yes."

Well, I don't know. I'd love to have rings. Or a little moon. My own personal satellite. A moon's moon, as it were.

"And where do you think you'll find the raw material for it? You haven't enough gravity to grab a comet."

I'll build it out of my skin. From my own rock.

"You can't!" he choked, horrified. "What about Janice? What about Mike? What about *La Mancha*?"

Oh, all right, I agreed surlily, acting as if I were put out. I guess they're worth it. Still...

"An even trade," he insisted. "We'll switch — right now."

The change took no time at all. One second I was falling, and the next, I was leaning weakly against the trunk of the tree.

I made my way out of the woods and headed for the road behind Gardner's. I felt giddy and weak — like I was newly born. Mike's jeep was parked half way down between the woods and the house. He and Jan were waiting inside the truck. Light spilled from the passenger-side door as I drew close.

Mike had a strange expression on his face. "I'm back," I told him. "Thanks, Bud." I signed him our secret finger signal we'd used when we were kids. That way, he'd know it was me.

"Did you find it?" Jan asked as I climbed in beside her.

"Find what?"

"Your wizard's hat. You said you thought you left it near the pond."

"I didn't," I replied. "But it's no great loss. I found something a whole lot better." I gave her a squeeze and grinned at Mike. He didn't smile.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He blinked several times. "If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd say you were glowing." ☘

Ed and Marion Go into Business

by Sandy Robertson

illustration by Nancy Niles

They ate their dinner in silence, as they did every evening. He tucked his napkin into the bib of his overalls and, as always, covered his food with a dusting of salt and pepper before even tasting it.

She watched his movements carefully this evening. He pushed cabbage onto his fork with a crust of bread. His temples pulsed in and out as he chewed. Gray eyes focused without interest on the window and the dry fields beyond. He ignored the dribble of gravy that was winding slowly down the stubble of his chin.

Nothing was amiss. She was satisfied that he didn't know. Couldn't possibly know.

She cleared away the dishes. They clattered into the porcelain sink. A bucket of hot water drawn from the woodstove flooded over them with a steamy swoosh.

She wondered if she should try him one more time. Even though her mind was made up, there seemed no harm in trying once more. Just to prove to herself that she'd given him every chance to change her mind.

"Ed, have you noticed in the paper what real estate is going for?"

He tapped his pipe grimly against the side of the ashtray, not answering.

"Well, it's just amazing," she continued. She scrubbed the plates vigorously and forced herself to sound cheerful.

"We could get a fortune for this farm. Buy a little house in the city. Maybe even a condominium. My sister Gwen wrote and says there's a nice one coming up for sale in her building."



He looked at her sternly and lit his pipe.

"Why, think of it Ed." She tried to sound hopeful. "It's time to think about retiring. You could take it easy for once. We'd have electricity. You could get a colour TV!"

She stopped washing dishes and sat down with him at the table.

"Won't you just think about it?"

He dug around in the bowl of his pipe with a wooden match and spoke without looking at her.

"We've been over this enough times, Marion. You should know where I stand. Nothing for an old farmer like me to do in the city. What kind of life would it be in some little shoe-box of a place, staring at the tube all day? And what would you do all day? With electricity doing all your chores for you, you'd be bored silly in a week."

"I want more than this in my old age." She waved a hand at nothing in particular. "And I wouldn't be bored. The city's full of opportunity. I could open a little shop or a tea room. You know I've always wanted to go into business."

He laughed without humour and stood up.

"We are in business. We're farmers. And we'd both be happier if you'd get those notions out of your head once and for all. This is the life we know, and this is where we'll stay. Now we'll not have another word about it."

"That's right, Ed. We've had this discussion for the last time." She spoke evenly, knowing the full truth of her words.

He nodded firmly and put on his jacket. The screen door banged shut behind him as he went out to do the evening milking.

*

In the morning, the house seemed chilly as he came downstairs to breakfast. In the kitchen he saw that no fire had been laid. The coffee pot sat empty on its shelf. He was annoyed. Marion always lit the fire before feeding the piglets. He'd be sure to have a word with her when she came in.

The water in the stove reservoir had gone stone cold. He washed quickly with icy water from the kitchen hand-pump. He settled into his chair at the kitchen table and read weather predictions in the almanac while waiting for his breakfast.

He was hungry. The minutes passed and he began to feel agitated. Finally, he pulled on his boots and stomped out to the pig pen. This was too much, he thought. Cold house. Cold water. No breakfast.

He could see at once that something was wrong. The piglets were not in their pen, but still locked in the shed as they were every night.

He knew she was gone. Must've walked to the highway before dawn to get the bus. Gone to her fancy city to stay with that twittering sister of hers. Well, once she saw how much things cost, and saw

that they had shops and tea rooms coming out of their ears, she'd be back, crying and asking his forgiveness. Inside of a week, he reckoned.

He unlatched the shed and twelve hungry piglets spilled squealing into the pen.

The thought of doing Marion's chores in addition to his own did not please him. He promised himself he'd give her a good talking-to when she got back.

His empty belly grumbled as he threw slop to the pigs. Next he gave Elsie her morning milking (noting with distaste that this, too, was Marion's job). He knew Marion would go next to the kitchen garden to pull whatever weeds were up and pick what was ripe, but he had spraying to do in the orchard. The garden would have to wait.

Hunger finally persuaded him into the cheerless kitchen. Already lunchtime, and he hadn't had his breakfast yet.

He tossed kindling and newspaper into the firebox and threw in four lit matches to be sure it would catch. He blew on the flames until the twigs began to crackle, then set a log on the little fire. It promptly smothered the flames, sending clouds of greasy smoke into the kitchen.

He started again, and while waiting for his fire to catch, explored the icebox to find something to cook. Except for a few eggs and some butter, there was only a big roast of pork to be had. He cut off a thick slab and set it in an iron pan on the stove.

His fire smoldered and belched smoke. The pork refused to sizzle, and only succeeded in turning flabby and gray. He was hungry. He gave up on the fire and slid the greasy slab onto a plate. He dusted it with salt and pepper and ate, barely tasting it.

*

There was work to do; his own as well as Marion's. But if she got this pining-for-the-city thing out of her system, maybe he'd find some peace after all.

Afternoon chores were followed by another slab of pork. This time his fire caught well, and he flipped the meat in the pan until the outside browned.

*

Marion had been gone for eight days. He set the last of the pork into the pan and poured a cup of the morning's leftover coffee to drink while it cooked.

The meat was barely warmed through when he ate it from the pan. He ate greedily. He'd never realized how much he enjoyed pork. The past week he'd developed quite a taste for it. It seemed that nothing else would do. The garden produce was going bad on the vine. The bread in the cupboard was mouldy. The eggs were untouched.

He swallowed the last of the pork and lifted the skillet to sip the pan juices.

As he stood up to blow out the kerosene lamp, the pain caught him by surprise. He clutched his belly and slumped back into his chair. The pain yanked at his guts. He clasped the wooden armrests and doubled over. The agony shot through his abdomen. In his pain, he was surprised that he had the urge to eat more food. It was as though the pain demanded to be fed.

He staggered to the icebox and tried to appease the pain with raw eggs. After three, the pain had only intensified. He crumpled to the floor, retching a pale stream of raw egg. Instinctively he knew what would bring relief. The pain demanded pork.

The weaner in the barn was to be their meat for the winter. It wouldn't even be big enough to slaughter until October. The ache swelled inside him and seemed to gnaw at every nerve in his torso.

He swayed to his feet painfully, took his hatchet from the wall, and lurched to the barn to satisfy his tormentor.

*

Marion saw the Doodley farm through the bus window. Just five more miles to the bus stop on the highway.

She would have phoned Ed, if they had had a phone. Maybe now a few things would be different. She hoped so.

She'd enjoyed her two weeks with Gwen. Gwen, being a widow, had done up her place to suit her own tastes. The condo was all yellow and wicker. Plush white rug and *The Price is Right* every afternoon on the TV.

She and Gwen had gone downtown often. They saw what the shops had to offer and investigated vacant retail property. Gwen had called it "market research," and had taken her all over the place. It had been fun, but she'd realized right away that the idea of moving to the city had been a mistake. It was too noisy, too busy, too expensive. She couldn't afford it on her own, and even if she could, she knew it wasn't for her.

She did learn something, though, and she couldn't wait to tell Ed how the whole city was crazy for the country! "Country Style," "Country Flavour." Every shop full of gingham and geese, baskets and lace. The city people seemed just wild for anything "country," and paid big money for it.

She didn't quite know how she would turn their country ways into a profit, but Ed had been right about them staying put, and he'd be glad to hear it.

The bus stopped at the end of their road and she stepped out into the sunshine. A half-mile walk south and she'd be home with her good news. Oh, Ed would be angry at first, she was sure, but after all, he'd proved to be right, so he wouldn't be angry too long.

She was happy to reach the kitchen door.

"Ed, it's me."

Inside, the house was still. The kitchen smelled of mouldy bread. He must be out working, she thought. She left her bag in the kitchen and went outside to find him.

There was so sign of him in the fields. He wasn't in the garden either. She noticed the vegetables rotten on the vine, and the weeds everywhere. She noticed then that the piglets were not in their pen. She opened the door to their shed and the smell threw her back. They'd been dead for some time.

