

SPEC

THE CANADIAN
MAGAZINE OF
SPECULATIVE
WRITING

Volume 3 Number 2
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EDITORIAL

by Marianne O. Nielsen and Hazel Sangster

You've probably heard the news by now, but we think it's worth repeating: the Copper Pig Society and *ON SPEC* magazine won its second Aurora/Casper Award at Context '91 in June. Thank you for voting for us and for **James Alan Gardner's** "Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large" (*ON SPEC* Vol. 2 #1) which won Best Short Story, and for **Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk** for Best Artist for her cover of *ON SPEC* Vol. 2 #2. We are very proud. Congratulations to the other Aurora winners as well: **Guy Gavriel Kay**, Best Long Form Work in English, for *Tigana*; **Élisabeth Vonarburg**, Best Long Form Work in French, for *Histoire de la Princesse et du Dragon* and for Best Short Work in French, "Ici, des tigres," in *Le Sabord 25*; **Les Compagnons a temps perdu**, Best Work in French (Other), for *Solaris*; **Catherine Girczyc**, Fan Achievement (Fanzine), for *Neology*; **Dave Panchyk**, Fan Achievement (Organizational), for his activities as president of the Saskatchewan Speculative Fiction Society and chair of Combine 0 convention; and to **Al Betz**, Fan Achievement (Other), for his "Ask Mr. Science" column in Vancouver's *BCSFazine*.

Now — as promised last issue — grab your tickets, get a good seat and welcome to the inner workings of *ON SPEC*!

ON SPEC operates with a basic editorial crew of 7 to 8 people, all volunteers — except our Administrative "Jackel of all trades," who gets paid as long as the grants hold out. Cath Jackel, who fills this position with patience and creativity, is the first point of contact with the magazine. She handles all routine inquiries, subscription requests, and general office duties.

This includes processing all the stories and poetry. Cath sends acknowledgement cards when your manuscript arrives and ensures that all submissions are in contest format (name and address on the cover page only). We don't want your name to prejudice the First Readers or Editorial Advisory Board. This means, however, that sometimes she must do violence to your manuscript. We are assuming that you would rather have your story violated and read, than have it returned clean and unread. (Of course, if you obtained our submission guidelines before you sent your manuscript to us, you already knew all this.) Cath also returns stories that, for whatever reason, do not meet our requirements.

The remainder of the stories go to our First Readers. There are usually five First Readers (not exactly the same people every time, to ensure a wide range of tastes is represented) who go through the up to 250 stories and

poems that we receive for each issue. They rate the stories and poems and make comments on each one. The top-rated 15 to 20 stories and 5 to 10 poems go to the Editorial Advisory Board, who again rate them and make constructive comments. These scores are averaged and the top 5 to 7 stories and 3 or more poems are published.

The General Editor then sends out the "Thank you very much for letting us see your story, but. . ." letters, which, whenever possible, contain a compilation of constructive comments made by the First Readers and/or the Editorial Advisory Board, depending on which stage of the process the story reaches. Because we are getting more and more stories, we no longer have time to write comments on all the submissions we receive.

Since we have only 84 pages to work with, the length of the submissions is a vital consideration. Much of our operating income comes from advertisements, so we must leave room for these, as well as for "house" information (bios, editorial, etc.). Cath and the occasional other editorial staff member line up the advertisements.

The Art Director assigns the art to artists who have previously submitted samples of their work. Specific story illustrations are assigned after the final story and poetry selection is made. The cover art has been commissioned earlier in the process, and is prepared for printing by the Art Director.

The stories are typed by various Editorial staff members and then sent by modem or disk to our Production Editor, who does the typesetting, copy editing and layout. More volunteers are brought in to proofread. After the copies arrive from the printer, subscriber, advertiser, contributor and bookstore copies are mailed out by Cath. Promotional work is done by the General Editor, the Managing Editor, Cath and any other Editorial staff member who sees an opportunity and grabs it. Then we party.

From beginning to end, this cooperative effort takes about 5 months for each issue. To shorten your wait, the best bet is to submit your story or poetry right before the deadline. Finally, it should be noted that all along the way there are people who chip in and help out — they are partners, friends, children, neighbours, readers, contributors, and individuals who just seem to think that what we're doing is neat or — *gasp* — worthwhile. Every time this happens the job becomes a little easier and more joyful to do. It's a great feeling to know that people really want this magazine to succeed, and that this is expressed not just with nice words but by expenditures of energy and money. ♪

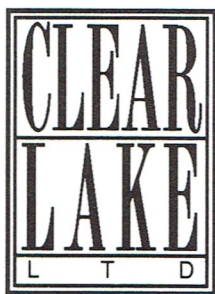
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PUBLISHER

Copper Pig Writers' Society

GENERAL EDITOR

Marianne O. Nielsen

MANAGING EDITOR

Hazel Sangster

ART DIRECTOR

Tim Hammell

PRODUCTION EDITOR

Jena Snyder

ADMINISTRATION

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"Writer's Guidelines" for *Tesseract* are available upon request from the Beach Holme address above.



Water

by Keith Scott

illustrated by Catherine Luce

Rob knew he should be relaxing now, enjoying the rolling Dakota hills dappled with shadows thrown by late afternoon clouds, the scorched-metal smell of the day backing off in his nostrils. He should be enjoying the first hint of evening cool, relishing the open sky of the canal section; they would reach the tunnel under the Colthart Range soon enough, and that would bring a claustrophobic run of six kilometres.

He stirred uneasily at the controls of the submersible. It had started when they crossed the international line at noon. Rana had the point and Doc was dragging along sulkily in the rear. Rob watched the two uniformed men in the border guardhouse as he brought the S-19 into the slip. Both men moved unsmiling out onto the dock and stood with their hands by their sides, neither offering any help with his lines. Rob was more surprised than angry, but he said nothing as Rana circled back and took the stern line in her teeth and flipped it over the dock bollard.

"Pretty smart fish he's got there, eh Charlie?" the beefy one in state-trooper brown commented with a hard laugh. Rob couldn't read a trace of friendliness in the trooper's laugh. He turned to Charlie, who wore the green uniform of the U.S. Border Patrol. Rob noticed with some relief that

Charlie was beginning to look a little embarrassed.

"Rob Childers," he began, "Canada Water Authority. Under the regulations, I'd like permission—"

"Shee . . . it!" The trooper spat into the water at Rob's elbow. "Spare us the regulations crap, Canutski. You and your fish just want to snoop around—"

"Leave it right there, Emon," Charlie broke in. "Right or wrong, he's got the power."

"Yeah . . . yeah! If you say so, Charlie," the cop said and stepped back, hitching the Colt Auto 60 forward on his broad hip.

Touching the gun had been a mistake. Cruising past, Doc reacted instantly and side-slammed the surface of the water with his tail fluke, lifting a solid wall of water onto the dock. It nearly swept the state trooper off his feet.

The Colt was starting to slide out of its holster as Rob leapt onto the dock and stood before the dripping cop. He had moved without thinking, but as the gun raised and centred on his middle, his thinking caught up with him. Why was he standing in front of this psycho's gun? More to the point, why was he still not moving?

"Move aside, Canutski," the trooper hissed. "I'm gonna get me a goddam fish."

Rob remained unwillingly rooted to the spot. "I'm sorry," he said, "he doesn't seem to like guns. . ."

"I said *move*."

The moment stretched endlessly, unbearably.

"Knock it off, Emon!" Charlie finally ordered from beside them. "You're messing in my jurisdiction here."

There was a long beat before the Colt slid back into its holster, even longer before Rob managed his first full breath. He listened as the trooper blustered about an assault charge and a full ten minutes of tense talk passed before Rob and his two dolphins were allowed to clear the border station.

Back in the open cut of the canal, Rob eased the five metre mini-sub up to 11 knots as he replayed the incident in his mind.

Right or wrong, the border patrol officer had said. Had things reached that point? Where did they get this feeling of being wronged? Or was it just wounded pride talking? Pride about taking water hand-outs from Canada?

Rob shook his head. Seven years of unrelieved drought did more than just wound pride. Maybe the last-minute decision to get out from behind his desk and take this patrol had been the right one.

But what did he say to Doc? He keyed the toggle for the Lilly Transpeak and spoke into the throat mike of his wet suit.

"I know why you did it, Doc. But perhaps you better wait for me to call the shots," he said. "D'you know what I mean?"

There was the briefest pause as the miracle transpeak box in the S-19 performed the underwater transfer to Delphinese, and then brought Doc's answer back to him, via the same medium, in English. Transliteration of the two communication modes through transpeak had been a magnificent forward leap, Rob told himself for the thousandth time.

"That cop was a puke, Rob," the big sea dolphin said from his position behind the submersible. Rob smiled at Doc's easy grasp of casual idiom.

"The point is that we are not here to make judgement calls on the pukiness of the local population," Rana commented primly from her position up ahead.

"Aw, come on Rana. You been on my back for two days," Doc complained. Abruptly, he switched into full-flight Delphinese, rapid bursts of information, constructs, sensory images that defeated the capability of the transpeak box and human comprehension. But fragments came through. Enough to confirm Rob's suspicion that had been nagging at him since they left base two days before.

Doc and Rana had had a falling out.

Damn! Why hadn't he been on to this? It could complicate a patrol which was already complicated enough.

"I wonder, ah . . . wouldn't it be better all around if we tried to forget everything but our patrol?" Rob interrupted. There was a loud sound from Doc that could only be classified as derisive.

"I'm willing, Rob," Rana said sweetly.

"Thanks, Rana," Rob said.

Still, he worried about Doc. This was only Doc's second patrol. Most of the Authority's volunteers were coastal bottlenose, like Rana, smaller, more subdued in colour and temperament, more used to humans since the communications breakthrough four years earlier.

Rob had learned not to question the motives nor the fierce individuality of his recruits from the sea, but he'd been intensely curious about Doc from the day he'd shown up three months ago. Why had he come?

He watched Rana slicing effortlessly through the water ahead of the S-19 without a splash, breaking surface for air twice each minute. She was young, five or six, about seven feet long, seven hundred pounds in weight, due to enter her first period of estrus soon. Rana was related to most of the dolphins in the squadron and Rob rated her as his best *delphinidae* volunteer in the group. His work with her alone had justified his move from the University of British Columbia to the Authority. . .

Abruptly, Rob pulled his full attention back to his surroundings. The

Colthart Tunnel loomed ahead and he busied himself with buttoning down the submersible, deploying the breathing stations on both sides for the dolphins . . . and then, they dropped into the tunnel with terrifying suddenness. Rob cursed his slowness as he fumbled toggles for the running lights and the overhead 360 degree flood, and finally concentrated on centering and holding the sub in the middle of the tunnel.

The concrete circle of the tunnel wall, fourteen metres in diameter, reflected the light eerily back to him through the bubble of the submersible's perspex top. He could hear the soft clicking of the dolphins as they switched to echo-location. Doc manoeuvred into the port breather station and pressed his blow hole into the air bell.

"How much of this have we got?" he asked.

Rob grinned as he recognized traces of concern in the big fellow's mind. "Little under half an hour, Doc," he answered. "Unless you guys want me to crank it up another knot or two?"

"I'm for that," Rana spoke from somewhere up front.

Rob edged the throttle forward. He punched in the change on the computer keyboard and read the answer. "Okay, troops. Factoring in the flow speed of the water, Smartass now says we clear in 23.4 minutes."

"Piss on Smartass, I say," Doc grumped from his breather station and then flicked away in the gloom of the tunnel. Rob's smile faded from his face. He knew the dolphins were more edgy about the miles of tunnel than he. At a stretch, they could go for five or six minutes between breaths, but putting their total reliance on artificial methods of air supply severely strained delphinid faith and logic.

It was a logic that never failed to move Rob to awe. Early in his career as a cetologist, when preliminary studies began to discover the outline of another mind on the planet, Rob knew how he'd spend the rest of his life.

It was a decision that had carried the price of complete absorption.

Witness the fact that he was here, Rob mused. Right here, at this particular moment in his 31 years . . . under a Dakota mountain. Riding a toy submarine in 20,000 cubic feet per second of diverted Canadian water. The Assiniboine-Souris trunk, smallest of four diversion systems, all built in the parched 1990's, barely sustaining an unbelieving and unaccepting U.S. Midwest. How could this dare happen to them?

"Because nobody would open their goddamn eyes," Rob answered aloud.

His attention was snapped back as the S-19 cleared the tunnel. Right on the 23.4 minute mark, Rob noted with satisfaction. He smiled as Rana, and then Doc leapt clear of the water in exuberant spins of relief.

Rob searched ahead for their next objective.

Stanhope lay on the southern side of the Colthart Range. Before the start of the main drought in 1997, it had been the centre of the grain belt, prosperous and rapidly growing, solidly Republican. The drought had reduced the town of 25,000 to an economic basket case.

Street lights were starting to come on as Rob eased the S-19 into the forebay of the Stanhope reservoir. This time, several youngsters eagerly competed with one another to catch his mooring lines. About two hundred people were congregated on the grassy berms around the reservoir, many seated on folding chairs in the backs of pick-up trucks, others sprawled on the dry brown grass or on blankets.

Rob quickly rigged the amplification gear and side mikes for the audience as Doc and Rana entertained the horde of kids at the dock. The Authority's dolphin demonstrations had been getting a mixed reception from all but the young. The kids seemed little concerned about the policing role of the visitors from the sea.

"My God," a girl squealed, "she feels just like a wet inner tube!"

"That's right," Rob agreed over the P.A. "And you're patting just about one of the most perfect life forms this world has developed. Thirty million years ago, Rana and Doc's ancestors went back into the sea while our ancestors stayed on land."

Rana and Doc circled the forebay at high speed, bringing a chorus of exclamations from the onlookers. "This species of dolphin . . . *Tursiops Truncatus*, to give it its right name, can reach speeds of 40 kilometres an hour," Rob explained. "But are there any questions?"

A tall, serious-faced girl approached one of the microphones. "Don't dolphins live only in salt water?"

"I'll answer that," Doc spoke through the transpeak vocalizer. There was a gasp of surprise from the audience. "Rob sprays us with a special gel of ethylene oxide twice a day. If not, we'd break out in skin infections from this water."

"But why are you doing this?" a young woman with a tow-headed child on her hip asked.

"The Dolphin Families offer services to any country that bans driftnet fish catches from their dinner tables," Rana answered. "That's a life or death decision for us—"

"What's that got to do with our being short of water?" a middle-aged farmer stopped her. "There's oceans of water we could use to the north of us."

Here it comes, Rob thought. He had hoped to avoid any political questions. He was moving toward his mike when Doc beat him to the punch.

"Why do you always think of *using* water?" Doc asked. "Why not think

of *living with water*? Like we do."

"Because I'm not a fish," the farmer shot back. Applause and boos were about evenly mixed, Rob judged. No matter, there had been enough of this. He spoke up quickly, making the point that *greenhousing* wasn't confined to the Dakotas. Parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan were also hard hit by the warming trend. This water was also needed at home. But with conservation. . .

Again there was a mixed reaction. Rob decided not to push it any farther. He announced the demonstration.

Rana and Doc put on a spectacular show of leaps and jumps, somersaults in unison, graceful twists and spirals, high speed tailchases around the edge of the forebay.

Rob watched in fascination. Rana and Doc, or any other team, had seldom reached this level, shown this excitement. They must have patched up their differences, he told himself with relief, wondering as always at the complexity of dolphin behaviour.

Their last maneuver was a magnificent leap at the west end of the pool, highlighted against the golden-red horizon of the set sun. It was a stall turn in formation, Rana gracefully matching the arc cut above her by the more powerful Doc, twenty feet above the surface of the water. At the turn point where all upward motion stopped and just before gravity pulled them back down to the water, they were frozen in a moment of pure and transcending harmony.