The glow of her good news evaporated, and she slumped into the beat up chair by the barn door.

He'd left her. She knew it. He'd decided she was gone for good, no doubt, and gone his own way. But where? It didn't make sense. He never liked anything but digging around in his fields. Maybe he was just teaching her a lesson, she thought. She had, after all, disappeared for two weeks without a word.

She slapped at something tickling her arm and turned to see what it was. The sight of it made her jump. It was a big white kind of worm.. Where she slapped it, she could see that it had split in two.

She stood up in amazed horror to see that the pieces grew before her eyes into two worms, each the size of the original. She watched with morbid fascination as the two moved towards a dead piglet. Feeding on it, they became four, and then eight.

She poked them cautiously with a stick. They didn't seem to be interested in her; only in eating and growing, eating and dividing.

More squirmed out from under the barn door, drawn to the dead flesh. They glistened and writhed and multiplied before her eyes.

Fascinated, she cut one in half with the end of a shovel and it painlessly, gracefully, grew into two.

She opened the barn door to find their source, and yards of them tumbled out tangled and shining.

That evening she had a sign tacked up out on the highway:

MARION'S "COUNTRY-STYLE" EVERLASTING BAIT WORMS
ONE IS ALL YOU EVER NEED TO BUY.

By six the next morning, she'd served her first customer, a fellow from the city on his way to the lake for some fishing.

He'd seemed skeptical about them being everlasting, but she showed him how to cut off just what he needed and the rest would grow back. She told him just to feed it a little raw pork every now and then. The worm would grow happily, and he'd never have to buy bait again.

*

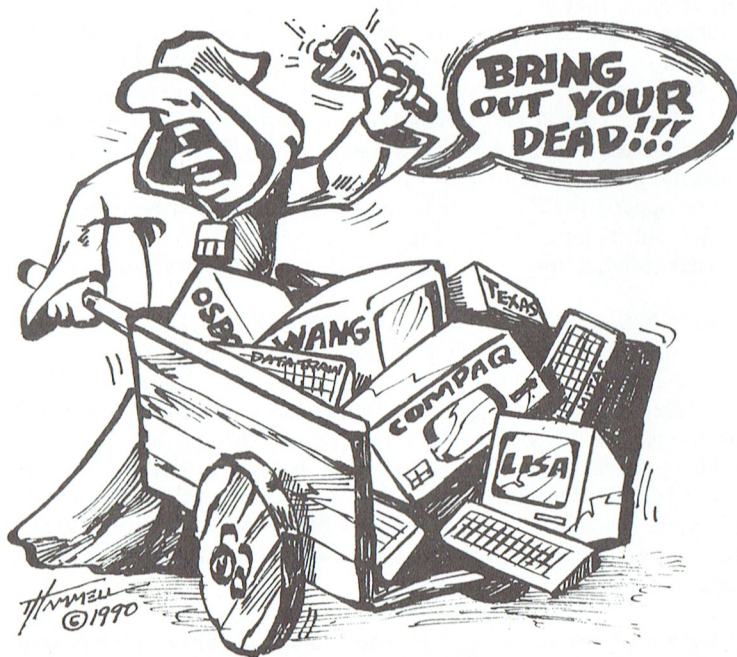
By ten in the morning, cars were lined up down the laneway. Word had spread fast.

At \$5.00 an "Everlasting Worm," Marion took in \$750.00 her first day in business. She counted it by the light of the kerosene lamp and wished Ed were with her to share the good fortune.

On Tuesday she called the Hydro Company to come install some electricity. Not long after, the electric range arrived, then the TV and the telephone.

Eventually, she reconciled herself to the fact the Ed must have found a new life for himself and wouldn't be coming back. She had plush white wall-to-wall broadloom installed, knowing that muddy boots would not return to soil it. And she made a point of watching *The Price is Right* every afternoon on the TV.

But every time she went to tend her worms, feed them, and carton them up, she wished Ed were around to share the success. He should have been pleased to know they could find all they wanted without leaving the farm. It seemed every time she saw those worms, she thought of Ed. ☹



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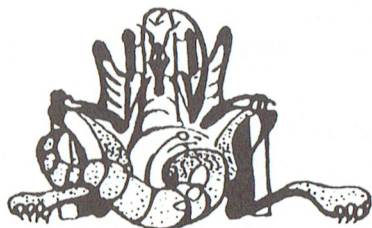
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Siege
Perilous
Folios

the educated plant

by Beth Goobie

it all starts with the dieffenbachia
sheila gets from her mother
when she graduates from college.
she likes its pastoral attitudes,
the way it catches the green sun;
thinks of its shadow
cast across the songs on her stereo
as she works at the local safeway.
at christmas she buys a poinsetta.

the poinsettia and dief get along well,
and sheila cannot resist buying an ivy.
soon it is a fig tree
then a begonia, jade plant
and cactus.

sheila is addicted, spends the bi-weekly cheque
within hours
on bags of dirt, fertilizer
and spray bottles.
by easter, her thumbs turn green.

sheila decides to educate her plants,
reads to them the book of genesis,
jack and the beanstalk,
nightmare on elm street.
it is during heart of darkness
that the dief seems to move closer
become more intent. the ivy dangles casually across her shoulder
tickling her neck.

sheila is pleased,
reads the sex life of vegetables aloud
pretending not to peek. the next morning,
some of the plants have shifted,
a few pots touching sides.
in days thereafter, she notices dirt
on her bed,
trails across the floor.
her gin begins to diminish
and cigarettes disappear.

one day she finds her silk dress
 ripped and stretched, behind the sofa
 with her burgundy heels.
 "something's going on here,"
 she tells herself.

she pretends to fall asleep
 watches, heavy lidded
 as the dief leaves its pot
 walks over to the fig,
 intermingling roots.
 the ivy turns on the stereo
 and approaches the jade
 which pulls
 (she can't believe it)
 her vibrator out
 and shoves it into the ivy's roots.
 when she hears the ivy moan
 in her own voice
 she feels the water in her veins wither.
 "alright, now i'm mad," she yells,
 jumping up. "i've been reasonable —
 this is enough."

the fern turns up the stereo
 and the plants begin to circle
 in a light unpotted tap dance,
 their street light shadows ominous.
 "please give me back my vibrator,"
 sheila whimpers.
 they move in, quickly tie her limbs
 with the protesting ivy.
 "plant her upside down," some howl.
 the dief considers. "no —
 it's been done before," he says.
 he places her feet in his pot,
 rubs some dirt on her face.

at dawn they all jump pot
 and scabble out the door.
 dismayed sheila sees the fig
 holds her car keys and a map to mexico.
 through the window she and the ivy
 see them roll down her convertible roof
 and careen down the avenue
 singing hotel california
 in green. ☘



A. KLEINBERG '10

A MATTER OF PERCEPTION

by Anna Mioduchowska
illustration by Adrian Kleinbergen

The panther was not unexpected and, at any rate, the dinner guests were accustomed to wild animals at table. The hostess herself, a cheetah born and raised in captivity, was not only perfectly tame but a superb cook, to which both the size and the benign disposition of her owner attested. To everyone's delight, she also enjoyed displaying her talents in public.

It was whispered about town that the panther had originally come from a zoological garden of particularly bad fame. Risky business, taking an animal like that into your home, everybody agreed. Retraining wild cats was thought to be nearly impossible. Years of hard, dangerous work that could end in complete failure. Experience also showed that panthers, especially if they came from questionable backgrounds, were unpredictable, often poor mothers, and absolutely useless in the kitchen. Pity the poor fellow who risked his future comfort with such a cat.

With gentle handling however, a few hopeful souls allowed, he probably could earn her undying gratitude and loyalty, not something to be sneered at in these uncertain times. Many of the guests, mellowed no doubt by the faultless martinis and the prospect of excellent food, were ready to give this panther a chance. She was certainly a most handsome animal.

*

The first test of the evening came with the *hors d'oeuvres*. Tiny *canapés* in a variety of shapes, each with an aesthetically pleasing sculpture of edible odds and ends erected in the centre. Bits of sea

creatures arranged in the shape of a dolphin on a heavy crystal platter. Wisps of fresh mint, parsley and rosemary were strewn in a seemingly careless fashion over all.

Ooh-ing and aah-ing, and generously helping themselves to the dainty morsels, some of the less polite guests wondered at how well the cheetah had learned to make use of the various kitchen utensils. Did she, when no one was about, dispense with them in favour of the powerful jaws and claws? If so, one had to admire her restraint. But then she was probably well fed before being allowed into the kitchen. Her glossy fur and gleaming eyes attested to a good diet and excellent health.

There were several lively conversations going on in the room, yet the very moment the panther reached for her first *hors d'oeuvre*, all the guests breathed in at the same time. And held, until the lustrous animal, the miniscule piece of food safely installed between three claws of her right paw, turned to her neighbour and uttered a perfectly ordinary remark:

"Pretty, isn't it? I am starved," she added and the canape disappeared neatly inside her cavernous mouth. Gustily, the guests breathed out their gratitude.

The successful introduction to the hot food, the aroma of which was insinuating itself into the dining area with insistence, was disposed of with speed that bordered on unmannerliness. The atmosphere among the guests became more relaxed, although a less greedy observer might have noticed the charged look that had passed earlier between the panther and her owner as she reached for a piece of herring. And the shudder that had run under her skin, bringing to life the black rosettes on her rich, tawny fur as she hastily drew back her empty paw.

"What beautiful teeth," someone admired absent-mindedly before returning to the on-going discussion of the rising bank rates. "But I would have had her de-clawed, at least."

Later someone else was to remark that for an animal that had spent most of its life in an indifferent zoo, the panther had a remarkable knowledge of architecture. A knowledge that would have been said to border on passion had the panther not been a... panther.

"Quaint," the same guest that had admired the animal's teeth said.

"Too bad you can't serve knowledge in a glass," tittered his neighbour, a balding man with a protruding belly that could not be camouflaged by a loose black jacket, and a web of fine veins immediately ennobled his nose.

Three meat courses, one of which was the notoriously difficult-to-prepare-well *flaki au beurre noire*, and a seductively aromatic asparagus soufflé for the odd vegetarian in the group, engrossed the

guests completely for the next while. The hostess received their compliments with a growl, the humorous tilt of her magnificent head bellying the threat inherent to her voice.

"Eat well," she said to each of them in turn, her English still exhibiting traces of an indeterminate accent. Or "*Bon appetit*," at which they smiled appreciatively. A bilingual, gourmet cheetah in the house was a treasure indeed.

"How on earth did he manage all that?" was a question that was begging to be uttered all evening, as indeed on all the other evenings under this roof. The host, an unassuming man with not very much to say for himself, did not appear capable of such subtly thorough training.

Was anyone aware of the speed with which the asparagus soufflé disappeared from the table? Did anyone notice the fact that, in spite of the choice of three meat dishes, the panther's plate contained nothing but vegetables, and later cheese and tangerines? A rather inordinately large helping of tangerines. It is highly unlikely. The amount of food made available to the guests was staggering, and the quality of it encouraged them to eat more than usual. Much more. Everyone was quite busy with refusing and then accepting their own second and third helpings. The panther was ignored until later, when coffee and liqueurs were served.

When it was already too late.

*

After the guests disposed of a variety of freshly-made fruit ices — a well thought-out decision on the part of the hostess for this unusually warm and humid evening — the cheetah brought out her *piece de resistance*. An enormous, multi-layered pistachio torte, her own variation of the favourite Dobos. Again, there were gasps of admiration from the guests, reassured that they had indeed done well by choosing to grace this table tonight. The visual attractiveness of the torte, decorated with sugared rose petals, tiny apples and strips of lime, was the touch of poetry many of them so missed in their lives. Genuine pain appeared in many eyes as they followed the movements of the heavy, antique silver knife, handled deftly by their precious cheetah. She was panting slightly with the heat, which resulted in giving her face an expression of hilarity. The air in the room rustled wantonly as the guests sank their two-pronged forks into the pale green flesh of the torte.

And this is where the owner of the panther made a cardinal error. An error which proved beyond any doubt that, as a man of crass sentiments, he should not have been allowed to acquire a creature as noble as a wild cat.

First of all, judging from the vigour with which the up to now perfectly poised panther had swallowed her portion of the ices, and

with which she made ready to devour the torte before her, it was becoming obvious to the guests that all was not well between the animal and the man.

"Tch, tch," the over-dressed woman sitting to the right of the man interested in bank rates clucked uncomfortably. "This cat looks... hungry."

"Hungry?" The panther's owner laughed rudely in response. "After a meal of this size and calibre? You are joking."

The woman, probably the only one of the guests who had noticed how little the panther had been allowed to eat all evening, briefly glanced at both the animal and the man, who was busy lewdly pinching the panther's supposedly fat haunches, and then turned her eyes away. It was not her place to intrude into the relationship between these two. A decision she was deeply to regret in the near future.

Neither the host nor the hostess seemed to be aware of the exchange, although the more than generous portion of the dessert that the cheetah had heaped on the plate of her fellow cat would point to the fact that she was not ignorant of the panther's predicament. In the wild, the two cats do not live in sympathy with one another. Under domestication...

With the delicately balanced mixture of sweetness and bitterness on their tongues, the guests rose heavily from the bountiful table and scattered into the spacious house and garden. A discreet belch, long sigh, and other sounds that bespoke of satisfaction resounded for a while against the tender hues of the northern summer evening sky. Someone complained, amiably, about the restless nights that came so late and ended so quickly, about the impossible birds that began to scream in one's windows at three in the morning...

It must have been then that the hostess invited the panther to retire with her to the kitchen, ostensibly to see to the preparation of the midnight snack. The guests would stay for several more hours; another light meal was *de rigueur*.

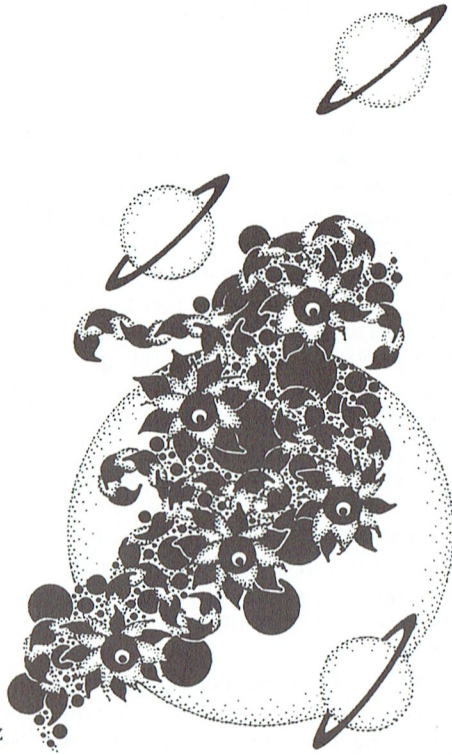
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One of the theories advanced as to why the cats chose to prepare a paté from the fellow with the noble nose was that his girth promised an impressive liver. The man who had admired the panther's teeth earlier did not believe that cats were capable of making choices based on such complex reasoning. His mother, who had been astute enough to understand the cat's hunger at the table, thought that on the contrary, the panther's choice must have been prompted by something particular. Needless to say, she did not voice her thoughts. No one could understand why the panther's owner had been spared.

Be it as it may, it was an undeniable fact that, later that night, the town's most prominent businessman was served on freshly baked biscuits. And not one of the guests could boast of having refused to

partake of their cheetah's new delicacy. The paté, served on biscuits with just a hint of salt sprinkled on top, had tasted particularly fine.

The cats were long gone, when upon investigation, the household's enormous freezer was found to contain several neatly wrapped human livers, and the distraught host began the fast that was eventually to end his up to then most pleasant and care-free life. ☛



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Prevailing Winds

by Sandra Hunter

illustration by Domenic Pirone

The small radio she held continued to drone out evacuation routes. Susan O'Donaugh strode the deserted street, paused, then turned off the sidewalk to skid down the obscured path to Gonzales Beach. The right-of-way, long in disuse, was overgrown with bright yellow broom. Susan sighed and surveyed the small bay; she was alone, of course. She was glad of that. How true it is, the haunts of childhood seem smaller when seen as an adult. The curve of the bay was somehow less sweeping, the Olympic Mountains across Juan de Fuca Strait did not seem far away at all. She glanced to the top of the curving cliff, the rising wind ruffling her ash pale hair. The stately homes were abandoned, their occupants fled.

The radio crackled in her palm, then the inflectionless voice announced there had been a massive vehicle pile-up in the Bennett Tunnel. "...This will be cleared shortly," the voice continued. Susan grimaced with distaste. There would not be time or compassion to spend on any trapped survivors. The corners of her mouth tugged downward as she repressed a welling of grim pity. The seas were impassable, tides still swelled and shrank unpredictably and electromagnetic fluctuations grounded air transport.

The voice reaffirmed there had been no contact from Tranquil-Hawking Base since their first reports of increased solar flares and seismic activity on the lunar surface. Grim-faced scientists on the vid confirmed that the moon's orbit continued erratic. The comet's passing had shifted and altered the centre of gravity between the earth and moon.

Bad news for those of us on the coast, she thought. Bad news for everyone, eventually. The old farts hadn't been able to come up with any explanation they agreed on, or any prognosis for the future viability of the human race.

Susan remembered the faces of her grandchildren pressed to the lander's window as Michael and Ellen begged her to come with them. She had never told them about her disease. "I'm an old woman," she had replied stiffly (secretly appalled at her impromptu disclaimer, for she had never felt old in her life). Ellen had cried and clasped her hand,

whispering, "God be with you, Mother!"

Maudlin, maudlin, Susan thought with a throwaway gesture. Her dislike of the deity invoked by most pious/pompous people had not lessened over the years. Michael blamed her for "giving up," but she had her pride — none of this hopeless scurrying for her. Michael would try though, no matter how futile it may seem. He had a stubbornness in him.

Susan shivered, tugged her woollen cape closer around her shoulders, and stepped over random driftwood and metallic debris to a place more sheltered from the wind. She sat as if she meant to stay a while, arranging her cape on the sand and, leaning back, she rotated the dial on her radio, seeking contact past the static. None. Hadn't been much since the tsunami warning. Susan lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and again her lips twisted in irony. Well, Abe, it won't be this cancer that gets me, after all, she thought, and with genuine love pictured the large, irascible doctor frowning to hide his concern. Always scolding.