A muffled crack brought Rob back to earth, the sound coming from the outer fringe of pickup trucks on his left. A few heads turned with Rob's, but there was nothing to see except a pickup pulling across the grass for the reservoir road. Rob dismissed it as a backfire from an early leaver.

He swung his eyes back to the forebay as Rana and Doc knifed back into the water. Then Rob made his closing remarks to the crowd and people began to leave.

Rana came into the dock area to bid goodbye to an eager knot of young well-wishers. Doc circled around in the middle of the forebay.

"We've got a problem, Rob," he said on the closed circuit channel. "Some yahoo just took a shot at me."

Rob's heart raced. "I thought I heard something," he said into his throat mike. "Did he get you, Doc?"

"You better get the antibiotic paste out. Rana says he put a hole through my dorsal."

*

Rob noticed that his companions were quieter than usual after the evening chores were done. Doc's wound was not a worry. The rifle bullet

had passed cleanly through the outer fan of his dorsal fin. Rob had made a quick report to District at Winnipeg, and now was waiting for instructions.

He hadn't long to wait.

"Okay, Rob," Steve Dortch, his assistant, called from District on the scrambled channel. "I think I've got some answers for you."

"Sorry to push the overtime on you, Steve."

"I'm not forgetting, boss," Steve laughed, and then sobered. "We got the makings of a first class brouhaha here, Rob. One of the Dakota newspapers ran a major story today about how Canada is welshing on the continental sharing of resources. They go back, in a very selective way, to the free trade deal at the beginning of '89. They even hint darkly about direct action being forced upon them—"

"What the hell do they think we're doing with our four diversion systems? Water supplied at cost, to boot?"

"Not enough. We're supposed to be drowning in the stuff up here," Steve sighed. "We can't get much out of Ottawa. It seems The Man is overseas. . . francophone summit in Dakar. And, as you know, the Environment Minister is new. . ."

"I thought she was gutsy."

"Remains to be seen. Anyway, I'll be back to you in the morning, Rob. Still glad you did me out of taking this patrol?"

"Frankly, no, Steve."

Steve laughed. "Sweet dreams, boss." He clicked off.

Rob's attention was drawn back to the forebay. The dolphins were slowly circling in the water, Doc gently nudging Rana's flank. Rob watched for a moment; then, curious, he switched on the sonar. Doc was emitting a series of pulsed yelps followed by a *coda*, the series of clicks that is known as the dolphin's song. Rana was silent and kept easing away from his gentle nudging. Rob keyed the transpeak and a torrent of word images poured into his ears, the vocalizer trying to give meaning to the richness of Doc's courtship ritual. Once more, the transpeak was unequal to the task, unable to keep pace with the speed of dolphin communication.

Rana began her ululating response. Feeling like an eavesdropper, Rob broke contact. Now he knew why Doc had come in from the deep.

How had D.H. Lawrence put it?

They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains

The hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent. . .

Rob had trouble getting to sleep. The uninhibited actions and sounds in the pool turned his mind to a bleak evaluation of his own situation. He

realized with a jolt that he knew Rana better than he knew any human female.

*

They pulled away from Stanhope early in the morning. Steve Dortch got back to them from Winnipeg before they left. The Director, he told them, was pressuring Ottawa to cool the rhetoric in the U.S. press with some plain talk about continental water . . . facts, figures, agreements, above all, ownership. All it needed was facts. Maybe?

In the meantime, Steve continued, if Rana and Doc were agreeable, go on with the patrol. Try and come up with an answer to the shortfall. But be careful!

Rob checked it out with the dolphins.

"Hey," Doc answered, "I'm mad enough to want some answers."

Rana agreed. As they rejoined the canal, Rob thought about the shortfall. For about a year now, there had been unexplainable variations in water delivery at the end of the Assiniboine-Souris trunk. At first, it was thought to be the result of heavier evaporation than anticipated, varying with the vagaries of the weather. But computer studies had uncovered another possibility.

Somebody might want it to look like evaporation.

Rob reviewed what lay ahead. Coming up almost immediately was another tunnel run of 2.5 km under the Watanabe industrial complex, a giant petro-chemical producer. Watanabe was the crown jewel in a conglomerate with a marked interest in the bottom line.

Rob could see the cracking towers and the tank farm of the plant ahead of them. Doc and Rana were together about 100 metres in front of the submersible when they passed the off-take gate structure for the plant. Watanabe was a major user of domestic and imported water, and a constant applicant for higher allocation. These applications were always supported by intense political pressure and lobbying.

"Okay, guys," Rob called on the scrambled channel, "we're going under."

"Got you, Rob," Doc answered. "I'll take the right side, Rana. You do the left?"

"Right, Romeo."

Rob laughed at Rana's sly humour. He never got over their capacity for humour and their general zest for living. Still smiling, he punched a request for flow data into Smartass. After the draw for the first four small branches, the Stanhope reservoir, and now Watanabe, there should remain 12,250 cfs of the original 20,000 cfs that crossed the border. . .

"Somebody just turned off a tap up ahead, Rob," Doc interrupted.

Rob's stomach tightened. He knew better than to question the ability of the dolphins to pick up even the slightest variation. But?

"I got it too, Rob," Rana confirmed.

"Okay. We go to Code Two, troops," Rob decided. He backed off the throttle setting and set the computer for autopilot.

They were nearing the halfway point when Rana called quietly from ahead. Rob put the S-19 into reverse and turned it over to Smartass to hold the mini-sub stationary against the current. He swung the powerful spot beam until he picked up Rana, her tail flukes pumping gently to maintain her position on the left wall.

"What have you got, Rana?"

"It's a hatch," Rana answered on the scrambler, "beautifully cut into the concrete. I can only pick it up on echo."

Rana swung away from the wall to her breather station on the side of the S-19. Doc took her place at the centre of the left wall.

"Whoeee! Laser cut," he exclaimed. "Circular. . . about a metre."

"That would fit the shortfall we been getting," Rob said. "Right. Let's go through the drill."

He took the con back from Smartass and eased the S-19 past the hidden hatch and up to the left wall of the tunnel. Rob extended the limpet arms, fore and aft, gripping the concrete and holding the submersible firmly a metre and a half from the wall. Both dolphins were at their breather stations taking great lungfuls of air to build up the oxygen level in their blood.

Rob's nerve ends were tingling as he automatically went through his steps in the drill.

He detached the sono-buoy. "I'll shut down now, Doc," he said. "Just take it down far enough to see that it's going to float with the current, free of the walls."

Rob shut down the S-19's tritium propulsor just as he activated the sono-buoy. Doc picked up the buoy in his mouth and swam downstream as Rob sat quietly in the now silent submersible. *Hope we didn't waste too much time*, he worried. They might just be fooled. And it would be much better to catch them in the act.

He unhooked the camera and slipped its strap over his left wrist.

"Rob!" Rana's voice behind him was urgent. Rob turned and watched the circle of the hatch open slowly from its snug fit into the concrete tunnel wall. A powerful hydraulic ram, connected to the steel backing of the hatch, was forcing it out into the flow of water.

Rob allowed himself a small moment of exultation. The decoy sound of the sono-buoy floating down the tunnel had fooled them, convinced them that the S-19 was proceeding on its patrol!

He shrugged into the backpack holding his air tanks and cracked the bubble top of the submersible, waiting for the rush of water to flood the cockpit before he slid the top back fully. Then he swam out to join Rana.

Rob peered into the hatch, now fully open. The inside end of the hydraulic arm was attached to the steel wall of a short circular section leading into a larger, squared chamber beyond. Rob couldn't see more than four or five metres into the surreptitious offtake. He backed off and took two quick pictures.

"Want me to go in?" Rana asked.

Rob considered it. He didn't like confined spaces. Scared hell out of him, to be truthful.

But he said, "No, I got the air. And I'll need more pictures."

He let the water flow suck him into the opening, hanging onto the hatch first, and then the hydraulic arm. *They must control the draw with a gate up ahead*, he told himself. *Not much being tapped now, but it could bleed off as much as 1400 cfs with a fully opened gate. Bastards!*

"Can't see much," he called back to Rana. Gratefully, he spotted hand loops welded into the walls and started to ease his way into the main chamber. His light revealed a run of five metres to a set of screens at the far end. *To stop debris?* he wondered.

Rob was taking another picture when a grating sound penetrated his ear pads. He rotated his head lamp around the chamber, but saw nothing. When the sound continued, he swung back to the screens, and was startled to see that they were slowly racking up.

"Hey, I don't like this. . ." he began.

"Pull out, Rob!" Rana yelled. "I'm getting something in there."

Rob thought he saw movement behind the screens. He reached in panic for the first handhold, keeping his eyes on the screens. They were more than a quarter open now, and Rob was horrified to see a long grey shape trying to squeeze under them.

Dear God! It was a shark!

And it was through now, facing him at the end of the chamber, with hunched back, lowered pectorals. . . the classic attack posture. He took another picture, wondering at the calmness that belied his racing emotions.

Rob was back at the mouth of the short circular section leading to the hatch. He knew the first handhold was a full metre within it. If he lunged for it, his legs would stream out into the larger chamber, inviting almost certain attack.

Rob chose inaction. It sometimes worked. He watched the shark sweep its high raked tail powerfully from side to side, holding its position against the current. Bull shark, Rob automatically catalogued it, *Carcharhinus*

Leucas, the fresh water killer. . . Amazon and Ganges.

With a wild threshing of its tail, the shark rushed at him. Feeding on pure terror, Rob reached for the first handhold. He caught it and frantically drew himself into the minimal safety of the tunnel.

Momentarily balked, the bull shark remained stationary at the end of the tunnel. Rob slipped out of his back pack and held it as a shield between himself and the chisel-headed teeth a scant two metres from him.

Suddenly the shark whipped into retreat, diving under the screens at the far end of the chamber. Rana stormed in and took up a defensive position in front of Rob. Faced by its ancient enemy, the shark disappeared into the gloom behind the screens.

"Jeez! Am I glad to see you. . ." Rob stopped. There was a change in the water. A drop in the pull of it on his body. Something was changing. He swung his head lamp to the tunnel entrance. The hatch was half closed!

"Hey. . . the damn thing's closing!" he shouted to Rana.

Everything seemed to go into slow motion, his hand, achingly heavy, reaching for the next handhold, the steady inexorable movement of the closing hatch. Could he make it? Would he. . . ?

Rana decided it for him. She slammed into him from behind and Rob jettted explosively out into the main tunnel, losing his hold on the backpack, the flexible breather hose pulling wildly against his teeth. Rob regained the pack, settled it on his shoulders and turned back to the hatch. *Oh God, no!*

Rana was wedged firmly in the opening. It had not been wide enough to let her through. All of her body below the dorsal fin remained trapped within the contraband tunnel.

Rob moved to her quickly and cupped the breather with his hands over her blow hole. He knew from the explosive intake that Rana had been at her outer limit. Refreshed by the oxygen, she struggled to free herself. Rob joined the effort, grabbing the edge of the hatch with both hands and pulling with all of his strength. Despite their joined efforts, it wouldn't budge.

Rana suddenly stiffened, "It's back!"

At first Rob didn't know what she meant, then he saw the crimson stain, spreading in the water before it was sucked back into the hatch opening. The bull shark! It was attacking Rana!

He was sobbing as he redoubled his effort. Who would do this? What kind of mentality. . . ? And then he was bumped aside in a swirling froth of water.

"Get out of the way!" Doc snarled. Rob watched as the big dolphin took a run at the partly open hatch. The contact of solid dolphin and even more solid concrete and steel rang sharply through the water. But the portal still held Rana firmly in its clasp.

Doc circled at high speed, a trail of blood from a gash on his nose following him. He was at high speed when he hit the hatch this time. There was a sharp double crack like closely spaced rifle shots as the heads of the mooring bolts sheared off the hydraulic arm.

Rob moved in to catch Rana, placing the breather over her blow hole once again. He didn't want to look, but he knew he must. There was a great, frayed cavity, just in front of the vaginal slit, from which blood was jetting in pulses. A foot of intestine waved grotesquely in the current.

Doc helped him maneuver Rana into the starboard breathing station. Doc didn't say a word and Rob wisely held his tongue. He could see the two great gashes on Doc's nose and head. Rob gingerly tucked the exposed intestine back into Rana's wound cavity and cinched up the carrying straps tightly, hoping to stop most of her bleeding.

"Let's go," he yelled. "We've got to get help."

Doc didn't answer. He swung away and plunged into the illicit tunnel, its hatch hanging crookedly wide open. Cursing steadily as he clambered into the cockpit, Rob slid the bubble top forward and dogged it shut. The tritium engine whirled into life and the water in the cockpit began to recede around him. Rob powered the 360 degree light up to full strength.

He was startled by a scream of terror in his headphones. A grey shape flashed by the submersible, followed by an even faster blue shape. Blue overtook grey and the shark was turned back into the pool of light from the S-19.

"We got to go, Doc!" Rob yelled, knowing he would still get no answer, yet understanding the cold fury of the big bottlenose. Rob pressed the port thruster button and eased the mini-sub away from the tunnel wall into the centre of the stream. The shark was startled by the appearance of the S-19, startled enough to pause momentarily.

The nose of the dolphin caught the shark full force in its soft underbelly, instantly rupturing liver and intestines. Rob spat out his breather mouthpiece and vomited into the receding water still hip-height in the cockpit.

The next rush was a driving rip into the right gill cover. Doc kept it up methodically, coldly, until the corpse was hardly recognizable as the most dangerous of tropical sharks.

Rob cracked on as much throttle as he dared and the submersible knifed down the centre of the tunnel. He knew that Doc had rejoined them. He could hear his rapid *coda* and Rana's faint answer. Savagely, Rob put out an all-channels message, demanding veterinarian attention and immediate action on all counts by the authorities. He knew that his message would be received.

But what action would be taken?

*

Rob's doubts were well founded. They were met at the tunnel mouth by a knot of worried but non-committal officials. The old dictum of say nothing, admit nothing seemed to be in effect.

Fortunately, a young and visibly-upset veterinarian arrived a few minutes later and she and Rob worked feverishly to save Rana. Rob was embarrassed by the streaks of vomit on his wet suit, and he stopped to wash them off.

"You're Robert Childers, aren't you?" the vet asked. Rob nodded. "And this is Rana?"

Rob nodded again.

"I've read all your papers on her," she said. "God damn. . . !" She was silent for a moment. "Look. I heard rumours. . . I didn't really believe them, because I didn't believe that grown men could be so childish. But the word was that they'd get even. They'd bring in something from the sea, too. Macho stupidity, I guess."

There were a few minutes when they dared to hope. Rana seemed to rally, started to breathe more evenly. Was it really hopeful or was it another example of dolphin "knowing"? When Doc started keening from the middle of the canal, Rob knew what it meant. Part lament, part rejoicing . . . the song of the final deep is profoundly moving, unforgettable.

Rana died half an hour later, just as a Watanabe vice-president arrived with two members of the national press.

"Is it Watanabe Chemical's practice to employ guard sharks?" the VP was asked by one of the reporters.

"Certainly not," came the answer, "and believe me, heads will roll if these allegations hold up." He stopped to let the effect of his words sink in. "But this water business and the unfair allocation system should be viewed as mitigating. . ."

Rob walked away in disgust. He stopped at the open cockpit of the S-19 to stow some of his gear. It was then that he noticed the empty camera bracket. His head swivelled back to where the battered body of the shark had been hauled ashore. Also gone! All signs of blood and gore on the bank where it had rested . . . gone!

Of course. What had the VP said? If these allegations hold up? Allegations of what?

Blind fury engulfed him. "You bloody sons-of-bitches!" he shouted. They looked at him wordlessly, warily. Finally, the VP spread his hands and began moving placatingly towards him. Rob spun on his heel and strode up the canal bank. Finally, he stopped and watched Doc cruise up

and down.