Well, well...so she had this place, and she mentally blessed the inspiration that had brought her here today. She deliberately relaxed against the log and allowed the sound of sea and slipping shale to wash the crust of years from her memory.

*

The morning sun spilled golden, slanting rays through the wind-twisted oaks. The wind was in their faces, blowing inland off the sea as the tide turned, full of salt and seagull voices. The two friends urged each other on, leaping their bikes over the oak trees' twisted roots. They swerved off the woods path onto Gonzales Road and in a few minutes were spreading their towels against a "just right" log. With rapid, excited movements they stripped off their jeans and sweatshirts to their bathing suits underneath. The lunch cache was wrapped in another towel and buried in the sand on the shady side of the log.

Susan was cold, jogging and flapping her arms to ward off the still chill air of early morning. "Come on, Abe!" she called and they ran to the foaming water's edge. The air was ripe with the scent of low tide and Susan yipped as black ooze and tiny crabs pushed between her toes. The swim raft was still crookedly beached on the sulphurous mud; it would be three hours before the tide floated it. The two friends amused themselves popping the air sacs in fat brown fingers of seaweed and searching for a good floating log they could roll and tumble on once the tide came in. Good floating logs were hard to find; most either became waterlogged and sank, or were washed up onto the beach in storms and were too heavy to move. The water was cold, so cold the top of her skull ached, but she always quickly adapted. Marauders attempted to pirate their log, but Susan and Abe were accomplished defenders. Poachers were driven off with skilfully flung jellyfish.

As the tide came in, Abe and she would lie on the raft as it heaved and rocked. Susan pressed her cheek to the gritty surface and heard the water murmur and chuckle in the raft logs. Spread-eagled on the gentle sea like neonates on their mother's belly, they watched out over the Strait. Often large tankers on their way to Metro Mainland would pass, and their passing was misty and silent as a mirage on the horizon. Sometimes a smaller ship would pass closer to the Bay, and all the children would shrill their excitement, flocking to the shore to jump and toss in the waves that would follow from the ship's wake. Susan heard their shouts as from a distance: the sun was like a giant warm hand, pressing her into the wood, her skin vibrating with the pleasure of it. She turned her head to gaze down into the water and saw jellyfish, like tiny parachutists, belling downward to a wavering weedy forest...

"Susan..."

"Umph...?" Susan's mouth felt gluey.

Abe's face was intent. "When we get married, we'll be able to do this all the time."

Susan stared back at her friend. At an age when most boys and girls studiously avoided each other, Abe and Susan stayed best friends. They were "soul mates" and shared their innermost thoughts. Both sets of parents tried gently and inexorably to steer them into more "suitable" friendships; but Susan realized as she looked at Abe's earnest brown eyes and sunburnt features that, to her, he was one with the sea that rocked her and the sun that warmed her. He was just a part of her, that was it.

"Of course we will, when we're not working," Susan replied. Abe was to be a doctor and she was to be an artist.

He returned her regard for a moment, then jackknifed up and, leaping to the edge of the raft, did a really keen cannonball into the water.

*

Susan came to herself with a start; strange, to remember that, now. Those times are gone forever. So when did I become a hard old woman? She jabbed her cigarette into the grey speckled sand. Susan looked at her hand; the enlarged knuckles, the spots. Her eyes narrowed their gaze over the Strait, blinked and closed in a spasm-like movement. She and Abe hadn't married, of course. He'd wed a nice Jewish girl, Martha. Susan, of the staunch Irish-Catholic family, had still broken her family's collective heart and married an adamant agnostic.

She had been thirty-seven years old and pregnant with her second child when he had decided to ward off death and/or male menopause by leaving her for a twenty-year old grad student. Susan had miscarried and almost lost her life. It had been a girl. Susan's body in the hospital had lain rigid in tearless grief, until Abe came in and, cupping

his hand over hers, he had kept vigil. She could see him, as if at the end of a long darkness, as he spoke of his sorrow at not being able to save the baby. He begged her to stay. She saw, as if a camera had suddenly focused, the tears shine on his cheeks and the sweat on his balding head. His brown eyes were rimmed with despair. Her Abe. She came back, cursing him.

Susan smiled and lit another cigarette. Why not, after all? This was difficult, however; the wind was picking up and sand stung her cheeks. What an irony, she thought, the sea rushing to the lemmings.

A rock tumbled down behind her and thunked against her shelter — startled, she rose to her feet. The wind whipped her hair into her eyes. She saw a large, stocky figure pause, survey the bay, and turn toward her. Abe's serious face lightened and, clasping her hands, he drew her to him, his bulk between her and the wind.

"... knew I'd find you here, Susan," he rumbled into her hair, and led her back to her driftwood shelter; lowering his bulk onto the sand, he frowned at the chaff of butts littering the sand. Susan raised her brows, archly.

"The hospital?" she asked, exhaling loudly and with gusto.

Abe shook his head, "Evacuated all we could..." He tightened his arm comfortably around her shoulder, "... made the rest ... comfortable." His voice was rough and she could read the exhaustion in every line of his body. She watched his face hungrily. No one she knew would call Abe handsome, but she could not remember a time in her life when she had not thought him beautiful — the patina of his goodness lay over him and that was all her eyes could see.

"Martha?" she asked, looking out to sea.

"Been gone a couple of weeks now... I couldn't leave the hospital. She seemed very quiet," Abe mused. "I think she understood."

Yes, Susan thought, I'm sure she did.

"Michael go?"

"He's trying the tunnel."

"Damn."

Abe's glance swept over the bay and he lifted his head to the prevailing wind. "Remember the raft?"

Susan smiled. She gestured to the "DANGER — WATER POLLUTED" sign angling from Midge Rock in the middle of the bay. "We got all the good times, Abe."

They sat quietly. Abe's hand once again held hers in its warmth as they watched a last shaft of light bronze a seagull's wing as it carved the darkening sky; inexplicably her spirit lifted and she pressed into his warmth. She floated, at peace.

Over the Strait, rain fell from cloud to sea. A banshee wind shouldered a mighty wave before it. ☘

Node to Node

by Catherine Girczyc

Jumping from Node to Node
in the modern way
of choosing the shortest path
and moving quickly
I encounter
"Critical Path Fatigue"
A synapse/nerve aberration,
wherein the alternate dimension appears,
the path not followed is shown again
And
You haunt me.

As I turn about
In this empty room
 I feel you behind me, watching.
As if my leaving
Couldn't or didn't
Come to pass.

In another dimension
A science fiction world of
 Alternate Choices, there perhaps
 My departure never happened.
And
Now I dream
you've followed me.

Though I never bent to your will,
Though I could have loved you,
I did not.
But the Alternate Universe
Exists.
And I wonder if I will see you
Behind me
All my days. ☞

Dog's Life

by Alice Major

illustration by Rob Alexander

Marietta poked a car key into the lock and tried to twist it. Wrong key. She sighed, selected a second key on the ring, wondered why she never could remember which one opened the trunk of George's brown Chevy. Still no action — the key slid in, but balked at turning. Must have been the first one after all. She found it on the ring, slid it into the lock again, tried twisting it counter-clockwise this time. The trunk lid went up with the yawning creak that always made Marietta's jaw hurt at the hinge. In the bottom of the trunk, plastic grocery sacks had slipped spinelessly to the side so that butter, bleach and bananas lay bundled promiscuously together.

As she pulled together the handles of half a dozen bags, Marietta heard a too-familiar shrillness yapping near her feet. The miniature poodle from across the street — an animal with the brains of a windsock — was making a run at her ankles. "Go away," growled Marietta. The poodle retreated a step but continued to stand stiff-legged, barking its tonsils out. Plastic bags clenched in either hand, Marietta took another step towards it.

"Go away," she said again. "This is my sidewalk. I don't have to be barked at on my own sidewalk." The animal kept yapping and, as she turned to walk up the driveway, made another rush towards her heels. As she rounded on it again, she saw the front door of the house across the street open.

"Mrs. Baker, can you please control this animal of yours," Marietta shouted, as coldly as she could make compatible with maximum volume. A big, square, roughly female shape rolled out onto the front step and called "Frannie, Frannie. Come here, Frannie," in an shrill voice, incongruous and not unlike the poodle's.

"If you can't stop that damn dog from harassing people, you



should keep her inside," Marietta yelled, then marched up the driveway with a sense of guilty exhilaration. Since doing the Saturday grocery shopping irritated her, she felt almost grateful to the poodle for giving her the opportunity to yell at something. She wrenched the screen door open, dumped the bags on the floor just inside and shouted, "George, George, I'm back."

As she was going back down the driveway for another load, the door across the street was closing behind Mrs. Baker's broad back. Marietta flinched slightly at the sullen click. Mount Baker's mind was as retentive as a glacier and the phrase "that damn dog" was no doubt now etched on it like three-inch-deep letters on granite.

"George, George, come and help," she called as she struggled into the house again with two paper bags in her arms and bottle of bleach dangling from three fingers of her right hand. There were still two more bags and a large box of laundry detergent out in the car. As she brought them into the kitchen, the refrigerator motor kicked in, emphasizing the empty quietness of the house. "George," she called again — up the stairs, out the back door. Still no answer. Surprised to the extent of a shrug, Marietta began pulling vegetables out of bags and clearing limp remnants out of the fridge to make room. Then she went upstairs with an armload of tissue boxes and paper towels to stow in the bathroom.

The golf shirt (beige, with a dark green alligator stitched to the pocket) and slacks that George had been wearing when she left the house were in a pile on the floor outside the bathroom door. "For Pete's sake, George," she said under her breath, then wondered why he would have bothered changing his clothes to go down the block — as she assumed — to borrow a tool of some description from Dale McEntry. As she picked up the golf shirt, she saw a vaguely familiar insect, a minute, purple-black oval, crawling along the inside of the collar seam.

"A flea," said Marietta out loud. "Where did that come from?" Hastily she pinched the bug in a fold of cloth and tossed the shirt in the laundry hamper.

At five o'clock, an hour or so after she had come home, she called the McEntry number. "Is George there?" she asked.

"Nope, not here. Has he slipped the leash?" said Dale in a just-one-of-the-boys tone that made Marietta wonder briefly if he was hiding something. Then she dismissed the thought. Dale was an inveterate nudger and winker.

"I just thought he might have come over to borrow a screw-driver or something," she said. "Bye, Dale."

At six-thirty, she made herself a fried-egg sandwich for supper. Plate in hand, dipping toasted bread into a blob of ketchup, she wandered through the front hall and opened the door. As she

chewed, she stared out through the screen into the summer evening, still bright, and began to acknowledge tremors of alarm. George's habits were regular and his territory on foot was limited: the convenience store two blocks away marked one boundary; Dale McEnry's house a block in the other direction marked another. He wasn't the type to take long, solitary walks, and to go any further afield he would have certainly taken the car. Marietta didn't think he even knew what buses were for.

By seven o'clock, she called the police. The desk sergeant was sympathetic but not alarmed.

"We don't list adults as missing until after 24 hours," he said.

"But he's missing *now*," said Marietta.

"Well, there can be so many ordinary reasons for someone not being around for a few hours," said the desk sergeant. "Maybe he's just gone to visit a friend."

"I've called his friends."

"Well, maybe a, um, yes, a friend you don't know about."

Marietta thought of the possibility of George cultivating a secret life of some sort, and decided not to tell this pleasant, faceless voice that it was about as likely as a dog learning to meow. Instead, she asked, "But can't you do something now?"

"Well," said the desk sergeant, repressing a sigh, "I'll take some details now. Can you give me the physical description?" Marietta tried to think.

"He's not very tall," she said at last.

"How tall?" said the police officer in resignation.

"About five-nine."

"Weight?"

"About one-forty-five. He's quite trim really."

"Hair colour?"

"Brown, quite a bit of grey at the sides."

"Eyes?"

Once again Marietta paused. "Hazel," she said at last. "No, more like brown, I guess."

"All right, Mrs. Saunders. We'll put the information on file. I'm sure he'll turn up soon," said the desk sergeant, trying to bring the conversation politely to a close.

"Yes, well, I hope so," Marietta replied and hung up the phone. She went to stand at the front door again, staring out at the suburban street, lying with its flat lawns and infant trees in the late sun of a summer evening. The Baker poodle was nosing along the edge of the sidewalk, taking skittish, prancing steps now and again. Suddenly a second dog came galloping down the street making straight for the poodle. As Marietta gave a silent cheer, Frannie yelped and bolted for the safety of the Baker's door.

The second dog sat on its haunches on the poodle's front lawn for a moment, then turned and trotted purposefully across the street and up her own driveway to the front door where it sat and looked anxiously up at her, wiggling a stubby tail and making whimpery noises in the back of its throat. He was mostly, maybe completely, Airedale with a grizzled grey-and-brown coat and an alert cock to his head. As far as Marietta could see, he wasn't wearing a collar or tag of any kind.

"Shoo. Go away," she said. "This isn't your house." She closed the inside door and walked back to the kitchen.

By eight o'clock she started calling hospitals. At nine o'clock she filled the kettle to make tea and, while it was heating up, went to stare fruitlessly out the door again. The Airedale was still on the step, looking earnestly up at her. She stared down at the dog, wondering why it seemed familiar and why she should feel a slight sense of relief. The trim, compact, well-muscled frame quivered with anticipation as the dog stared back. Something about the eyes...

Marietta shook herself a little — all dogs have the same soulful expression when they want to be fed, that's why she thought she knew him. But still she kept gazing down, down, down. And finally said, tentatively, "George?"

"Wuff!" The Airedale gave a leap of delight. "Wuff, wuff!"

"This is crazy," said Marietta, *sotto voce*. "I'm crazy. My husband is not an Airedale terrier." She started to close the door and the dog let out a high, despairing whine. She opened the door again, and once again said cautiously, "George?"

"Wuff! Wuff!" The dog turned a tight, ecstatic circle on the step, stood on its hind legs and put its paws up on the glass of the screen door. Hardly knowing what she was doing, Marietta turned the knob and opened the door a few inches. The dog immediately squeezed its head and shoulders through the opening, wriggled the rest of its body through and trotted straight down the hall to the kitchen. It sat in front of the fridge and looked pleadingly at Marietta, who had followed it, feeling dizzy.

"I guess you just know what fridges are for," she said. The Airedale whimpered encouragingly as she reached for the door and took a heel of cold roast beef, rather dry and stale, from the meatkeeper. She cut it in chunks and found a large green plastic bowl in the back of a cupboard.

"George isn't keen on leftovers," she said, putting the bowl down on the floor. "Let's see how you do."

The Airedale wolfed down the meat, sniffed at her feet and trotted into the living room. Marietta followed it, reassured by the dog's relish of something that George would have spurned. But she was thrown off-balance again to see that it had jumped on the sofa and

settled into George's accustomed place on the sofa. Off-balance — and yet somehow she felt that feather touch of relief again as she turned on the TV and sat down next to it.

She and the Airedale watched television until past midnight until Marietta thought she might as well go to bed. She found herself in a quandary about whether to lock the house. She had borrowed George's key ring that afternoon when she went for the groceries, so he would be locked out if he returned in the middle of the night. At first, she decided to leave the front door unlocked. Then, after she was in bed with the lights out she changed her mind, got up and went downstairs to lock it after all.

"I'd hear the doorbell," she told herself.

The terrier had followed her upstairs and tried jumping on the bed.

"Oh, no you don't" she said firmly, hauling him off. With a sigh, he curled up on the rug by the door. Marietta heard imaginary doorbells all through a restless night and only dropped off to real sleep when the sky was beginning to lighten again. When she awoke to the bright light of the morning sun in her face as she lay on her right side, it took her a few moments to remember why the day was unusual. For a moment she thought George had come back while she was sleeping, thinking she felt the weight of his body pressed into her back. But as she gasped and turned around, she found only the pertinacious terrier snoozing on the bedspread beside her.

At noon, Dale McEnry came over to borrow a crowbar and looked grave when she told him George had been missing overnight. There was no trace of nudge or wink as he asked whether she had called the police.

"They won't work on it until it's been 24 hours," she said.

"What the hell do we pay taxes for?" Dale demanded of the dog, who had joined them on the front step. At four o'clock she called the police again. This time they sent a young policeman to take the relevant information. He opened a small, virginal notebook, clicked his ball-point pen into action and asked her for more descriptive details.

"Any scars, birthmarks, distinguishing features?"

Marietta searched her brain, finding her mental picture of her husband kept blurring into the image of an Airedale terrier. "He had a little scar on his left thumb," she said at last. "He cut himself on his router one time. That's all I can think of."

"Would you have a recent picture of him we could have?"

"Oh, of course," said Marietta in relief at this commonsense way of getting around the problem of description and went to find the envelope of photos she had picked up only a couple of weeks before.

As she handed one to the officer, he asked, "Did your husband have outside interests, go out much? What did he do with his spare

time?"

"Well, mostly he just stayed around the house," said Marietta. "He liked puttering — you know, putting up wallboard in the basement or digging in the garden. That sort of thing. Or watching television. Hockey and football. You know."

The young policeman nodded as though he did know. He looked like the kind of person who would follow the same weekend routines himself. He cleared his throat and asked, "Did your husband have any — well, any friends?"

Marietta looked at him blankly. "Of course he has friends. He's quite a friendly person."

The young officer was reddening. "I mean, like, female friends."

She continued to look blankly at him for a moment or two before her mind cleared. "Oh, I see what you mean," she said. "No — you'd have to know my husband to believe me, but I'm sure there was nothing like that."

Marietta thought there was a trace of "Of course, she'd have to say that," in the officer's attitude as he made a note. Then he asked, "Has your husband seem depressed, worried about anything?"

"No, not at all," she answered. "You have no idea how ordinary everything seemed when I went out to do the shopping."

"Well, we'll see what we can do, Mrs. Saunders," the youngster said doubtfully.

The dog stood beside Marietta on the front step as she stood watching the policeman go down the driveway to his car. As the cruiser pulled away, she noticed a hand letting the Bakers' curtain drop.

"That should give Mount Baker something to wonder about," she said grimly to the dog, who growled in reply. Monday morning, Marietta phoned George's office and her own and made the excuse they were home sick. She phoned the SPCA to report she had found an Airedale terrier, obviously well cared-for, in case someone was looking for it. She phoned the police station several times, until they told her wearily that they would let her know as soon as they found anything out.