One hour later, the Director instructed Rob to return first thing in the morning. A CL-215 water bomber would meet them on the Souris river and transport Doc and Rana's body to deep sea off Vancouver Island.

"Yes, but what's going to happen about all this?" Rob demanded.

"Believe me, Rob," the Director answered quietly, "we're doing everything we can. I'm off to Ottawa in ten minutes."

In the morning, Rob bitterly pointed the bow of the S-19 northward. His depression flowed over him in suffocating waves as he looked out at Rana's body, shrouded in a plastic bag, lying strapped to the foredeck. He relived his highest moments with her. There were so many of them. He had been blessed, or cursed, by her affection, her openness, her belief . . . by her inability to dissemble.

And that brought the questions.

Could he go on with it? Could he put himself on the line for humanity again? What kind of surety would he use this time? A promised breakthrough to pre-frontal thinking and awareness? A non-self state of consciousness?

Lack of answers brought a deep misery.

With each hour, a growing crowd of spectators gathered at vantage points to see the S-19 pass through. At first, they were mostly the volubly curious, some even openly jeering, but as the long day wore on, Rob noticed a growing number of sympathizers in each gathering, followed soon by placards and the first visible signs of protest. Watanabe Chemical's story was not being bought by everyone.

Rob kept his comments terse to the growing number of media people. It had become a major news story with worldwide interest. Their passage under an interstate highway provoked the first evidence of violence, not much more than pushing and shoving, but several demonstrators ended up in the canal. Rob had to aid one of these, bringing the S-19 alongside the floundering non-swimmer. He was surprised at the lack of action on the part of Doc.

Doc chose to stay submerged whenever a crowd of viewers appeared ahead. Rob kept the transpeak open, hoping against hope that Doc would break his silence. But silence it was. After completing the lament below the Watanabe plant, Doc had not made another sound.

Finally, the border guardhouse loomed ahead. The slip where Doc's tail splash had caught the cop was empty. Rob could see several heads peering at them from the windows of the guardhouse. He didn't know what he expected, but the fact that their passing stirred not even a single wave or sign depressed him still more.

Suddenly Steve Dortch was on the radio.

"She's going to do it, Rob!" Steve was trying to keep the exaltation out of his voice. "The Director talked the Minister into shutting it off."

"I don't believe it, Steve."

"You've got an hour to reach the Souris. If you don't make it, you'll be walking instead of floating."

"How long d'you think this will last?" Rob asked.

"Probably no longer than it takes for the Prime Minister to get back from the conference in Dakar. Two days, maybe. But we're making our point this time before our usual wimpiness sets in." Steve sobered. "How's Doc?"

"I think he's listening," Rob said.

"I don't suppose it helps any, but tell him I'm so damn sorry. . ." Steve's voice trailed off, then he said his goodbyes quickly and clicked off.

Sorry? Rob shook his head. He knew what Steve had really meant. *But we are always so damn sorry.*

He looked ahead of the S-19 to where Doc cut smoothly through the surface of the canal. Rob hit the transpeak switch.

"Just tell me one thing, Doc," he said into the mike. "Do we have any chance in hell of making it? Any chance of getting our act together?"

Mocking silence was his answer. 🐦

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HORIZONS
SCIENCE FICTION

What makes

Doug Barbour, J. Brian Clarke,

Candas Jane Dorsey, Leslie Gadallah,

and Spider Robinson

LAUGH???

?

(See page 70 to find out.)

many worlds theory

by Alice Major

there is always the possibility that no
possibilities are wasted

that the world splits at every decision point
and calcifies each infinitesimal
might-be
like coral branching

you fear the coraliferous future in which
I wave goodbye
and collapse your world down to a single
man in an empty room

I promise it will not happen
make the same small decision again and again
to keep our world from branching

and only sometimes envy
the woman who is alone in a room
with an ocean view watching waves spread

she is listening to their chorale rolling boom
caesura
then susurrus of foam collapsing on sand
she is fingering a branch of coral and
she is writing
my poems

(Physics Note: The path of a quantum particle such as an electron can be described according to a mathematical function known as Schrödinger's wave function, which describes the probabilities associated with all possible routes the particle can take. Mathematicians use the phrase "collapse of the wave function" to refer to the actual path taken once the particle is observed; the need to collapse the wave function could be avoided by adopting a "many worlds theory" that posits — rather than the choice of a single path — the splitting of the universe into branches so that each different path is followed in a different universe.)

christ must have had a helluva time as a kid

by J. Nelson

yer mum's a virgin, the other students taunt.

hunched before a mirror, he squeezes blackheads
and wonders if french-kissing is a sin.
heavy-petting is right out.

bad-ass kids in the john want to be friends,
offer a cigarette, casually ask
can he turn water to wine?
while the guys sneak sips from their fathers' liquor
he's praying in his room
always being lectured by the old man.

sometimes, at night, he dreams
of cruising the boulevard in a porsche 944
a lucky dangling from his lower lip
and a top-heavy las vegas show-girl giggling
in the passenger seat, reaching up his thigh
and he wakes, gasping. he rushes his sheets
to the washing machine before his parents rise.

at school, all the atheists
treat him like he doesn't exist.

maggie dillon, the cutest girl in tenth grade
asks him to tutor — her parents are in miami —
but he says no, returns to his room.
pounding out proverbs on his smith-corona, he stops
studies his hands
imagining the holes.



Going Home

by Jena Snyder
illustrated by Jim Beveridge

Natalie piloted the sub-compact grimly, her wrists aching from keeping the rocketing Toyota on course. Of all days, this had to be the one for a storm.

Mum's birthday's always been in the middle of winter, she reminded herself. Why are you so surprised? The weather's been lousy every year now for the past twelve.

She didn't really mind the weather, even if she did grouse about it all the way to the nursing home and back, four hours each way. Hard to get even that little time off these days, with all the work she had piled up. Ah, success. RAM/Tech couldn't do without their star manager, they said. There wasn't a deal she wasn't able push through, no matter the constraints. Manufacturer complaining he didn't have enough time? *Send Natalie*, the order came down from the upper echelons. And off Natalie would go to browbeat the poor sucker into delivering, not just on time, but a day early. There wasn't anyone she couldn't deal with, and beat.

Except the doctors. Her mind swam back to the nursing home, where her mother lay swaddled and intubated and ulcerated and — amazingly — still alive. "She's improved since the last time you were here, Ms. Winslow,"

the nurse cheerily told her as she rose from her marble-topped desk. The girl always reminded Natalie of one of those Rent-a-Bimbos her ex-husband had liked so much: big Bambi eyes, bigger boobs, waist you could span with your hands, IQ to match her bust size. She had to be dating a doctor to look like that.

"She can't be 'improved,'" Natalie said flatly. "Unless the doctors have confused her with someone else."

The nurse put on her frown-face and tsk-tsked prettily. "Oh, Ms. Winslow!" she chided. Natalie resisted the urge to slap her perky little face. "Dr. Walker and Dr. McCallum have always kept right up-to-date on your mother's progress."

Don't I know it, Natalie thought tartly. The monthly statement from the nursing home detailed every doctor's visit, every change of bed linens, every diaper, every procedure.

"Follow me, Ms. Winslow." Perfectly-shaped buns twitching with every step, the nurse led Natalie down the hall to her mother's room.

Does the little chit think I don't know the way? Natalie forced herself to let her clenched jaw drop slightly, and slowed her breathing. No sense letting herself get out of hand before the visit had even begun.

But, Christ, it was hard! For years now, every time she decided she was overdue for a visit to her mother, she started to tighten up days before she climbed into the Toyota. By the time she walked up the steps of the flat, creeping ivy of a building — wings stretching out in every direction, new construction always going on to accommodate the ever-growing number of patients needing institutionalization every year — Natalie's jaws would be aching, her stomach tying itself in knots, and a migraine was always waiting to claim her the moment she folded herself back into the Toyota to go home.

"When did they install the walkway?" Natalie asked casually. They had stepped onto a moving conveyor belt that ran the length of the hall. "Last time I was here, they were still planning it."

"The walkway?" the nurse asked in surprise. Once more the frown creased her perky little forehead. "Oh, it was — ah, just a short time ago."

"A short time?" Natalie was pleased to see the girl's face do a slow flush under her careful makeup. "Let's see . . ." she mused. "Was it last year I was here? Or the year before? Could it be that long? Yes, my last year's visit was cancelled because of that exploratory McCallum ordered."

"It's very difficult," the nurse said tightly. Now Natalie could see the little wrinkles around that too-perfect mouth. "The patient and the treatment come first, of course, before scheduled visits. That's the way it's been for ages, Ms. Winslow. You know that."

"Oh, I know," Natalie quickly agreed, giving herself a mental kick. Irritating the girl would accomplish nothing, except perhaps getting her visit cut short, and that would ruin everything. Offering her most ingratiating smile, the one she usually reserved for rich, foreign clients, Natalie said, "It's just the strain. I shouldn't take it out on you, dear. Can you forgive me?"

That caught her right between the eyes. The girl blinked, confused, but flashed her beautiful teeth in an answering smile. "Of course, Ms. Winslow."

Natalie didn't think the nurse was completely taken in, but she wasn't going to waste any more energy on placating her. Not now, when they were at her mother's door. More important things demanded her concentration. Time to tighten down, flush the blood from her veins and replace it with steel. What new wonders had the doctors discovered in two years? What new machines were chugging and beeping in the room, breathing and beating and digesting for her mother?

"Here we are, Ms. Winslow — will you be wanting coffee?"

"Yes," Natalie nodded. "But no sugar in mine or Mum's." It slipped out before she could stop it. *Coffee! Christ, what were you thinking?*

The nurse raised a skeptical eyebrow, but said nothing more than, "The orderly will bring it down in about ten minutes." But just as she turned, she couldn't resist a little dart. "Maybe you should schedule yourself for some tests, Ms. Winslow, considering Anna's history of Alzheimer's."

The nurse was gone before Natalie could think of a reply. It wasn't the insult, but her use of her mother's given name, Anna, that had shaken her. The damn girl was maybe a quarter Natalie's age, a baby compared to her mother. Where did she get *Anna*? What happened to "Mrs. Barisev"? *No respect*, Natalie shook her head wearily. *They just have no respect these days.*

With that, she took a deep breath, pushed her face into what felt like it might be a smile, and put her hand on the doorplate. The disk drive whirred as it searched for her print, then — grudgingly, it seemed — the computer slipped the lock on the door and let her in.

The smell took her by surprise, as it did every time. Used to be, she remembered, when you stepped into someone's hospital room, it was like stepping right into their body; the rich, ripe odours of too-warm skin and oozing wounds and body fluids all too noticeable. There was nothing like that now, just the slightly chemical tang of artificial sea breezes or pine forests. Today it was new-mown hay, a scent that had long ago disappeared from reality. *Good thing they managed to capture it on disk before we all forgot*, Natalie thought wistfully.

She turned her attention briskly to the bedside table, putting off that first look that was always so hard. The flowers she'd ordered had been

delivered. Good. And the birthday card was there — how did the clerk do on selection? Good again, Natalie saw with relief. The colours were bold and primary, the print large and simple, “Happy Birthday, Mom.”

Damn! She’d told the clerk specifically that she wanted *Mum* on the card, not *Mom*. Not that it really mattered. All her mother saw these days was the colour of the flowers. She didn’t read anything any more. But it still bothered Natalie. *Such a simple thing*, she chafed. *If that clerk was one of my subordinates* —

The thought was snapped away abruptly as her eyes drifted, and she inadvertently caught sight of the figure in the hospital bed. Her belly and throat constricted at once, hot and painful, and her eyes blurred. Quickly she squared her shoulders and blinked, setting the smile back in place. “Hi, Mum!” she said as brightly as she could. “It’s me.” Her voice sounded like a frog’s.

Her mother’s eyes opened, but she didn’t reply. She couldn’t, of course, not with all the tubes running in and out of her nose and throat. But her eyes—! Natalie felt a rush of emotion as her mother blinked, trying to focus. *Will she know me? Will she remember?*

“It’s me,” she said softly, switching to the rich, throaty Russian she hadn’t used for over two years, since she was last at the nursing home. “It’s Natalya.”

The tiny figure on the bed gave a slight jerk of surprise, and recognition flooded her hazel eyes. She couldn’t smile with her mouth, but those eyes lit up, blazing with joy. From behind the taped-in tubes came a strangled murmur, and Natalie quickly shushed her. “I know,” she said. “You want to talk but this—” the word for *paraphernalia* had long disappeared out of her limited Russian vocabulary. She waved her hand, substituting, “—trash won’t let you. It’s all right, Mum. I’ll talk for us both.”

Did her mother even understand English any more? Probably not. The Russian was sweet on Natalie’s tongue, albeit rusty. Like the metallic water from the pump on the farm, so many years ago. Natalie couldn’t remember how long ago it had been since she’d last heard her real name. Everyone at the office called her “Natalie,” the other pronunciation too baffling for their new-world tongues. She could still remember when it was, though, that she’d heard it. When she’d brought her mother here, to this nursing home, the crown jewel of the world’s medical facilities.

It would keep her in debt for years, but it would be worth it: there was no sacrifice Natalie wouldn’t make to see her mother well. McCallum and Walker were tops in the cancer field, and their initial reports on the tumour suggested there were still treatment options open, perhaps even the possibility of a complete remission.

"Natalya, I don't like this place," her mother had said, softly, in Russian, so the doctors and receptionists wouldn't understand her. "Can't I go home?"

"Don't be silly, Mum," Natalie laughed, a little embarrassed. It must be the Alzheimer's that made her forget. "The house is up for sale, remember? And I travel too much to have you at my condo. No medical care in that part of the world, anyway. This is the best place to be, you'll see. They'll take such good care of you, you'll live to be a hundred and twenty!"

"No one should live that long," her mother said flatly. "Eighty's old enough."

If she closed her eyes, Natalie could almost — almost — remember how her mother had looked then, at eighty. Too thin, of course; the cancer was already burning through her like a grassfire. But her eyes had been as beautiful as ever, big and bright and full of intelligence. *Alive*, thought Natalie. *They'd been alive then.*

Hard to say what they were most days now, behind the gauzy plasti-skin tent. You could describe them as open, but that was about all. The recognition, there for a brief moment — *If it had been there at all*, Natalie thought sadly — had already faded. She carefully sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted the edge of the tent. Her mother appeared to be looking at something on the ceiling just beyond Natalie's shoulder.

The tumour was bigger, of course. Natalie wasn't surprised. It wasn't the first time the doctors had lied to her, saying they had the cancer in remission, the tumour was getting smaller, they weren't going to operate again. Her mother looked more like the alien flesh growing on the basal-cell mass under her arm instead of the other way around.

"Oh, Mum. . ." Natalie whispered. She knew she shouldn't touch her, that the environment under the plasti-skin was absolutely sterile, but she couldn't stop herself. She cupped her mother's skeletal cheek in the palm of her hand. "I'm here for your birthday, Mum, just like I promised," she managed to say.

For a few minutes she couldn't go on. She'd practised the speech over and over again until she could say it all without crying, but it just wasn't the same, face to face.

"I couldn't get here sooner. Every time I called they had you scheduled for more tests, more treatments. Spring, they said, or summer at the latest. But I think there's a new girl at the front desk. I just pulled out the old Barisev charm and talked her into letting me come in for your birthday." Natalie smiled fiercely as she thought of how she'd worked on the faceless voice at the other end of the line, hammering at the girl until she'd finally broken down in tears and punched the authorization into the main bank.

"How could she say no?" Natalie asked. "It's not every day a person gets to be your age."