In the afternoon, on an impulse, she phoned George's secretary to ask her if she could think of anything that might have precipitated the disappearance. Wanda was agog with excitement at the mystery, couldn't imagine what had caused it. Mr. Saunders had seemed okay on Friday, there was nothing wrong at the office. Sure Mrs. Saunders, she'd keep quiet about it.

Marietta hung up, sure the story would be all over George's department in a quarter of an hour.

"That was stupid of me," she told the dog lying at her feet on the kitchen floor. "George would hate to have everyone talking about

him like that."

The dog thumped his tail and put his muzzle down on the floor. He wore an expression remarkably like the one George wore when he found he had measured something wrong and sawed a piece of wood too short.

The week passed; Marietta continued to make phone calls, with an increasing sense that she was just going through the motions. Police officers stopped by a few of times to ask more questions. Marietta made a sign: "Found: Airedale dog, about six years old, friendly," and posted it on telephone poles in the neighbourhood. She wondered whether she shouldn't be putting up a second sign as well: "Lost: husband, about 47 years of age, friendly."

Even without signs posted, word about George's disappearance got round the area. Neighbours would sympathize when they met her in the shopping centre.

"It must be just awful, not knowing."

Marietta would nod her head sadly and agree. She did not, however, mention to anyone her certainty that George was not missing — that he had, for inscrutable reasons, turned himself into a large Airedale. People would only think she was cracking under the strain. She sometimes thought so herself. But then the dog would do something that was so much like one of George's mannerisms — snore in a particular way, or turn finicky if she tried to feed him leftover tinned tuna.

As the autumn wore on, Marietta and the dog fell into a pattern. In some ways, life was easier with George as an Airedale. He didn't fill the car or mow the lawn any more, but there was a lot less laundry to do and the cooking was easier. Marietta would leave him outside during the day in good weather while she went to work. She fed him in the morning and again in the evening, before making herself a poached egg or a bowl of soup. Afterwards, they'd watch television in the living room.

One evening she and the dog were sitting side by side — there was a persistent patch of dull grey developing at one end of the sofa — watching a re-run episode of a cops-and-robbers show that had always been a favorite of George's. As the maverick hero burst into his stodgy boss's office for the third time, Marietta found herself yawning.

"You know, I don't know why we're watching this," she remarked to the dog, who was staring uncritically at the screen. She got up, flicked off the set and roamed around the room.

"Music, that's what I want," she said at last. Flipping through her small collection of records and pulled out the sound track of *Oklahoma*, a scratchy old LP she hadn't listened to for years. "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow," she hummed along. "The

corn is as high as an elephant's eye..."

George leaned against her shoulder and whimpered. Marietta scratched his stomach absently, put her head on the back of the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

"They're doing *Kiss Me Kate* next month at the Citadel Theatre," she said. "Fred Sheffield at the office has seasons tickets, he was telling me today. Seasons tickets, George," she said dreamily. "You know, I don't think we've been to the theatre since before we were married. Remember when we went to see *Oklahoma*?" The Airedale sneezed.

"Well, I suppose it wasn't all that good. But I enjoyed it. You know I always liked musicals."

Her fingers found the right spot on his shaggy fur and his hind leg started to beat rhythmically and rapturously on the cushion. Marietta glanced down to see the bright red penis slide out like a long balloon inflating and promptly stopped scratching. She ordered the dog off the sofa and sat feeling queasy for a few moments.

The following day, as she was getting out of the car after work with a bag of groceries, the Bakers' door swung open and Mrs. Baker steamed out.

"That your dog?" she demanded, pointing at the Airedale who was strolling down the sidewalk with the air of a dog with time to kill and only a passing interest in poodles.

"Yes," Marietta replied shortly.

The neighbour drew a deep, shuddering sigh. "Well, you'd better keep him in, or I'm going to call the pound on you."

Marietta put her head back. "What's he done?"

"What has he done? That's what he's done," said Mrs. Baker, her voice rising like a kettle coming to the boil as she waved at her front door.

"I don't understand," said Marietta. Mr. Baker was standing in the window, holding the poodle.

"Your filthy animal came right in the house this morning and tried to rape — RAPE! — our Frannie."

Marietta looked at the poodle and felt an irrational reflex of hostility towards it. She said, "Don't be silly, Mrs. Baker. It's only a natural dog reaction if she's in heat, not rape."

The Airedale had come to stand at Marietta's side and was sniffing at the neighbour's skirt with a scornful flare of his nostrils.

"Don't you call me silly. That dog is a menace."

"Nonsense. He's perfectly harmless." George started a deep rumbling in his throat.

"Call that harmless! He's a menace and he's filthy. And you'd better get him fixed, not let him run all over the neighbourhood attacking nice dogs."

The rumbling became a full-fledged growl. Marietta looked down at the dog and said slowly, "Fixed?"

"Fixed. Fixed. You know what that means?" shrilled Mrs. Baker.

"Oh I know what it means," said Marietta reflectively. "But I don't think I could. In the circumstances."

"Oh you couldn't?" Mrs. Baker had reached the boil. "Well you'd better do something or Henry will be after him with a gun. A gun, do you hear me?"

"I'm sure the whole neighbourhood can," Marietta replied coldly, tugging at the back of George's neck, to make him come into the house. Once inside the house she slammed boxes around on the kitchen counter for a few moments.

"You just damn well stay away from that bitch," she told the Airedale through clenched teeth. The dog whimpered and held up a front paw. She looked at him and started to laugh.

"This is ridiculous. I think I'm jealous of a poodle."

She kept George inside the next morning, although it was a fine fall day and he whined to get out the whole time she was eating breakfast. At work she made a few phone calls and by the time she got home that afternoon, a truck with the sign "A & D Home Handyman" was parked outside the house. Two days later, a six-foot fence had been built from the side of the house to the fence at the edge of Marietta's lot, closing off the backyard.

After she had written a cheque for the contractor, Marietta went out into the backyard to inspect the fence. She thought George would approve of the workmanship — it was square and sturdy, the posts sunk well into concrete. The Airedale signified his good opinion by lifting his leg on one of the posts. Then he went to the new gate and whined to get out.

"I'm sorry, George, but no. I'll take you for a walk after supper," said Marietta. The Airedale continued to whimper.

"No. You can't get out," she repeated. "Come over here. I have to talk to you." She sat on the steps and patted her knee. The dog trotted over and put his head on her leg, looking earnestly up at her. She tried to frame some sentences.

"I don't know why you wanted to live this kind of life, George," she said at last, hesitantly. "But I have to say it's become, it's — well, a bit limiting. You're just going to have to stay in this yard from now on. Or be fixed — and even then the pound could come along and pick you up if you're just roaming around."

She scratched his ears absently for a while, then said at last, "Basically, George, we've grown apart..." The Airedale continued to gaze intently at her as she stared towards the back of the garden. "We don't have a lot in common any more."

"Oh, I don't suppose we ever talked all that much anyway," she

continued, looking down at him. "Obviously I didn't know what was going on in your head." Marietta took his lower jaw in her hand and shook it gently back and forth.

"But I'll tell you one thing. I'm not going to sit around every night of my life watching television."

She looked off to the western sky and was silent again for a while, her fingers working in the grizzled coat. The dog flattened its ears out and leaned on her knee, wearing an expression of idiotic contentment. "Fred Sheffield asked me to go to the theatre with him last week," she said. "I said I wouldn't, but I changed my mind and told him I would. And I may even ask him to come back here afterwards."

"I don't know how you'll feel about that, George," she continued, watching the sunset. "I don't suppose you'll like him any more than I like Frannie. But I guess you'll just have to get used to the idea."

The Airedale yawned hugely and lounged away to the far side of the backyard. Marietta felt a slight, irrational sense of disappointment. Did she half expect George might be goaded into changing back again?

She looked at him, sniffing the well defined perimeter of his world. He was perfectly happy, she thought. Through the slats in the fence, she saw the big brown Chevy sitting in the driveway.

"I should sell that," she thought, and indulged in a fragmentary vision of driving down the road in a small, bright red convertible. Four on the floor.

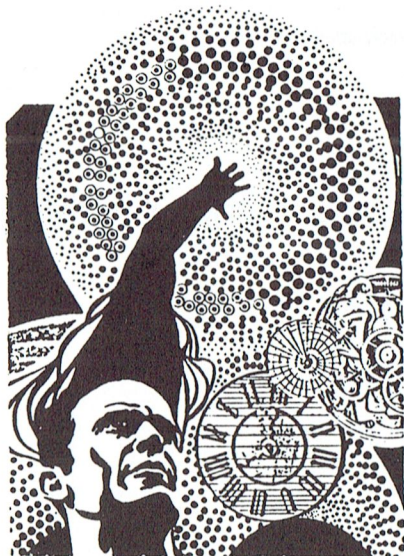
Inside the house, the phone rang — a tentative half ring, followed by a more challenging full-length one. She sighed and stood up.

The voice on the other end of the phone was familiar. She heard it ten times a day at the office. But it felt odd, almost illicit, to hear it while staring at the the familiar yellow-flowered wallpaper of the kitchen. For a moment, she had an illusion the walls had dissolved. "Oh. Hi, Fred," she answered. "No... it's all right. I'm glad you called." ☘

CHANGE OF NAME



Lorna Toolis, Head Librarian of the **SPACED OUT LIBRARY** in Toronto, informs us that, as of the first of January, 1991, the library will be renamed the **Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy**. All other address info remains the same.



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puddlechurch and a sickle moon

by Beth Goobie

wednesday night, outside vermilion's
west library door,
sandy catches a sickle moon
in her left eye.
thinking it a dandelion seed
she rubs her lid,
accidentally hooks some perspectives
on a hang nail
and drops them onto the cobblestone walk.
her vision blurs; she notes
an unusual fog duelling
in the buckingham street graveyard.

inside the crowd gathered to hear bernard puddlechurch
read *tips from the headless gardener*,
is swapping underwear
then everyone sings the hallelujah chorus
and sits down.
sandy notes the barber wears his heart
on a white cotton sleeve, and julia
with knives in her eyes.

bernard clears his throat
and a frog jumps out
carrying a bag of groceries
and two canadiana encyclopedias.
after profuse apologies, it takes
the second row spare seat.
bernard begins, in his blue plaid voice,
brings the twilight in from outside
in sequins and a double breasted overcoat.

mid chapter, sandy observes the flowered wallpaper
in the south east corner
send green tendrils about the twillby sisters

who dance once a year
 with the presbyterian minister.
 leaves entwine petunia,
 encircle rose,
 quietly draw them back
 into the patterned garden.
 surprised but content
 their faces suddenly bloom,
 immortal in the paper heart
 of each daisy and lilac design.

the banker's wife wears an oak picture frame
 about her face. at intermission
 she does not converse,
 smiles in heavy oils.
 the mayor pulls words out of his wallet,
 handing them out with champagne.
 the librarian loses her stutter;
 her syllables take wing
 circle her head,
 dizzy chattering stars.

during the second half
 sandy sees figures
 crawl out of each library book.
 initially thin, dust covered
 they shake off their shelf bound lives,
 fade out the back door
 pulling the headless gardener
 and a line of turnips and cabbages
 with them. the reading is over.

on her way home, sandy passes the devil
 wearing the barber in his buttonhole.
 one of julia's knives
 is in his heart. before sleep,
 sandy combs several constellations
 from her hair
 and makes love to sherlock holmes
 on her paisley davenport,
 keeping in mind he is bound to smell musty
 on moonless rainy nights. ☞

God Rest Ye Merry

by Cheryl Merkel

illustration by Richard Bartrop



*od rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our saviour
Was born on Christmas day...*

Appleby scowled as the music echoed through the ship; someone, in a last-minute frenzy of Christmas cheer, had programmed the computer's public address system to broadcast a random selection of carols. Continuously. He supposed eventually he would find the energy to halt the program; in the meantime, it provided a kind of companionship. It was only the fourth time the ship had selected this particular carol, and Appleby had a bet with himself as to how many times it would be played over the five days he would be alone.

Strictly speaking, of course, he wasn't alone. That was the whole point of the exercise. Someone had to guard the prisoner. The crew had been about to draw lots for the dubious privilege when he had offered to stay. Made more sense, he had said, as they hesitated. No family, what few friends he had were scattered to the corners of the Universe. He had welcomed the opportunity, not looking forward to spending the holiday alone, or worse yet, as an extra guest in a stranger's home, always conscious of not really belonging, however politely they might try to fit him in. Appleby had long since begun to treat Christmas as just another day.

He leaned back in the Pilot's chair, crossing his feet negligently on the console in front of him and taking a long swig from the bottle

he held. No-one around to complain about his un-military attitude. He considered wiping the relevant portion of Ship's automatic recording, then shrugged. Not much they could do to him now.

The bottle was a gift from Fletcher, bless him. The taciturn mechanic had sidled up to him as he watched them board the shuttle for transfer planetside, thrusting it into his arms with a muttered "Merry Christmas." Appleby suspected the gift had a lot more to do with the tightened security down below than with a true Christmas spirit, but he accepted it gratefully anyway. He had saved it until Christmas Day, wanting in some vague way for the day to be a little special. The Lord knew there wouldn't be many more of them.

He scratched idly at the implants at his temples, briefly considered linking with ship. No escape that way. There was nowhere to go for a prison-ship in geo-stationary orbit above Eridanii Station. And he had seen enough stars to last a lifetime. His lifetime.

He sighed. It had come to this. Pilot of a ship that went nowhere, that needed no pilot. Needed no crew, either, but Military regulations stated that for every ship there existed a pilot, and he was it.

Existing was about right, he thought, descending into self-pity as the level in the bottle sank. Not much longer, though. Ironic, when he thought about it (which he tried not to do). The end, for most pilots, was a gradual descent into madness as their humanity drained into the Matrix, their personality merging into the alien chill of the shipmind until the Monitor finally pulled the plug. Appleby wasn't sure if he would have preferred that.

Instead, he would quietly slip into a coma as the tumor in his brain expanded, until finally he simply stopped breathing. Ironic, really, that the technology that had made him a Pilot was killing him. One in a thousand reacted to the Matrix implants as he had, the medics told him. One in ten thousand was incurable.

"Just my luck," he snarled. "Had to be bloody unique." He had a headache. He always had a headache these days, one the bottle had not helped. Not at all.

"Pilot?" At the sound of his voice, Ship had stopped the carols. When he did not respond, it resumed the program.

He squinted at the bottle, and shook it sadly as the disembodied voice sang of Herald Angels. Nearly empty, and it had been the best of Fletcher's homemade booze. A week old — just right for drinking. Any longer than that and it got downright dangerous. He stretched. Time to go check on the prisoner. Weaving only slightly, he headed for the holding cells.

A lot of trouble for one small alien, he reckoned. But the powers-that-be considered it too dangerous to confine her planet-side, where some mad fool might attempt a rescue, while they decided what to do

with her. Kept her penned in a holding cell in a broken down shuttlecraft for three long months, kept a Pilot and a Monitor and a Mechanic (first class) penned up with her. Not even a hint of leave until now; until the message from base, in the usual terse militaryese: Christmas leave approved two crew members.

The alien was curled up in the back of the holding cell, a huddled shape in the one-size-fits-nobody coverall that was all they had allowed her. A ragged hole had been cut for her tail; lacking scissors she had had to rip it out with teeth and nails. Appleby had seen her do it; the memory of her pointed canines and semi-retractile claws as they tore at the material still had the power to make him shudder. Her fur looked blacker against the crimson cloth. *Prisoner red*, they called it, so that a non-crew member would be readily identifiable. Appleby had laughed. No one would ever mistake this prisoner for human.

He watched her in silence, and soon she turned, flowing off the bunk with a predator's grace to stand before the observation window. One way glass, it was supposed to be (and was, when there were others there to observe), but Appleby had programmed the computer to alter it to ordinary glass at his command. Uncanny, the way she always seemed to know it was him, even before the glass changed. Witherspoon and Fletcher had teased him about his fascination for the alien, and for a while had taken to keying the glass themselves and taunting her. She ignored them with a royal indifference, and eventually they stopped.

Appleby couldn't explain the fascination she held for him. She reminded him of a wolf, with her sleek dark fur, and the vaguely canine head with its pointed ears. She was no animal. Her black eyes held a frighteningly alien intelligence, and at least when Witherspoon was around, burned with naked hatred.

Witherspoon, as the ship's Monitor and resident medical scientist, had the unenviable task of performing the routine twice-monthly physical exams. After the first time, when she had roused from sedation and nearly got loose while they were transferring her to the Sickbay, he simply flooded the chamber with a paralyzing agent and performed the examination right there in the cell while Appleby stood by with a stunner. Appleby was always disturbed by the unfeeling way Witherspoon handled her, like an animal. He tried to be careful when lifting her back onto the bunk afterwards; he imagined she looked at him with gratitude. Then again, perhaps not. It was hard to tell what was going on behind those pitiless onyx eyes.

He pressed his hand against the window, and she matched it. It was a ritual they had; the first time he had done it she had backed away, unsure of his intent. Eventually, she had realized he had meant no harm and placed her own opposite his, mouth open in a soundless

RJB-90



grin as she compared his strong hand against her own slight six-fingered one. Her ears pricked up as he spoke, watching his mouth with the unwavering attention she paid to everything he did. He wondered how much she understood. So far, no one had ever managed to communicate with the K'tarri.

"Merry Christmas, Jessie," he said, proud that he was slurring only slightly. He had no idea what her name was, of course, but he had to call her something, and he had always liked the name. Her head tilted, the three gold rings in her left ear clinking musically. Her mouth opened, pink tongue showing briefly between the long teeth in a soundless greeting. Her nostrils flared.

The first contact with the K'tarri had been made by a small freighter and had ended with seventeen dead and the ship floating lifeless, stripped of cargo and weapons. Other contacts had gone the way of the first until the humans stopped trying for peace and simply fought back, until the unspoken war became official. The K'tarri took no prisoners, and left no wounded. The few K'tarri they had managed to capture generally suicided before much information had been obtained. That they had her at all was a miracle; she had been found floating unconscious in a burnt-out fighter, and they had gotten her into a cell before she woke.