That thought sobered her, and she fell silent again, her fingers rubbing compulsively along her mother's thin jaw. She stopped when she realized the feather-light pressure was leaving a bruise. What kind of drugs were they giving her now?

No plug-in to the terminal in the room — of course. Couldn't let the visitors go flipping through confidential data. That was better left to the doctors. Even the judges had seen the wisdom in that, fifteen years ago. Families had been overruled. Laypersons simply didn't have the ability to make informed, intelligent, unbiased decisions when it came to possible medical breakthroughs. And a tumour like Anna Barisev's was worth more than a research lab: nestled like a suckling infant by her breast, the growth was rich with information. Theses, dissertations, even books had been written on this unwanted child. Patient ANBE574526 was one of the most valuable sources of cancer study in the nursing home.

Just then the sealed door opened with a soft hiss, admitting the orderly with coffee. "Why, hello, Richard!" Natalie said in surprise. "I didn't know you were still working!"

"Have to, Ma'am, to pay for Dad's care," the orderly smiled, showing a set of perfect teeth. "Doctors pay good money for healthy parts like mine!"

His teeth, Natalie thought as he set the tray down, were the only visibly human thing left of the man. She could remember when there had been controversy about blood donors being paid; she wondered what the opponents of bucks-for-blood would say about Richard? Had they ever envisioned a son selling himself off bit by bit — organs, skin, eyes, limbs — to pay for his father's medical bills? The ultimate prostitution, perfectly legal.

The orderly rolled smoothly to the door, his wheels carrying him soundlessly across the imitation marble floor. "See ya," he waved his prosthetic fingers, and slid outside. The door hissed shut behind him and unseen pumps began their endless work of exchanging bad air for a good, clean, sterile mix of gas-and-drug soup.

Ignoring the coffee Richard had brought at her request, Natalie turned back to her mother. Pushing the sheet down, she exposed her mother's stick-like arms. Extra plastic veins, colour-coloured so the doctors could keep track of which vein went where or carried which drug, snaked out from her elbow. More tubes of plastic went directly into the tumour. These were connected to their own compact computer, presumably keeping track of changes in the mass as new drugs were added or dosages changed.

As Natalie expected, there were no less than four new scars. New lungs — artificial, of course — had been implanted, as well as a machine functioning as a liver, one for a stomach, and small and large bowels. As with

Richard, not much of the original body remained. The tumour did, of course. And the part of the brain that told Anna Barisev's body to keep manufacturing the mutant cells that kept the tumour alive and healthy. How many years ago was it the doctors had learned to reprogram the brain — reprogram an individual's very genetic makeup — via the bone marrow and blood? Eight? Nine? How could a panel of doctors and judges decide that the study of a tumour was more important than a living, breathing human being who wanted nothing more out of life than to simply go home?

Natalie gently replaced the sheet. She knew the bright, brief flash of recognition she thought she'd seen in her mother's eyes had been just her imagination. There was nothing left of her mother in that poor clutter of tubes and skin and bone. Forty years ago, in 1989, when Natalie first brought her mother to the nursing home, there had been no cure for either the cancer or the Alzheimer's that was eating away at her memories. Twenty years later — too late for Anna Barisev, of course — the latter disease could be prevented, although reversal of damage was impossible. If, as the nurse had suggested, Natalie herself began exhibiting the first symptoms, she had nothing to worry about. Her memories were intact for at least another half-century.

What did worry her was the pea-sized lump she had found growing in her breast, just beneath that odd, misshapen mole. The pea that had grown to an egg in four short weeks. If she started chemo immediately, maybe had a little exploratory surgery done, she'd be fine, she knew. If she was lucky, she might even get a bed here. Wouldn't the doctors love the opportunity to study a disease spanning two generations? "Damn them," she whispered, trembling slightly, more from rage than fear. "Damn them for what they've done to you, Mum. . ."

Sitting up a little straighter, Natalie plucked a tissue out of the nearby box and blew her nose. It wasn't as bad now that she'd been here a few minutes. It was just the initial shock that got her. "I never thought it would come to this, Mum," she confessed. "If I'd known. . ."

But she had known. She herself had voted for the Life Party, in effect approving the Medical Authority Law, in the international election back in '14. She was one of the most vocal supporters of the party, advocating fetal culture, advanced research, automatic organ harvesting. It had all made such good sense back then, back when she was young. The doctors had promised everyone a doubled lifespan. Who wouldn't support such a god-send?

Natalie bent over the tiny, wasted figure on the crisp bed and kissed her mother's cheek. "I have to go now, Mum," she said. There was no response, but she couldn't let that stop her. "There's so much I wanted to say," she murmured, more to herself than to her mother. "No time. Not

now. I just want you to know, Mum. . . You were right. I should have just taken you home, back in 1989. Eighty is old enough."

She glanced toward the door, then quickly opened her briefcase and withdrew a notebook-sized laptop computer. With a silent blessing to her drones at RAM/Tech for developing Universal Access, she aimed the keyboard at the bedside terminal, activated the infrared remote, and tapped a key. The little machine was linked with the hospital mainframe within a matter of seconds.

When she found her mother's file, Natalie scanned the screen with grim determination. The list of drugs prescribed seemed endless. Anti-rejection drugs, narcotics, blood thinning agents, drugs to combat the cancer, mood-elevators—

"Mood-elevators?" Natalie snorted. "Oh, for God's sake—!"

Finally she found what she wanted, plain old morphine, the cancer patient's last sanctuary against the ever-advancing pain. Her fingers snapped down on the keys, isolating the morphine drip from the program that would be loaded next. When the mainframe politely inquired as to her authority, she punched in the name of the nursing home's Chief of Staff, and added his confidential ID number, secured through a good friend for an extremely large number of credit points.

"Come on, come on," she said nervously. The screen sat idle, the internal drive silent. Then, with a chirp, it whirred to life, and the order went singing down the lines.

Almost at once, one of the red tubes connected to her mother's elbow began to faintly pulse. Natalie pressed her fingers to her lips, and passed the silent kiss to her mother. Then she loaded the virus into her mother's file.

Search and destroy, she thought. How fitting that an electronic cancer should end the organic one. In a matter of thirty seconds, the virus was burrowed deep in the binary code, completely hidden, ready to begin duplicating here, erasing there, when the remote command was issued.

"TRANSFER COMPLETE" flashed on the screen. Natalie snapped the laptop shut and shoved it into her bag. She forced herself to sit at her mother's bedside and drink the coffee the orderly had brought, before she checked her watch. Two minutes to spare.

At the end of those two minutes a chime sounded to end her visit. She carefully replaced the sheet and the plasti-skin tent over her mother, and let herself out.

She walked briskly down the hall, not waiting for the walkway to carry her to the main door. The nurse buzzed her out with a cheery, "See you next year, Ms. Winslow," and she was out in real air once more.

When Natalie put her finger in the ID-keyhole, the door of the Toyota cruiser popped open at once. Without a glance back at the nursing home, she angled the nose of the craft upward, put it in autopilot, and then took the laptop out once more.


Five minutes should do it, she thought, watching the numbers flash across the screen. Five minutes to reverse forty years of the doctors' meddling. By now the alarms were probably ringing, the mainframe having discovered that irreversible changes were taking place in Patient ANBE574526's DNA composition. The tumour would be the first to die, and Anna would follow, the virus making sure the sweet morphine was the only thing flowing, right up to the end.

The nursing home staff would be quick to figure out what had happened, who was responsible. Police vehicles would have been deployed by now, but they'd be too late. Natalie closed her eyes. That had been her worst fear: that she might get caught before the program had a chance to release her mother. If the death penalty hadn't been revoked again, she might have considered it.

Still windy, she thought. The little craft gamely breasted the storm in the upper atmosphere, climbing steadily, and as Natalie snapped off the autopilot, she found herself thinking about another Toyota she'd owned once, a Cressida? No, a Camry. Brand new, a thirtieth birthday present to herself. *God, that was half a century ago*, she realized. *Back when cars still ran on the ground.*

Long ago, she thought as she put the cruiser into a steep, final dive, and sat back with a smile. *Long enough.* †

In memory of Maria Muzyka, January 7, 1901 - August 17, 1990



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Where light goes

by Alice Major

Into the dark eyes of cameras
Rattle of photons on celluloid retina,
 image turned upside-down,
 memory made present

Into photograph albums
plush covers closed on the past—
 boy in the back row,
 the one you smiled for in history class

Out to the far corners
of the universe, star-encoded silence
 mute evidence
 of long-gone conflagration

Click-click-click of constellations
on the shutters of the sky
 arbitrary conjugations
 patterned on the background of the night
 by your eyes

combinations

by Barry Hammond

all these premonitions:
reading tea leaves
throwing the sticks or dice
oracle arrangement of arcane cards on the table
slapping your head against unexposed film to make images
divining the future in the entrails of birds
like pathologists deciphering crimes
in the splatter patterns of blood
blasted by a gun
fired in one direction:
the future
a one-way street
locked into the weight of light
reflecting the mass of the universe
unchangeable as the progress
from birth to death
biochemical patterns
which have shape and structure
but no meaning
other than the random associations
stirred up in the mental dregs
of the gazer
who is a gambler
betting on occult miracles and dreams
to cancel his physical debt.



DREAMS IN DARKNESS

by Cheryl Merkel
illustrated by Marc Holmes

E*psilon Starbase, Eridanii Sector*

Aine woke, teeth clenched on a silent scream, tasting tears and the bitter aftermath of grief, her ears ringing with the echoes of her hoarse shout. "Nico, no! Get out! Getout getout *DON'T RUN!*" Her mind groped frantically, but the dream faded as it always did, leaving her with half-remembered fragments and the anguished certainty of guilt. Gradually, she became aware of the thin beeping of her wristcomp, and automatically turned to Nicolai's side of the cabin to confirm the mission. Memory came too late to prevent the familiar shock of his absence, the wrench her heart gave at the sight of his empty bed. He gazed at her from the silver-framed holo above her bunk, a lock of pale hair falling over his forehead, shadowing brilliant turquoise eyes. A smile hovered on the full, sensuous lips, parted as if to speak. But Nicolai would never speak again. Nicolai was dead, and she had killed him.

Aine forced the thought away and concentrated deliberately on dressing. At the half-heard, half-sensed whisper of her name she whirled, searching the corners where shadows gathered in defiance of the harsh white lighting. Emptiness mocked her. She shivered in the tiny cabin, chilly despite the station's climate control.

Glancing furtively in the mirror, she grimaced, hardly recognizing herself. With trembling hands she fastened the high collar of her flightsuit. She

had always been small, but now she was thin to the point of emaciation, her feminine curves pared to an androgynous grace. Her hair had long since been cropped to a fine dark stubble. Above haunted green eyes the delicate net of the implants sat like a crown upon her shaven skull, a dull silver gleam at brow and temples. Filaments met in the centre of her forehead in a black teardrop shot with scarlet; the crown and jewel of a Linkage Pilot. A Dreamer.

Her throat hurt. She rinsed the fuzzy medicinal aftertaste from her mouth, wiping her lips and regarding the flecks of bloody spittle remaining on the towel impassively. Vandel had told her what to expect from this particular drug. He had not liked prescribing it but eventually even he had had to admit that unless something was done it would mean yet another body awaiting trans-shipment Home.

Next to Nicolai's black Monitor's cap, her helmet rested on its stand by the door. Her hands trembled only slightly as she picked it up, cradling the smooth plastic under one arm as she keyed the lock. When (*if?*) she returned, the cap would still be there, a mute reminder of her loss. Somehow she had been unable to pack it away with the rest of his things. Vandel disapproved. He said she needed to make a clean break. He meant well, but as he was the first to admit, he was no psych.

Unfortunate, her resistance to psych. Months later, the soul-deep wound that was Nicolai's death still bled, still woke her in the night with its agony. Heart hammering, her throat raw with the screams that had forced themselves through her clenched teeth and the mind-numbing blanket of Vandel's drugs, Aine would fight sleep until exhaustion claimed her. Each night she slid closer to the final, seductive dissolution of madness, a Dreamer afraid to Dream.

On Home there were human psychs for those few maladjusted individuals unable (or unwilling) to establish the proper therapeutic rapport with the psycomp counselling programs, but Home was half a galaxy away, and pilots were in short supply. Until the semi-annual supply shuttle arrived, she would have to wait. As Nicolai waited in the empty shuttle-bay, a still white form among all the other still white forms, each neatly encased in its shiny white container.

Each week she went to him, a tiny mad corner of her mind hoping that *this* time it would be a mistake, that she would find the lid open and Nicolai gone. He would be waiting for her in the duty room, waving their latest mission orders and laughing over the neat trick he'd just pulled. *Betcha thought I was dead, hey Princess? No way, Ho-say. Gonna live Happily Ever After.* They would laugh and she'd tease him about his odd speech and he'd respond that maybe if she read a few real *books* instead of technical manu-

als. . . Sometimes she heard his voice, a faint echo in the lonely shuttlebay.
No Way, Ho-say.

Vandel did what he could: gave her the drugs she needed to keep her dreams at bay and monitored her dwindling sanity. Kept her alive. It was hard to be grateful; in the first savage madness of grief she had tried to join Nicolai, had knelt beside his coffin in a spreading pool of blood as the medteam hammered at the hatch she'd blocked. They'd finally had to blow it open. "Happily ever after," she'd said, kept saying, in a ragged voice that was hardly recognizable as human, until a horrified Vandel drugged her into oblivion. When he finally let her out of sickbay, she'd found Combat Operations had deducted the cost of hatch repairs from her pay.

It *had* been a stupid thing to do.

So she took the drugs, reported dutifully to sickbay twice each day, and eventually, Vandel certified her as (provisionally) sane. He'd had to — the war was heating up in their sector and they needed every pilot they had. She'd promised, only half-jokingly, that if she decided to End it All she'd take a K'tarri Juggernaut with her.

She dreamed defiantly, forcing herself into the linkage with her drone fighter as though trying to lose herself within the alien chaos of the shipmind. She took insane chances, ran risks that few other pilots cared to emulate, and to her secret dismay, lived through it all. Her new monitor guarded her skillfully, dragging her back from the very edge of madness time and time again. Standing between her and the Dark.

Bourne was as unlike Nicolai as she could imagine, a dark, stocky Colonial from some Rim world whose name she had forgotten, as taciturn as Nico had been eloquent. She suspected he was Security; something in his manner, his casual, yet penetrating questions about Nicolai's death, the way he looked at her when he thought her unaware. Only Vandel stood between her and a full psych-probe, she knew, Vandel and ironically, the K'tarri. Until the new offensive had been beaten back, the desperate need for pilots was all that kept her out of a Security cell. For although the Confederation could, and did, manufacture hundreds of warships each second, the minds capable of animating them were few and far between.

*

Drone technology had existed as far back as the late twentieth century, but without the ability to function intelligently, drones had remained secondary to human-piloted craft for military purposes. Their great advantage, that of operating at beyond human tolerances, was balanced by their inability to achieve the flexible response of a human pilot. An offshoot of biofeedback experimentation, linkage technology used sophisticated cybernetic implants to link human and machine. Miniature transceivers amplified

the brain's electrical impulses, translating thought into terms that could be understood by a starship's computer brain.

Cocooned in the womb-like comfort of a lifestation, guarded by the vigilant monitors, linkage pilots dreamed, their dreams merging into the reality of flight as their deadly craft rode the killing maelstrom of the starfields. Rejoicing in their dreams, knowing it was only a matter of time until all dreams ended.

Unsupported, a pilot could last ten to twelve months of daily missions before human consciousness was no longer distinguishable from the shipmind. Monitored, that time could be increased, but in the decades since the development of linkage technology, no pilot had ever survived more than six years. Dissolution began with slight alterations in personality, with gradually increasing periods of disorientation. Memories vanished, hallucinations became common. Eventually the still form in the lifestation would fail to open its eyes and the monitor would Terminate the Mission. (*Pulling the plug*, the pilots called it.) The lifestation would fall silent, its functions shutting down one by one as the pitiful wreckage that had once been a human being was released into the Dark.

Aine had been a pilot four years. And though she could not remember how — or why — her lover had died, she knew that she was somehow responsible.

*

Hunched awkwardly over the console, Bourne worked slowly, readying the lifestation for the forthcoming mission. Methodically he worked his way down the preflight checklist, completing each task with a painstaking thoroughness that betrayed his inexperience. Two weeks of training had done little to prepare him for his monitor's duties.

Less than a week after his arrival, Bourne realized his cover as a monitor had been blown. Vandel had laughed. "They had you tagged within three days," he'd told Bourne. "But cheer up, Major. Apparently you're more successful as an actor than you think. Most of 'em think you're Security." The medic had grinned at Bourne's embarrassment. "It's that furtive air of yours, Nathan."

Furtive air? He'd thought he was being discreet!

Bourne hated fieldwork. It always meant lying to somebody. For his evaluation of Aine's psychological status to be accurate, it was imperative that she remain ignorant of his true purpose. If that meant portraying an IIC officer trying to act like a monitor, then so be it. At times Bourne felt the beginnings of schizophrenia. He sighed. It would have been so much easier if Aine had undergone a psych-probe.

The lifestation beeped insistently as he missed a key. Scowling, he

wiped the line and started over. This was all Vandel's fault.

The medic had fought to keep Aine out of a Security cell, arguing that Aine's resistance to the probe would damage her mind irreparably — and pilots were already in short supply. The Security representative had retorted that murder could not be ignored.

The fact of the matter was that monitors did not die in the line of duty. Pilots died. Died because they were too strongly linked with their ships, destroyed with them in the heat of battle, or died as their humanity drained into the shipmind until the Monitor pulled the plug. With the buffer of a pilot mind between themselves and the shipmind, the worst a Monitor could expect was a headache. Not death. Never death.

Accidental death or deliberate murder; they *had* to know what had occurred within Aine's dream. If a psych-probe was the only way to find out. . .

They had compromised on Bourne. If a qualified psychiatrist found her to be sane, she would be turned over to Security for trial. If, as Bourne increasingly suspected, Aine was becoming psychologically unstable, he would have no alternative but to declare her unfit for duty. At that point any damage a psych-probe might do would be incidental.

Bourne had the uncomfortable sense that for Aine Cantrell, time was running out.

*

In the soft lighting of the Mission Room, Aine saw that twelve of the fifteen lifestations were already occupied, black-uniformed monitors hovering protectively over the still forms of their pilots. A swift glance at the prominently displayed vital signs screens above each coffin-like couch told her that most were dreaming, a few beginning to wake. Only two pilots were still conscious; as she watched, the screen above their heads altered to the glowing sine wave of a full linkage.

The irritating beep of the Alert tone silenced as she touched her wristcomp to the lifestation control, officially logging in. Her heart faltered, her breath catching in her throat. Nicolai smiled at her from the monitor's station. She closed her eyes, willing him away; when she looked again it was Bourne who sat there. He acknowledged her arrival with a slight nod, eyes intent on the preflight program he was running, and Aine returned his nod shakily. Rapidly she began attaching the lifestation leads to the conductive patches on her flightsuit.

Climbing into the lifestation couch, Aine prayed that Bourne had not noticed her hesitation. Such tiny signs were indicators of personality dissolution, she knew. Five such indicators meant reduced duty; seven and Vandel would be forced to pull her off the flightline. Ten — *ten*, she thought wildly

— and he would pull the plug. Desperately she tried to still the trembling of her hands. Twenty-three years, she grimaced inwardly, was a bit old to be afraid of the Dark.

Bourne's face was impassive as he bent to place the medpak sensor at the base of her throat, hands warm against her chill flesh as he loosened her collar. She felt a sharp twinge as the sensor's tiny needles anchored themselves in her flesh, the transparent disc darkening as it filled with blood. When it was removed, it would leave a faint scar; she bore a necklace of such scars around her throat.

Sighing, Aine closed her eyes as Bourne placed the opaque helmet on her head, settling its contacts firmly against the thin metal implants at her temples. Aine felt the faint vibration as the transparent lid came down and latched, but her awareness of the room was already fading. The familiar tingle began as her breathing altered to the in-hold-out-hold pattern of rapport. Ruby and black swirled behind her closed eyes, rippled across the face of the screen above her. Cautiously she summoned the dragon.

In the darkness of the cave, the dragon that was Ship/Aine was stirring, a vague reptilian shape in the shadows, wings folded neatly along her sides, breath pluming in the cold mountain air. Deep within the scarlet eyes, a banked glow intensified.

Distantly, Aine felt Bourne's presence as he silently took his own position at her side but Ship was already there, threatening to overwhelm her with its overpowering hunger and she had no attention to spare. Bourne would care for her body while she was out there, with Ship. On the other side of the base, great hangar doors were slowly opening to space as the docking bay echoed to a building resonant hum of power. Running lights flickered as systems came on line. The sleek black fighters came alive. Violet beams lanced out, cradling each ship in a web of light.

She came to full awareness, narrow scaled head lifting as the urge to move strengthened. A faint glow of dawn lit the sky; light filtered into the cave. Her talons clawed at the rock; wings stretched, relaxed.

Guided by the tractor beams and obedient to the will of their pilots, three fighters eased from their moorings, falling smoothly into line. Violet-edged shadows played over the dark forms of the remaining ships; above the hanger entrance the star and dagger emblem of the Star Command glowed amethyst. Once clear of the hangar doors, the tractor beams winked out. Thrusters flared blue, and the fighters were gone.

Waddling awkwardly to the lip of her cave she poured herself onto the narrow

ledge. Below her the mountainside was sheer, the valley lost in darkness; above her clouds obscured the brightening sky. Thunder rumbled. With a defiant scream, she launched herself from the ledge.

Her vital signs were fluctuating now, heart rate increasing slightly, respirations slowing as she moved further into trance. Bourne administered a mild analgesic to ease the shock of transition and her heart rate steadied.

Leathery wings spread as she dropped, catching the cold mountain wind and hurling her aloft into the midst of the storm-clouds. Rain sleeted from her slick black hide as she soared, screaming her elation to the wind. A thin echo of her cry drifted up as others launched themselves aloft. Gradually, her heartbeat steadied. She grew accustomed to the cold.

When he was certain she was stable, Bourne donned his own helmet, grimacing with the initial surge of <Inquiry/Identification> from Ship.

A sense of presence: the dwindling corner of Aine's mind that was human responded.

Aine answered Ship with a <Command> of her own, shielding Bourne from the datahunger that was the shipmind, allowing him to settle into his position in the dream. His vision was strangely doubled; over the dark room with its softly glowing stations was superimposed an image of a storm-wracked sky. For a moment he rode the storm with the dragon, felt himself buffeted by wind and drenched in cold rain, felt the <Elation/Anticipation/Hunger> of his wingmates as they soared among the storm clouds. Aine forced him away, blocking Ship's raw power. On his console, an amber light blinked; the squadron was moving away from the base.

Lightning flared; an answering spark lit her eyes. Her world was sky; somewhere within the mass of cloud was the enemy. Her flight wobbled, steadying as she took a deep breath to calm herself. Cold air burned in her lungs.

Aine's pulse and respirations rose rapidly; Bourne waited for them to settle, ready to administer a sedative.

Com-Ops began transmitting mission data, and on the main screens at the base, three tiny blips wheeled obediently.

She caught an updraft and wheeled, climbing for height. A distant bank of cloud looked promising; she widened her circle as her wingmates peeled away for objectives of their own. Her forked tongue flickered, tasting the sharp scent of ozone, the air disappointingly clear of the enemy scent. Below her the clouds thinned, revealing the craggy tops of the mountain range, stretching across the horizon as far as her slitted eyes could see. Mere specks in the distance, the others paralleled her course, faint echoes of their cries drifting on the wind.

Diving at a wisp of cloud she shrieked a challenge, head cocked for the enemy's reply. None came, and she snapped irritably at the cloud fragments. Fighting the compulsion to continue towards the cloudbank, she spiralled down towards the safe haven of her cave.

Aine trembled, caught in the heady joy of the dragon's flight. She struggled for control, fighting to retain her sense of identity and purpose. Slowly she forced the dragon away from the cave. Each time she linked it seemed the beast was stronger. Each time she felt the edges of her sanity blurring, felt a greater pull from the shipmind. Routine patrols were the most dangerous. Without the distraction of combat the urge to surrender, to lose herself in the shipmind until only the Dragon remained grew harder to resist. One day, she knew, she would lose that struggle.

Not yet, she vowed, beginning yet another sweep across the valley. She fought the inevitable, beckoning horror that was the dragon with all her failing strength, screaming defiance into the storm. When the Dark finally took her, it would be as herself!

Bourne scanned the lifestation screens automatically, only half attending to the readouts. Aine lay still and cold, only the faint rise and fall of her chest and the evidence of the screens telling him she lived. A light blinked an amber warning; the medpak sensor was slightly loose. He considered repositioning it but discarded the idea swiftly. Aine hated to be touched. He had had a graphic demonstration of that only last week.

He'd grasped her shoulder, meaning to rouse her from the post-mission lethargy. It had resulted in a swiftly vicious attack that stopped just short of being lethal. Ears ringing, Bourne found himself flat on his back as the enraged pilot stripped the leads from her suit with short, sharp, jerks.

"Don't you ever," she enunciated through set teeth, "ever, touch me again. Hear me, Monitor? Until I am out of that couch and moving I don't want you near me. Clear?" Tossing the dangling wires onto his console, she had all but run from the room as he stared.

Remembering, Bourne almost missed the soft chime of Recall. His warning to Aine came a heartbeat too late.

The sudden command to return to the cave signalled an escalation of Aine's inner combat. Angered by the conflicting commands, the huge reptile shuddered, twisting in the air, then abruptly dove for the ground. Wings tightly folded, eyes slitted against the rush of cold air, it shrieked as Aine scrambled to re-establish control.

Red warning indicators lit as her heart rate increased and the smooth pattern of the linkage sine wave began to alter.

The cave gaped, a welcoming refuge. Talons clawed at the crumbling rock of the mountainside, sending chunks tumbling into the abyss as Aine forced the dragon

onto the ledge. Its reptilian sight picked out a wetly gleaming patch on the rock, its nostrils filling with the heady scent of blood. Aine felt her fragile control begin to slip.

Alarms sounded as her body drew on depleted reserves of strength. The lifestation's computer reacted automatically, initiating a stabilizing program, administering a stimulant but demanding monitor input for further action. For a vital moment Bourne hesitated. As he began to enter commands, Aine's body convulsed.

Pain exploded within her as the dragon flung itself backwards, clawing at the rock in a desperate attempt to escape. Caught in the narrow entrance it thrashed in panic as the sharp granite edges tore through its thick hide, wings shredding as it battered them against the walls. Pinned beneath the writhing body, a foreleg twisted and snapped as the reptile dragged itself towards the ledge.

Memories flickered, her mind groping after its humanity, sorting through its contents in a last despairing attempt to avoid the dark undertow of madness that was the dragon. Despairing, Aine saw a shadow of movement deep within the cavern.

"Hold her head, dammit! Lose the contacts and she's dead!" Vandel snapped, breathless from the run from sickbay. A technician slid into Bourne's vacated seat as the medic knelt beside the lifestation. "What happened?" Vandel demanded. "And shut that bloody alarm off!"

"It was the Recall. She just — convulsed." Bourne's voice shook as he tried to hold Aine still, leaning awkwardly over the lifestation side. Her helmet rattled against the plastic; at her throat, blood began to soak through the collar of her flightsuit as the medpak ripped loose.

"Get the oxygen— Medpak's off!" Vandel elbowed Bourne aside as he tried to do everything at once. "What's her pattern doing? Never mind the bloody program, Chambers, get a move on! Waveform status?"

"Waveform altering to Theta pattern," the tech monitoring Aine reported.

Bourne's gaze was fixed on the vitals signs screen. "Heart rate above tolerance limits," he grated. "I can't — hold her!"

"Fifty of nor-epicaine-V. Now!" Vandel ordered. Clear fluid leaked from beneath the sensor as his bloodstained fingers tried to hold it in place.

"Forty percent absorption," Chambers reported. "Heart rate dropping." Her voice sharpened. "Pattern separation commencing. Theta to Rho to Chi— We're losing her!"

Vandel nodded grimly. "Twenty mils of di-tryptophan, now!"

Bourne looked up, startled. "Di-tryptophan? A REM suppressant? Won't that—"

"Block the dream. Maybe. I haven't got a lot of choice!" the medic snapped. "She's been on it for some time. Highly toxic, but it might just work — if it doesn't kill her first. Just pray she can still tolerate the drug."

"Given," Chambers stated.

Slowly, Aine's tremors eased. Cautiously Bourne relaxed his hold as her body relaxed. "Come on, Aine," he muttered, "hang on—"

Vandel glanced at the monitor and cursed as alarms shrilled. "Ventricular fibrillation! No heart rate!" Chambers reported urgently. "Pattern separation nearly complete."

"Defibrillate. Stand back— Let go, Bourne! Hit her." Aine's body jolted as the lifestation delivered a pulse of energy to her chest.

Something hit her, hard. The dragon staggered, fell heavily, its haunches sliding closer to the edge.

She could see him clearly now, a slim, muscular figure in a monitor's full-dress black and silver. He smiled.

"Asystole. Come on, Aine," Bourne urged.

"Hit her again."

The dragon was still, the glow fading from its crimson eyes. Blood trickled from its mouth, pooling on the rock at its feet. A fading tremor wracked the huge body as Aine felt herself separating, a tenuous ghostly form beginning to coalesce beside the dying reptile. Eagerly he came to meet her.

"Asyst— no! Normal rhythm! We did it!"

"Pattern?"

"Pattern separation nearly complete."

"N-Nico?" Aine stammered.

He grinned at her. "Hello, Princess."

It had the slightly sarcastic flavour of the authentic Nicolai. But Nico was dead. "You're dead, Nico," she whispered. "Aren't you?"

He nodded. "And you're dreaming again, Princess." He tilted his head, regarding her quizzically. "When are you going to wake up?" Her fingertips tingled with the urge to touch his hair where it curled over the collar of his uniform, and she stepped forward. Could two ghosts touch?

"Weirdest thing I ever saw! Pattern stabilizing. What now?"

"We wait."

"I'm — dreaming you?" she demanded, as he laughed. He caught her hand in his, drew her into a gentle embrace. His hands were warm upon her shoulders.

"In a manner of speaking," he told her. "The dream needs us all — you, me, even that—" he gestured at the silent dragon "—to complete itself. And then," he sighed, answering her unvoiced question, "it ends. All dreams have an ending, Aine. All dreamers wake." He hesitated, searching her face. "I came to say good-bye, Aine."

"No! I won't! Let me come with you!" she begged. "Nico, please—" as he shook his head.

"Can't, love. Not yet." He caught her chin, forcing her head up as she sobbed. "Believe me — other dreams await you, Aine. In time, you may forget how we once dreamed together. But if you forget all things, Aine, remember this — I love you. I will always love you — and I will wait for you, here in the Dark. Remember that, Aine, remember. . ."

"I remember," Aine gasped, as her eyes opened and Vandel's grimly intent face came slowly into focus against the pale grey walls of sickbay. Beyond him, Bourne watched her narrowly. "Nicolai, I remember. . ."

*

As far as fieldwork went it had been the weirdest case he'd ever had, Bourne mused. From the shuttle's tiny observation deck he stared down into the gloom of the huge bay, almost reluctant to leave now that his mission was completed.