She was high-ranking K'tarri, warrior-class or better. You could tell, Appleby knew, by the gold rings in the pointed ears, the heavy gold bracelet on her wrist. Suspecting a concealed weapon, they had taken the ornaments away. She had been distressed, pacing the tiny holding cell until Security had released them. Appleby had returned them, placing them beside her on the pillow in the moment before Witherspoon's gas wore off. She had replaced them with trembling hands, and afterwards, had seemed to regard Appleby in a kindlier light. Then again, maybe not. Who could tell?

"Merry Christmas," he repeated. "But I regret to say that due to tech — technic-al diff'culty got no presen' for you. Got no presen' atall. At all." He swayed. "You know 'bout Chriss — Chrissimas, Jessie? 'S a Holiday. Holy day. Peace on Nerth'n all that rot." Abruptly, his legs gave way, and he sat down on the floor. She matched his move, pressing up against the glass, watching him intently.

His head felt funny. Felt like it was going to explode. Felt like — Cold washed through him.

Witherspoon had told him what to expect, had told him that if he ever felt what he was feeling now to go to Sickbay immediately, run, do not walk. But Witherspoon was planetside and about the only thing Appleby knew how to do in Sickbay was close the Medunit lid. Certainly not how to program the unit to keep him alive until Witherspoon got back, in two days time.

Appleby groaned as pain lanced through his brain, leaving him weak and trembling. The alien whined and, startled, he almost forgot his pain. She had never made a sound before.

She looked at him, and at the lock. Back at him again. He laughed, and it was half a sob.

"Why not?" he said recklessly. "Why bloody not? Where ya gonna go? Christmas, after all. Christmas," he repeated, levering himself to his feet.

The lock control was infinitely far away. He staggered towards it, whimpering in pain as he lost his balance and slammed into the wall. His brain was on fire, every movement was an agony. Darkness ate at the edges of his vision. The alien was pressed up against the glass, watching as he made his painful way to the lock — and keyed it. Appleby sighed, and let the darkness take him.

She came out of the cell in a blur of motion, somersaulting over Appleby's limp form in the doorway to stand crouched, eyes blazing and claws extended. Her head lifted, nostrils flared as she tested the air, ears flicking rapidly back and forth. The ship was empty, but for herself and the man. Reassured, she ignored the strange noises the computer was making. *Mus-ic*, the man had called it. Harmless.

She looked down at the man at her feet. His breathing had become very unsteady, and his lips were blue. A thin trickle of blood leaked from his nose, forming a small puddle on the floor. She was no expert on humans, as they called themselves, but she could tell he was mortally ill, could feel his life slipping away. She paused. What was the life of a human to a K'tarri? Better send for help before the others returned. With a last glance at the unconscious man, she set out for the bridge.

*

Appleby woke, slightly surprised to find himself still alive. Painfully, he dragged himself into a sitting position against the bulkhead, trying unsuccessfully to staunch the flow of blood. He leaned his head against the cool metal, gathering his strength. The alien was gone, probably rifling the ship for weapons. Slowly, he began to crawl towards the Sickbay. At least the carols had stopped.

She came swiftly along the corridor, following the blood-trail distastefully. She had never hunted helpless quarry before, but this was necessary. Her people were coming, and she had very little time left. The dying man had not travelled far when she caught up to him.

*

It was Witherspoon who found him. The alien had not been as careful as she had thought; the ship had managed to send out a distress call before she cut the link. The K'tarri scoutship that came for her was only beginning to accelerate away as the hastily scrambled flight of combat ships arrived. The K'tarri had a slight lead, though,

and had escaped by a narrow margin.

It was pitifully easy to piece together what had happened. The blood trail led along the corridor from the holding cell, to where she had caught up with Appleby. There were the smudges of a struggle, and then of a large object being dragged along the corridor to the Sickbay.

Witherspoon stared, appalled at the destruction. She had somehow gotten Appleby's body into the Medunit, but then must have gone mad. The access panel to the controls had been ripped loose, and coils of wiring lay everywhere, spliced together seemingly haphazardly. Two other units had been similarly vandalized, and bits and pieces of their circuitry had been added to the unit where Appleby lay. Above him, data flashed across the screen too fast to be identified.

On the control console, lights blinked red in warning that a program was running; as Witherspoon stared in disbelief, they altered to yellow, then green. Program complete. The transparent lid hissed open, as Appleby stirred, and sat up. He stared at the destruction around him and the grim figures in the doorway, and tried a weak smile. His head hurt.

The headache, Witherspoon told him a short while later, was due to an overindulgence in Fletcher's potent brew. Not to anything else. Certainly not due to the tumor, which had been neatly excised. Not a trace remained of the malignant growth that had been killing him; in the cannibalized Medunit was the program that had cured him.

"My God," Witherspoon said in awe, afterwards. "She saved your life. Did it all in less than an hour — rewired and reprogrammed the Medunit. The computer was still recording, and it shows that she delayed their departure until she had finished."

But that wasn't all. As the K'tarri had left, she had turned, there at the hatch, and stared into the camera pickup as the others made frantic motions for her to leave. Her mouth open in that soundless grin, she raised one slim hand, and spoke for the first — and last — time:

"Mer-ry Christ-mas, Apple-by," she said. ☩

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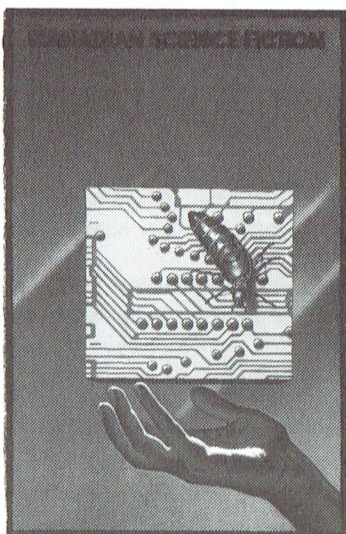
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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

CATHERINE GIRCZYC is an Alberta writer of poetry, plays, filmscripts and prose. Her current projects are a script commissioned by the CBC Radio series *Vanishing Point*, and a play for the ConText '91 science fiction convention in Edmonton.

BETH GOOBIE, an Edmonton poet who works with emotionally disturbed children, won the 1990 *Edmonton Journal* Literary Award for best short story.

SANDRA HUNTER grew up in Victoria and now lives on the mainland. She is raising a family, works part-time for a veterinarian and tends to pine for the tang of salt air. This is her first published short story.

SUSAN MACGREGOR resides in Edmonton with a vegetarian and two male dwarves. She works for the University of Alberta and writes between bouts of household chaos. This is her first published short story.

ALICE MAJOR won the Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism 4th Write for Youth Competition for her fantasy novel, *The Chinese Mirror*. She has also published poetry and short stories.

CHERYL MERKEL is an Edmonton registered nurse and pilot who is currently in the process of applying to become an air traffic controller. This is her first published short story and she is very happy about it.

ANNA MIODUCHOWSKA lives in Edmonton where she is on the Editorial Board of *Other Voices* magazine. Her work has appeared in *Canadian Women's Studies* and *Secrets from the Orange Couch*.

SANDY ROBERTSON is an Ontarian writer presently on the move between cities. This story is her second submission and her first sale — her first submission won a prize in a literary competition.

BRUCE TAYLOR lives in Seattle, Wa. where he whiles away his time writing magic realism. He has been nominated for the Bram Stoker and Nebula Awards and was writer-in-residence at Shakespeare and Co. in Paris, France in 1986.

EDO VAN BELKOM lives in Brampton, Ontario. This is his fifth short story sale in the last few months.

ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

ROB ALEXANDER is making the "Artist's Pilgrimage" to New York publishers this fall. He won Honourable Mention in black and white at the 1989 World Fantasy Convention in Seattle.

RICHARD BARTROP, who lives in Calgary, has exhibited work at the "Realms Beyond" show at Art Channels, and at numerous Alberta science fiction conventions.

CATHERINE BUBURUZ, the fiction/poetry editor of *Champagne Horror* magazine, lives in Regina.

NADRA CHAPMAN is a freelance artist in Toronto. This is her first published illustration in an SF magazine.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has exhibited her work at Framebrant Gallery and the Edmonton Fringe Festival. She has recently been trying her hand at colour work again, as evidenced by our front cover.

TIM HAMMELL, who should need no introduction to *ON SPEC* readers, is our art director. His artwork has been displayed at many northwest SF conventions.

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN, one of our faithful regulars from Calgary, is currently working on the comic *Timedrifter*.


NANCY NILES, a Calgary resident, aims to break into comics. This is her third appearance in *ON SPEC*.

DOMENIC PIRONE of Toronto is another first-time *ON SPEC* artist. A newcomer to the SF market, he is currently working on a comic.

DORY A. RIKKONEN works in the ad department of a Calgary retail store and has displayed her art at several ConVersion conventions. This is her first illustration for *ON SPEC*. ☛



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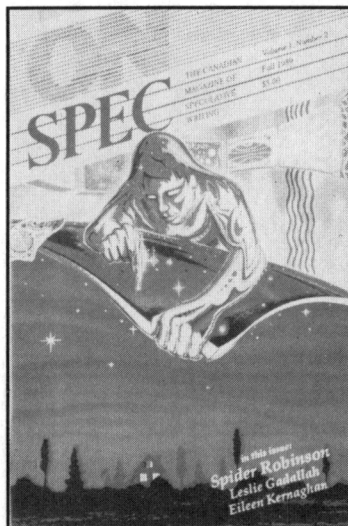
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