Absently he patted the pocket containing the thin datadisc of his case notes, wondering what Security would make of Aine's testimony. He didn't really know what to make of it himself, he thought, but there was no denying the truth in her voice, the raw agony in her eyes as she told of her partner's death.

Nicolai, she said, had been a voracious reader. "Real books. Literature, he called it. He'd insist on reading them to me, too. Said it was so that I wouldn't dream my life away." She closed her eyes briefly, remembering.

"Nico had gotten hold of some pre-Landing stuff. Kid's stories. Real old — these were *paper* books! There was one about a princess who slept for a hundred years until her true love came along to kiss her awake. Well, Nico took to callin' me Princess, and pretty soon he was tryin' the same thing." Aine shook her head. "Idiot.

"Gets hard, y'know? Waking. Each time you dream it gets harder. You get all — fuzzy 'round the edges. Sometimes you can't tell where you end and Ship begins. It's like having to tear yourself apart, some days. But Nico could always pull me out, with that stupid trick. Always. Until one day, I was too slow. I was still linked, y'see, when he kissed me and Ship was still there. Nico— Monitors don't link, Bourne. They always have someone between them and the dream." She swallowed, hard. "Nico panicked. He tried to escape — you *never* run from a dragon, it only attracts their atten-

tion — and Ship — took him. Just shoved me aside and took him.” Her voice rose dangerously. “Took *him*. You’ve felt Ship’s hunger, Bourne. You know. I heard him scream, felt his mind splintering apart — I *felt* him dying. By the time I linked again, it was too late. Ship was — feeding — and Nicolai had gone and I couldn’t follow. I couldn’t even share his death. It should have been me, Bourne. I’m the pilot! It should have been *me!*”

It ended with his final recommendation: No further action. If nothing else, Bourne was certain that within the context of her dream, Aine was not deliberately responsible for Nicolai’s death. He hoped it would be enough for Security. Putting a combat ship on trial for murder was not something he wanted to recommend.

As for Aine’s sanity — he remembered the look on her face as she had watched the coffins being loaded into the shuttle. No, he could not call her sane. Functional, perhaps. For the time being, that would have to be enough.

Aine sighed as the door hissed shut behind her; the familiar chill of her cabin settling around her like a cloak. She hesitated, frowning. A book rested atop her narrow bunk. Surely she remembered packing it away with the rest of Nicolai’s things? Her hands shook as she picked it up, tracing the ornate gold letters on the leather binding with trembling fingers. *A Child’s Collection of Fairy Tales*. As though awaiting her touch, it fell open to the flyleaf, and Nicolai’s spiky handwriting fairly leapt out at her.

“To Aine,” it read. “Take one story before bedtime and sleep well. Happily Ever After, Nico.” Scrawled across the bottom was a final post-script. “P.S. Pleasant Dreams, Princess.”

As her tears fell onto Nicolai’s last gift, Aine suddenly realized that for the first time in months, the cabin was warm. ☽

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Frost Warning

by Anna Mioduchowska

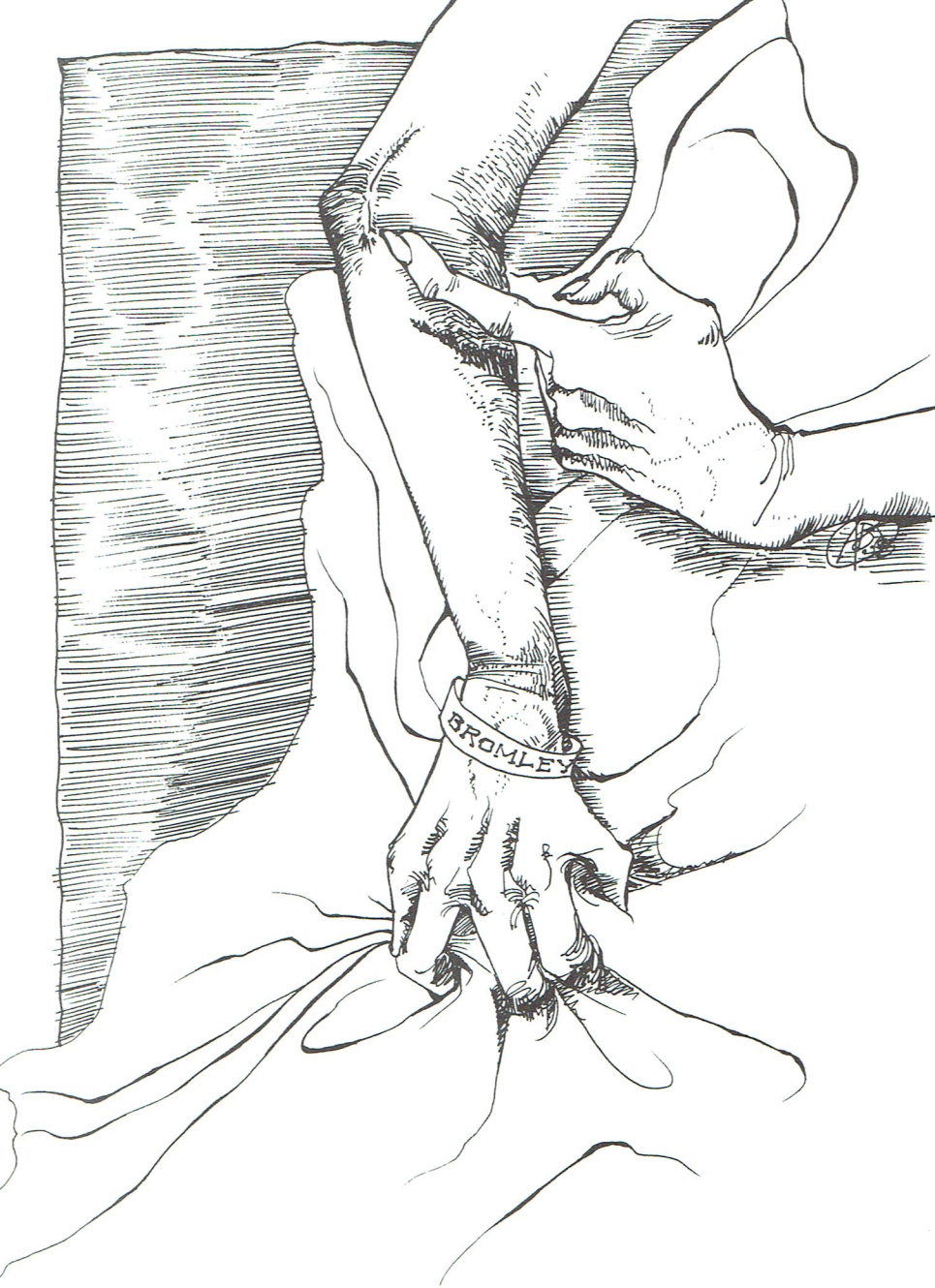
they must have knocked
against the door
polite at first
I know they were that kind
of vegetables
I brought them up myself

when no one answered we
are heavy sleepers here
they must have tried
the windows
those are distinct
cucumber marks
gentle tomato prints

yet
it's the beans
wax beans that shyly hid
their young to shield them from
my greedy eyes
wax beans that raised the shout
that led the shivering group
in the assault an hour
before the dawn

the dawn sun came up
shrunken late this morning
searching now left now right
surprised there were no gleeful
shouts to urge it on its way
instead
grim sight slumped down
against the back door
their knuckles bleeding still
tomatoes beans
raised arms stiff twisted
in despair
umbrellas shattered by the wind
zucchinis
down all down

at least
it was an honourable death ❁



Side Effects

by Dot Foster
illustration by Andrea Baeza

"The forecast has been wrong all summer," Ruth shrugs as she laces up her boots.

"But I still think we should carry them with us," Nelson insists.

"Okay, Hon. You carry them and I'll say I told you so."

Nelson slips the yellow rain suits into his pack and makes a face at Ruth. She adjusts the buckles on the back of his pack and pat-pinch his bottom. His arms catch her and pull her close. It's a good kiss. Ruth twists away, breathless.

"We can't make love all day just because the boys are at camp. Come on, or we'll never make it to the lookout in time."

Freckles barks in agreement. He's the black and grey terrier cross they adopted two summers ago. His nose has three black spots and his tail has a definite kink from the time the kids got it caught in the car door when he was a puppy.

Laughing, Nelson loosens his grip and they start up the rocky trail. The smell of white spruce and fir tickles their noses as they follow the twisting trail up the mountain. Ruth stops to grab a handful of wild strawberries, then runs to catch up, savouring the sweet, seedy juice. Nelson is waiting on a mossy rock as she rounds the bend.

"I'm sopped already," Ruth pants. "Lucky I wore my halter instead of my bra." She strips off the soggy T-shirt and tucks it through her fanny pack strap.

Nelson sees a switchback ahead. "This trail is supposed to be two miles,

but I bet we could short-cut if we head up through the bush."

"Okay. Lead on, trail blazer. Just don't blame me if we get lost."

They scramble over some deadfall and up the uneven mountainside. The trees thicken, then open up into a mossy glen. The green carpet covers rocks and stumps, then dips into a soft green hollow. The hollow is deep with moss. It holds a wisp of memory, an echo fading, now gone. Ruth feels the soft green tickle her back as Nelson's long arms pull her down into the moss towards him. She pulls away.

"Don't you ever get enough?" But desire for his lean body aches.

She pulls away with an effort. Some silly dream she had last night, just on the edge of memory. "If this is a short-cut, we'd better get cutting or we'll never get back to meet the bus at four o'clock."

Pushing through the dense brush, they cut across the trail a few hundred yards later. Five or six more scrambles bring them out near the tree line with the great ledges of rock just above them. The valley is spread below, a toy landscape with a tiny highway slashing through it.

Miniature cars creep like ants. Eastward, the jagged peaks tooth the sky all the way to Sulphur and Rundle, but the west peaks are hidden by black clouds, streaked with forked lightning.

"Maybe you'll be glad I brought the rain gear after all, Smartie. See, it's cooling off already. Think we can make it to the lookout?"

"I guess we'd better try." Ruth jumps as a clap of thunder reverberates down the valley.

They reach the lookout just as the storm starts spattering big drops on the trail.

"It's padlocked," says Nelson grimly as he tries the door of the old lookout post. He peers inside. "Nobody's been in here for a long time. Maybe years. We'd better at least try to get back to the woods before this storm gets any worse."

Nelson slips the yellow rain cape over Ruth's head and she wrinkles her nose at the musty smell. He fastens the hood over her auburn curls and kisses the end of her nose. A fat raindrop lands on top of the kiss.

"Thank you for bringing the rain gear, Honey," she says meekly. "Now hurry up and get yours on. It's really starting to come down."

They start down as the rain pelts harder and harder, turning the trail into a torrent of mud and loose gravel.

"Poor Freckles has no rain gear. Maybe you should carry him under your cape."

"No way — he won't melt." Nelson laughs as Freckles dashes on ahead as if to say, "Hurry up, you clowns."

About half way to the tree line there is a rumble and a clatter of rocks bouncing down granite cliffs.

Nelson and Ruth grab Freckles and crouch together behind the wet cutbank of the trail. Several rocks bounce harmlessly down the mountainside. There are no more clatters for several moments and they carefully stand up, but it's too soon. A final chunk catches Ruth on the arm and knocks her flat on the muddy trail. The edges are knife sharp and it cuts right through the heavy rain cape. Her arm has a jagged cut about three inches long, just above the right elbow.

Nelson digs out the first aid kit and ties on a soggy bandage. Blood and rain mix and it's hard to tell if the bleeding has stopped.

"How's it feel now, Ruthie?"

"It hurts like hell but I'll live. Let's get going. We might miss the boys' bus."

By the time they finally get to the van, Ruth's whole arm is aching and she winces as Freckles shakes and sprays them both.

"Dumb dog. Go in the back and lay down," Nelson says sharply.

"Let's hurry and get back to town. I want to be there when Bernie and Steve get back from camp."

Nelson takes another look at Ruth's face. "We're stopping at the Bungalows to phone Shirley and Bob. You're going to emergency to have that gash cleaned and stitched up. You'll probably have a scar anyway, but it will heal faster if it gets done properly. Besides, you'll likely need a tetanus shot."

"But Honey, I want to get the boys." The edge of the dream touches her again. Somehow it's urgent to get them.

"My silly darling, Wilmores won't mind picking them up when they get Sandy and Joel. Steve and Bernie will be tickled to spend a couple more hours with their friends."

Ruth sees how much blood is seeping through the bandage and gives in.

"Okay, Nelson. You win, if you really think it needs stitches."

Wisps of grey hair curl against the hospital linens. The name on the wrist band says "Mrs. Ruth Bromly" in neat computer print. It is clipped around her wrist but the wrist is so thin and frail. Ruth sees veins like blue rivers under the transparent skin. Her eyes dart from the machine to the nurse then back to the machine.

"Where am I? Where's Nelson? Bernie? Steve? Where am I?" Her voice sounds strange, thin and quavery.

Her eyes focus on a white uniform. The voice that answers her is firm but kind. "You're going to be fine, Mrs. Bromly, just fine. Your hip is responding to treatment very well. Two or three more treatments on the O.S. and you'll be as good as new."

Another white uniform. This time a man. Ruth recognizes Dr. Wheeler.

He turns to his patient. "You were unconscious when you were admitted, Mrs. Bromly. We set your hip and put you right on the O.S. That stands for osteoelectrostimulator. You've probably heard of it."

Ruth sobs, "Where are Nelson and Bernie and Steve?"

"It's quite an amazing machine," continues the doctor in a soothing voice. "It stimulates the memory cells of your brain. They send out the regeneration signals of a young, healthy body. Older patients heal from three to ten times as fast as normal. It's particularly effective on broken bones."

Older patients. *Am I old?* Ruth wonders. Then it starts to come back to her. "Do I have broken bones? I remember tripping on the hall carpet. Then I hit my head on the bookcase and everything went black."

"You were lucky. One of your neighbours couldn't get you on the visophone so she sent the super in to see if you were all right. I'm afraid your hip is broken, Mrs. Bromly, but don't worry. With the O.S. treatment it will be as good as new in no time. Probably better, because this treatment builds bones stronger than the normal calcium-deficient bones elderly people have."

Ruth sees the web of wrinkles on her arms. The scar above her right elbow is white and smooth compared to the rest. She remembers the tanned, smooth arm so clearly. Nelson — Nelson and Bernie and Steve.

All dead these long years. The boys in the station wagon with the Wilmores. The gravel truck on Crowchild that couldn't stop in time.

Steve and Bernie riding in the back with the packs and bedrolls. If only — if only — the echo that has haunted her thoughts through the long lonely years. "Doctor, I was dreaming — about hiking up Eisenhower Lookout with my husband. I was very young. My boys were little tykes at summer camp — just before they were killed in the accident. It seemed so real. Not at all like a dream."

"That's a normal side effect of the O.S. treatment. It stimulates memories in a certain memory area, the same area once we start a series of treatment.

"Your brain is rather like a twenty-four hour video disk. It records everything that ever happened to you. With the right stimulation, whole days can be played back, so to speak. If it was unpleasant, I could have you sedated for the next treatment."

"Oh no. It was wonderful — except for my arm. But what if I did something differently than I did before?"

Dr. Wheeler laughs. "Don't worry, Mrs. Bromly, you can't do anything differently. It's only a play-back mechanism, nothing more. I'll check you in the morning. If you have pain or trouble sleeping, ask the nurse for medication. I'll leave instructions."

Ruth wonders why that whisper of a dream pulled at her in the memory sequence. She tries to think back to the real day of the storm, but it's so long ago the play-back memory overwhelms it and blots it out. She sleeps and dreams of green moss and Nelson's kisses.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bromly. Did you have a comfortable night?"

Nurse Anderson's hair is auburn and curls around her freckled face. *Like mine before it went grey*, Ruth notices, *when Nelson used to call me his peppery red head and—* "Oh yes, thanks, I slept fine. When is my next O.S. treatment?"

Nurse Anderson checks the printout. "Today at ten. Be sure to eat all your breakfast and take these calcium pills, now. Your body must be well-supplied with calcium for the treatment to work at maximum efficiency."

The smell of white spruce and fir tickles Ruth's nose as they follow the twisting trail up the mountain. She stops and grabs a handful of wild strawberries, then runs to catch up, savouring the sweet, seedy juice. Nelson is waiting on a mossy rock as she rounds the bend.

"I'm sopped already," Ruth pants. "Lucky I wore my halter instead of my bra." She strips off the soggy T-shirt and tucks it through her fanny pack strap.

Nelson sees a switchback ahead. "This trail is supposed to be two miles, but I bet we could short-cut if we head up through the bush."

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"Don't you ever get enough?" But desire for his lean body aches.

She feels the hunger spread through her like fire — like it's been ages. His hands unclip the halter — slide the jeans off in one smooth movement. The little splashes of sunlight filter through the spruce as their naked bodies roll together in the pillows of green, reaching, tasting, touching, until the green fades and nothing is left but their passion and the sobbing moan of the rising wind. It's like the first time and yet it's like hungry years have passed. A sudden clap of thunder echoes as it bounces off the granite towers. Laughing, they scramble into their clothes and clamber through the dense bush back down to the trail. Freckles is whining at the storm.

Big fat drops of rain splat down polka-dotting the hard packed trail.

Nelson digs out the rain suits and Ruth wriggles her nose at the mildew smell as Nelson pulls the cape over her head.

"We'll never make it in this."

The polka dots have turned to a slick coating of water. Tiny rivulets rush to turn every dip into a puddle. Another crack of thunder; this time the lightning flashes at the same time. Despite the water, the trail is rocky enough to let their Vibram soles grip.

Freckles runs along beside them, barking at the lightning. The rain plasters his hair to his skin and drips off his crooked tail. When the thunder crashes, he whines and cringes in front of Nelson for protection.

The van is in sight when the sky opens into a torrent. Nelson and Ruth run through ankle-deep water with Freckles leaping ahead now.

They all leap into the van, sliding the door shut, and leave the storm outside hammering on the roof and windows.

"Nelson. We really should get started home. It's almost one o'clock. That bus gets to the church at four. I want to be there when the boys get home from camp."

"Don't worry, honey. We'll make it — even in this rain. Lucky we broke camp after breakfast today. . ."

Freckles gives a great shake, showering both of them. Ruth snuggles up to Nelson as they nose the van out into the traffic and head for Calgary.

The smell of antiseptic and wax remind Ruth she is in the hospital.

Nurse Stuart is on the O.S. today. She takes Ruth's pulse and smiles cheerily.

"How do you feel today, Mrs. Bromly? Your hip is coming along just fine."

"I'm fine," Ruth stammers, the memory of the rain still washing over her. She absently fingers her scar and feels only soft wrinkles.

No scar. She sits up carefully and checks both arms. No scar.

"Nurse," she demands sharply, "do you see a scar above my elbow? It's about six centimetres long, white and smooth, slightly curved. Do you see it?"

The nurse peers closely. "No, I don't see a scar. Are you sure you had one?"

"I'm sure," snaps Ruth. "Call Dr. Wheeler."

"Now calm down, Mrs. Bromly. Dr. Wheeler will see you on his rounds. He'll be by this afternoon. Perhaps you should take a tablet to calm your nerves."

"I don't want a tablet. I want Dr. Wheeler."

"Very well, I'll see if he's in the hospital yet."

About fifteen minutes later, Dr. Wheeler comes to her bed.

"Now, what's the big emergency, Mrs. Bromly? Your printout says you're responding very well to the O.S. Only one more treatment and you'll be off for physical therapy. What's the problem?"

"It was different this time. The memory sequence changed. You said that couldn't happen."

"That's right, it's impossible. Memory sequences can't change."

"Well it did. And remember that white scar above my elbow? It's gone too." She shows the doctor her evenly wrinkled arm. No scar.

Dr. Wheeler looks puzzled. Then his face clears. "There are still many things we don't know about this regeneration process. We know it works, but the exact mechanism is still under investigation. It's probably regenerated the scar tissue, too. A bonus side effect, that's all."

"No side effects."

That was why Nelson insisted he have the vasectomy. "I just have to spent a couple of hours in the doctor's office, much more sensible than sending you to the hospital for two or three days to have your tubes tied." They had all the family they wanted. It was the sensible thing to do. Ruth remembers how hard Nelson tried to get the operation reversed after the accident. The specialist warned him the chance of success was only one in a hundred but he went through with it anyway, hoping.

The stroke was a sort of side effect too. A side effect of grief and despair. Nelson never really got over losing the boys. Never could forgive Bob and Shirley. Sandy and Joel were in seat belts. Bernie and Steve could have been too. The pain ate him up inside. Ruth tried to help him but he locked himself away from her too—

Ruth brings herself back with an effort.

"But Doctor, the memory sequence was different this time."

"Probably just confused with a dream. Memory is a funny thing." His tone is slightly condescending. "The older we get, the less reliable it is." He turns to go.

"Dr. Wheeler," Ruth calls him back, "has anyone ever died while under O.S. treatment?"

"No, of course not. It's one of the safest treatments ever developed. Why do you ask?"

"Then you really don't know what would happen if someone died while they were plugged in?" she insisted.

"They would just die. I'm sure I can't see what you're so worried about. Your hip is doing very well. We could discontinue the O.S. treatment completely if you're really concerned."

"Oh no," Ruth assures him. "Sorry I've been such a nuisance."

"Get some rest, Mrs. Bromly." His voice is kinder again. "I'll wait until tomorrow to continue the treatment. Meanwhile I'll get the nurse to give you a sedative to calm your nerves."

Ruth closes her eyes and thinks very hard. About her life in the lonely apartment. The pictures on the walls, yellow with age. Nelson and Bernie

and Steve — only memories. Memories and pictures on the wall. With a tremendous effort, she throws herself from the high hospital bed.

Ruth regains consciousness and the room focuses. Dr. Wheeler's anxious voice reaches her ears.

"Mrs. Bromly, Mrs. Bromly. Whatever were you trying to do? You've broken your other hip now, and re-cracked the one that was healing so nicely."

"I'm sorry," Ruth lies meekly. "I was dreaming a grizzly bear was chasing me. I was only trying to climb a tree to escape. It's so hard to tell dreams from reality when you're getting old."

"Well, the nurses will keep the sides up on your bed from now on.

"You'll be getting pain medication every three hours until we get those bones healing again. You'll be back on O.S. treatment again tomorrow morning. Now try to get some rest."

When the machine is turned on the next morning, Ruth waits for the memory sequence to start. At first it overwhelms her, but gradually she forces her will on the events — making sure they don't go all the way up the mountain — deliberately this time.

Freckles gives the great shake showering both of them. Ruth snuggles up to Nelson and they nose the van out into the traffic and head for Calgary.

This time Ruth fights to stay in the van but the pull back to the hospital is more than she can resist. The treatment room comes into focus and the rain on the windshield fades.

Ruth listens with her eyes closed for a minute.

"She didn't respond at first when we ended the treatment, Dr. Wheeler. We've never had that happen before on the O.S. Should we have the machine checked?"

"The technicians just did it last week. It shouldn't need it." He checks Ruth's printout and looks puzzled. "Everything is perfectly normal, but perhaps we should wait forty-eight hours for the next treatment just to be on the safe side. Let me know if there are any irregularities with any of the other patients today." He frowns at the printout again. "She may be in a bit of pain so continue the medication every three hours if she needs it."

"Nurse Anderson," Ruth calls, digging her fingernails into her palms under the cover. She can only let the expected amount of pain show. "Could I have my next pills now, please, dear?"

"Not for another five minutes, Mrs. Bromly. Don't worry, I'll bring them right on time."

"When is my next O.S. treatment?"

"It's at ten o'clock tomorrow. The pills will keep the hips from giving you too much pain. Try to rest and eat everything on your tray, including the calcium supplement."

Dr. Wheeler looks at the X-ray printouts the next morning while Ruth

is on the O.S. "The bones are responding beautifully. Does she still seem to be in a lot of pain?"

"She's been asking for the medication every three hours. I swear, she's been watching the clock."

"I'll have a complete program done on her this afternoon if the pain hasn't subsided," Dr. Wheeler decides, somewhat puzzled.

The alarm beeps out in the hall. Dr. Wheeler and the nurses run back into the O.S. room. Mrs. Bromly's still form has just a hint of a smile in the thin lips. All efforts to revive her are futile. Her old heart just won't respond.

Dr. Wheeler has the autopsy printout sent down as soon as it's available. He frowns as he reads it.

"Nurse Anderson." His voice is grim. "How did that old lady manage to get her hands on sixteen of those tablets?"

"I swear, I saw her swallow them — each time. It wasn't my fault. She must have faked it." She sobs. "It really wasn't my fault. I had no idea she was suicidal. She seemed so happy and bright. Ask Nurse Stuart. We followed procedure. There were none of the usual signs."

"Too damn bright," mutters Dr. Wheeler remembering the missing scar.

Ruth watches the rain flatten and streak against the windshield as the van gathers speed.

"I hope we make it on time. This rain could slow us down if it gets worse."

"What's the fuss anyhow? The kids aren't going anywhere. They'll just have to wait at the church until we get there if we're a bit late. Relax, Hon." His hand teases the back of Ruth's neck as she leans toward him.

But to Ruth the trip seems endless — cars poke, trucks amble, blocking lanes, slowing the flow. Finally the thunderstorm is behind them and the road is dry.

The buses are already unloading when the van pulls into the church yard. Ruth breaks into a triumphant run to hold first Bernie, then Steve, then both of them. When Nelson gets close they leap from Ruth to give him the same clamorous welcome.

Nelson extracts himself laughing. "Okay guys, let's load up. Freckles is waiting in the van. There's a big storm trying to catch up with us, but if we hurry we'll beat it home." ☂

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BEST
DAMN
CHEESECAKE
IN THE
UNIVERSE



CLOSED

Best Damn Cheesecake in the Universe

by Diane L. Walton

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnstalk

I saw the sign over the door first. It was small, but loud, and effective. "Best Damn Cheesecake in the Universe," it proclaimed in a blaze of pink neon. I'd go a long way to get good cheesecake, which is why I'll never, ever be a size 10. Seeing a claim like this, I naturally rose to the challenge.

It was odd that I hadn't encountered Melissa's place before. She occupied a small niche in the basement of an office building across the street from mine — just off the LRT station tunnel. She may have been there for years, for all I knew. There were certainly never any newspaper reviews on her place, as there were for the many trendy downtown eateries that were desperate for a share of the clientele.

I happened upon it late one lunch hour as I hurried back to work. I drive to work, and never use the subway, but The Bay was convenient for some quick lunch hour shopping. There was a way to get from my building's basement parkade across to the underground station. It's well lit and the drug dealers are usually not up before noon, so it's a reasonably safe walk, even for an unprotected woman. After five years in the big city, my

mother was still asking if I was "taking precautions." I would nod and, with a clear conscience, smile at her. Mother firmly believed that a woman, by the very act of walking alone in dark places, was wearing a "Hey, guys, come and rape me" sign on her back.

It was the neon sign over the door of the shop which caught my eye. Not much I could do with only five minutes left of the lunch hour, but I made a mental note of the place and vowed to return. That grandiose claim was not to be taken lightly.

When I got back to the office, I asked around to see if any of my fellow gluttons had ever been to Melissa's. Nobody had heard of it. Norma asked me if I was dead certain that I'd even seen a restaurant there. She seemed to remember that there'd been a fine art reproduction shop that had gone out of business several years before, but she wasn't absolutely certain that anyone had taken over the space.

"Looked pretty occupied today," I replied, "and I haven't hallucinated a restaurant for, gee, I don't know, months, maybe. I'll let you know what it's like."

As soon as work finished, I found myself heading across the street in the direction of the LRT station. Cheesecake before supper? My mother would shake her head in dismay. *You have to eat better meals, Meredith, more vegetables. How do you expect to keep your health? No wonder you catch so many colds.*

I could have kicked myself for not checking to see what their hours of operation were. "Open 11 to 3, Daily," the small sign inside the door read. I should have known. A place in this sort of location would do the bulk of its business during the working day. Nobody in their right mind (other than a real cheesecake fanatic) would want to go there at this time of day, I reasoned, and it probably wouldn't attract much of a dinner crowd. As a matter of fact, beyond the coffee machine and the sign advertising cheesecake, I didn't see any hard evidence that they actually served anything else there. Maybe that was all they needed to serve. Business must be good. But had there been any customers at noon when I went by? I couldn't be certain.

Next day, as soon as my last client left just before noon, I was on my way. I couldn't convince anyone to go to lunch with me, but that was fine. I didn't mind being the one who would make the glorious discovery, and then generously spread the news to my fellow slaves. We took our cheesecake very seriously in my office.

This time when I approached the front door of the restaurant, I did notice that it was empty of customers. I feared that I might have missed a sign that was going to tell me "Closed For Renovations," or even worse, but the door opened easily at my touch, and I went in. A bell tinkled shrilly as

the door swung shut.

It was a tiny place. Barely enough room for the three small round tables, covered with those ubiquitous red and white checked tablecloths. In the far corner I noticed an antique cash register, without the fancy computerized keyboard they all seem to have these days. It had one of those pop-up displays where the totals of your purchase appear on little white cards. I remember that it read "NO SALE" in black upper case letters. I don't think it has ever said anything else.

Beneath it was a refrigerated glass display case. Inside this, I hazarded a guess, were the best damn cheesecakes in the universe. I was prepared to make the caloric sacrifice to find out if this was truth. While perusing the place, I realized that I, too, was being observed. A small, red-headed woman stood behind the display case. She was wearing a pale green waitress uniform with white eyelet lace trim and a white apron. Her cheeks were bright with rouge, and there was a heavy coat of metallic blue shadow on each eyelid. Her hair was tightly curled close to her head, as if she'd just come from getting a new perm. Perhaps it hadn't begun to relax, as the hairdressers always promise that it will. My perms never relaxed, and always went frizzy, so I gave up on them a long time ago.

She was smiling broadly at me as though I were a long lost relative. Maybe she didn't get that many customers after all.

Her first words were a surprise to me. "So you found the place, did you? So many don't. How can I help you?"

I found this a little odd. Why else would I be there except for what they advertised as their specialty? "I hope you can help me to some of your famous cheesecake," I replied. "Are you Melissa?"

"You bet, honey," she answered. "And you must be. . . " I was astonished to watch as she consulted a large book that lay on the top of the counter. "Yes, there you are! You are Meredith Clearwater, attorney at law, daughter of Ethel and Franklyn Clearwater of Grande Prairie. I should have known that."

Now I was really confused. "What do you mean, you 'should have known that'? How could you possibly have my name in a reservation book? I only told a couple of people at work that I was coming here. Is there a hidden camera here, or what?"

She laughed. "This is no reservation book, honey. Not the way you think of it, anyhow. People don't come here because they want to. They come here because they *need* to. Sit down, and I'll bring you some coffee."

I needed more than coffee. "Yes, I know," she added, as though reading my thoughts was part of the service here, "but the cheesecake requires a bit more finesse. We have to match you up with the cheesecake that is perfect

for you, or it just won't work."

"What won't work?" This was driving me batty.

"Why, the promise on the sign, of course." She looked at me carefully. "You came here for the best damn cheesecake in the universe. But it might not be here yet. The universe is a pretty big place, you know."

I sat obediently at the table she pointed to, and shortly thereafter was sipping a steaming cup of pretty good Kona coffee, while I tried to take stock of my situation. Here I was, on my lunch hour, waiting while this woman told me (in spite of the fact I could see a display case absolutely *loaded* with cheesecakes) that mine might not have arrived yet! I was more than willing to sample the vast assortment I could see there. A B-52 cheesecake was that moment high on my list of priorities. Perhaps fresh peach, if they could get them from somewhere like Chile at this time of year. Hell, they *all* looked good enough for me. Then I stopped to consider. Maybe they were just there for display. Maybe they were all styrofoam, like wedding cakes. I'll never forget my disappointment at learning that those marvellous, multi-tiered cakes were just for looks, except the part the bride and groom would slice for photographs. Maybe that's what always turned me off the idea of marriage.

But this thought did nothing to make my stomach feel better. I had skipped morning coffee break to make room for this, and here was this woman telling me that I'd have to wait longer.

"Maybe days," she added, casually. No wonder business was slow! Perhaps this place was little more than a convenient tax write off for some corporate bigwig. My stomach growled in protest.

"Would you please tell me why this is so important?" I asked in desperation. "And just what is in that big book, anyhow? Do you have the names of all the people who work downtown, or something? Even so, how on earth could you have known about me and my parents, unless someone from my office called you?"

She went to the counter and lifted the book. It was a large black volume, not much different from the family Bible we'd inherited from my grandmother a few years back. On the cover were some letters in gold, gothic script. "Cheesecake Lovers of the Universe," it read.

"They come from all over," she said, conversationally. "The trick is, we don't just give you any old cheesecake. Of course they're all good! We give you THE cheesecake. Once you have had it, you never really need another one."

"That's a very depressing thought," I responded, feeling the slightest bit nervous. "I can't imagine never wanting another cheesecake again."

"Now don't get me wrong, honey," the woman replied, seriously. "I

didn't say you'd never *want* another cheesecake. I said you'd never *need* another cheesecake. There's a big difference."

I mulled over that one briefly, and supposed that she was right. How often in the past had my mother said things like, "Now dear, you know you don't NEED those new shoes; you just WANT them." Or else "Sweetheart, I think you really NEED a haircut." Or else, "Meredith, I think you NEED to go out with young men more often. Even if you don't like the ones you go out with. After all, you never know. While you're out, you might meet someone."

"This is very nice coffee," I said after a few moments. "But I'm starving here. Can you tell me when my cheesecake is going to be ready?"

"I don't know. The book hasn't told me yet."

That was as much as I could take. I gulped the rest of my coffee, left a Loonie on the table and fled the shop before Melissa had a chance to utter another demented word. Before going back to work, I grabbed a salmon salad sandwich in the Food Fair at Scotia Place. When I got to work, I hid in my own office behind a closed door. I didn't want anybody to know that I had gone out for cheesecake and ended up talking with a nut bar.

Which is precisely why I found myself, three days later, walking through that same door under that same pink neon sign, and seating myself at that same table. Melissa did not seem surprised.

"Not much longer," she said. "Maybe today, even." I didn't even ask how or if she really knew.

There was another customer there, too. A sad-looking old Oriental man sat hunched over his coffee, reading a thick paperback. It was covered by a hand-made cloth book jacket, so I couldn't see the title. I'm always snoop about what other people choose to read in public. On airplanes, I often find my gaze straying across the aisle, to the laps of total strangers, mostly male. It can get embarrassing sometimes.

Melissa brought my coffee and gestured toward the old fellow, saying with a whisper, "Sad case, that one. He's been coming here for nearly twenty years. Ever since his wife passed away, poor soul. I keep hoping that his cheesecake will come, but it never does."

"Do you mean to tell me that in all this time he's never had ANY cheesecake?" I asked in a horrified stage whisper. That would be like dying of thirst in the desert while an A&W Root Beer stand stood right in front of you. "Couldn't he have one of those other cakes while he's waiting?" I think I wanted her to tell me they were all fake, and have done with it. I still didn't know exactly what this "wait" would be for, but I sure didn't want to see myself in twenty years, hunched over this checkered tablecloth with my coffee and a book. And no cheesecake.

"It wouldn't be the same," was all she said. And then a little while later, she came by my table, shaking her head sadly. "Try again next week, honey."

That cheesecake became an obsession with me. I didn't give up dessert entirely while I waited for it, however. Do I look that stupid? Over the weeks which passed, I ate out as often as I ever had, and sampled the best cheesecakes that Edmonton had to offer. But it wasn't the same, somehow. I always had the feeling that I was missing out on something elusive that only Melissa's cheesecake could give me. So at least one lunch hour a week, you could find me there, drinking coffee and reading a paperback novel.

Occasionally I would nod and smile to Mr. Wu, the old Chinese gentleman, and he would nod and smile back. We never spoke. What would I have said to him? "Hello, Mr. Wu, how's the cheesecake?" We knew we were both in the same bizarre situation. Melissa would bring us our coffee and shake her head and say something comforting like, "Maybe next week, honey," and then go back to cleaning the counter, or whatever else she did to pass the time. And at the end of the lunch hour, I would leave the coffee money and a small tip on the table, close up my book and return to my office, stopping to pick up a sandwich along the way. Mr. Wu may have stayed until closing time each day that he was there. I didn't ask what he did the rest of the time.

When I walked in one particular day, I knew that something was different. Melissa's black book was open wide on the table in front of Mr. Wu, and she was showing him something. "It says today for sure, Mr. Wu. Gee, I'm gonna miss you."

I wasn't at all sure that I should be there to witness something this intensely personal. "Should I leave?"

"No, honey. Stay! This is something that really ought to be shared. Mr. Wu would be so disappointed if he thought he'd driven you away. Wouldn't you be, Mr. Wu?" The old man nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the pages of the large book. I wished I knew what it said. I wondered what my page would say when my time came.

Somehow, I was expecting a fanfare or drum roll as Melissa proudly carried the plate with Mr. Wu's cheesecake to his table. I remember that it wasn't a slice of cake, as it would be had she taken it from one of the larger ones in the display case (which may or may not have been fake). It was a small, but complete, round cheesecake, made exclusively for Mr. Wu. Of course.

She placed it before him, and stepped back in respect as he lifted the fork. He carefully plunged his fork into the cheesecake (was it lemon?) and brought the first piece to his mouth. I felt myself holding my breath as I watched him chew slowly. A smile began to grow on his lips as he savoured

every morsel of that first mouthful. I watched, mesmerized, as Mr. Wu continued to eat what I knew had to be the best damn cheesecake he'd ever had in his entire life. I felt like I was sharing some sort of religious experience. It was weird, but I felt at peace, just sitting there with my coffee forgotten, watching Mr. Wu eat that cheesecake.

After polishing off the last morsel from the plate, he sat a while sipping his coffee, and smiling. I felt a tinge of jealousy and then remembered what Melissa had told me about his twenty-year-long wait for this very moment. He'd paid his dues for certain. Then Mr. Wu carefully wiped his hands and mouth with the cloth napkin that Melissa always provided, stood, bowed slightly to Melissa and to me, left a hundred dollar bill on the table, and slowly walked out of the coffee shop without another glance back. On his way out, he bowed to the pink neon sign.

Melissa waited until he was out of sight before she sighed, "I'll miss the old guy." Then she busied herself with clearing the dishes from the table and wiping up any crumbs. She picked up the bill he'd left, grinned at me and pocketed it. "Pretty nice of him to do that. We don't charge for the cheesecake when it comes."

I watched her with curiosity as she took his plate and fork and reverently carried them to a small door in the wall, near the back of the restaurant. She pulled on a wooden knob, and a sort of chute opened. She tipped the plate and fork over the lip of the chute and watched them slide down to somewhere. We were already in the basement of the building. There must, I thought, be a sub-basement. Then she closed the little door.

"Interesting way to get the stuff to the dishwasher," I remarked.

"Oh no, honey. We don't wash any of the cheesecake plates and cutlery. That would be disrespectful. We dispose of them by returning them to their original elements. It's the only way. I would never expect the next customer to use a plate that someone else had used."

I let this one slip past me without commenting. The concept of returning a china plate and stainless steel fork to "original elements" was just too odd for me, even in this place. "Can't Mr. Wu use that same plate and fork the next time he comes?" I asked.

Melissa just looked at me for a moment. Then she said, quietly, "You don't know, do you? He won't be back here. Ever. He doesn't need to any more, you see."

"That's just it, I *don't* understand!" I answered. "Doesn't anybody *ever* come back after they've eaten their cheesecake?"

I could tell she was trying to be patient with me. "Like I said. Once you've had the best damn cheesecake in the universe, you won't need to come back." And she turned and walked through the little door behind the

display case that held all those wonderful looking cheesecakes. I sat for a long while, until my coffee grew cold and it was time to get back to the office. I left my Loonie on the table, as usual.

That was several years ago. I've been going to Melissa's every week on one of my lunch hours. I don't work at the firm downtown any more, so it's a bit awkward to get there, but I do. I haven't seen any other customers since my lunch hours with Mr. Wu in all that time. Perhaps they go on different days or during different hours. Perhaps there aren't many others like me and Mr. Wu. Melissa says that it is pretty rare that two customers are there together, and that I should feel honoured to have seen Mr. Wu get his cheesecake. Some days, however, I have arrived just in time to see Melissa reverently pouring the used plate and fork down that little chute in the back. I bite my lip and hold back tears over someone else's good fortune and my envy.

Every week she greets me with my coffee and a hopeful smile. "Any day now, honey. I'm sure of it."

Every week I read my book, sip my coffee, leave my Loonie on the table and pick up a sandwich on my way back to the office. I'm a senior partner now, so getting back on time isn't as critical as it used to be. I always wait until the last possible minute. Besides, some of my most creative thinking and decision making has been done during those lunch hours. Cheesecake or no cheesecake, those hours have been good for me — sort of mini retreats in the middle of a busy week.

My mom passed away last spring. Dad has been seeing a widow who goes to the same church as he does, and it's been good for him. I think Mom told him before she went that he should remarry quickly so he wouldn't be lonely. She always did try to take care of us. I don't know what she would say about my visits to Melissa's. I always kept those to myself, and never told her. I miss her advice, though. I think that even when I ignored it, I was still using it, and she knew that.

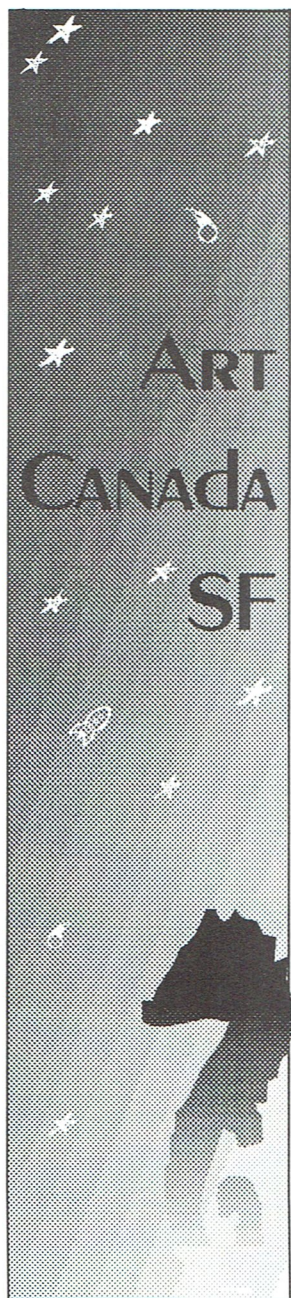
I don't really know why I do this. I can't imagine waiting as patiently for anything else in the whole universe.

But I will always remember that smile on Mr. Wu's face. That smile, I think, is as good as it gets. I heard a song once that talked about being "closer to fine." I like the sound of that. I think my life is pretty close to fine. And my cheesecake will be coming to me soon. Any day now.

I'm sure of it. ☺

(continued from page 23)

What makes Doug, Brian, Candas, Leslie & Spider Laugh?
Our Special HUMOUR Issue, available in December, 1991!



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Flesh and Blood

by Brent Buckner

illustrated by Nancy Niles

My hand shook as I reached to ring Douglas Crain's doorbell, lit up in the night. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself for the coming debate with the elderly Jesuit. I had to convince my old teacher to help me destroy myself, and I had never won even a trivial argument with him.

Impatiently, I tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked. I pushed it open, and called into the house. Again, I received no response, so I tentatively tried to stick a foot over the threshold. An invisible wall stopped me; another aspect of the legends confirmed.

I tried calling again, more loudly. "Douglas? It's Patrick."

This time I got a response. His muffled voice came to me through the kitchen, but obviously originated in the basement. "Come on in! I'll be up in a second."

The barrier fell to his words, and I stepped over the threshold. That was as far as I was going, though. A crucifix hung on the wall at the end of the entrance passageway, just before the kitchen. It held me at bay.

I called back. "I'll just wait for you here at the door, thanks." I turned myself away from the burning cross and leaned into the door. It helped, a bit.

I didn't have long to wait. I soon heard his footsteps coming up the

stairs, followed by his appearance at the end of the entranceway.

"Don't come any closer!" Douglas stopped, startled by my odd greeting. The cross he wore around his neck had necessitated it. "Just stay there for a moment. Please." At least he couldn't feel too threatened by me, once he understood what I had become.

"Patrick, are you ill?" His voice was curious and concerned.

Of course he had reached that conclusion. I looked awful, and here I was telling him to keep his distance. In some sense he was right; I was sick.

"Not in the way that you mean. It's hard to explain." Start slowly. "It's mostly psychological, but I have some physical symptoms too." The expression on Douglas' face was carefully neutral. He didn't want to risk offending me; when he had all the facts, he would allow his reactions to show.

"I have a strong aversion to religious symbols, especially crosses and crucifixes. It would make it easier for me if you'd put your cross inside your shirt. Keep it on, though. And you could also take down the crucifix. Put it in the kitchen or something." Douglas simply nodded and complied.

He stepped back into view after removing the crucifix from the wall and depositing it in the kitchen. "Is that better?"

"Much better, thank you. Is there some place we could sit and talk?"

He jerked his head, indicating with his chin the room off to my left. "The living room should be fine. Just give me a moment to move any artifacts that you'd find disturbing." He ducked into the room, turned on the lights and re-emerged. "No, I think that should be acceptable. I just wanted to double-check. Why don't you look in and let me know if anything's bothersome?"

"That sounds good. Thanks." Douglas went into the room and I stepped to the empty doorway. I only had to glance around. If there were anything to be wary of, I could hardly miss it. "No, it's fine." I hadn't said anything about mirrors, but fortunately there wasn't one in the room. I stepped toward the couch opposite Douglas' customary chair.

"Is there anything I can get you? A coffee, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. I don't think it's on my diet. Maybe we could just sit down, and I'll try to explain my problem."

"Okay, Patrick. Just let me know if you want anything."

We settled into our seats, and I readied myself with a deep breath. Any explanation would sound outrageous, but that was the nature of my predicament. All that I had to do was get Douglas to believe what he saw.

"I just told you one of the symptoms of my condition. There's another that I probably have. I'd like you to tell me whether or not I'm exhibiting it. I can't tell."

Douglas sat forward a bit, as though to get a better view of me. "Okay.

What am I looking for?"

"I'll need a mirror to show you. I'd rather not tell you what it is; it would sound pretty fantastic. If I've got it, you'll know." I thought for a moment. "Do you have a shaving mirror, or a hand mirror? Something small."

"I have one of those double-sided shaving mirrors. Will that do?"

"Sounds good. Would you get it, please? And, uh, I've also got an aversion to mirrors, so don't come close with it."

"Then how will I see anything, if you can't get close to it?"

"I'll explain it when you've got the mirror. Please."

Douglas gave me an odd look, trying to decide how to treat my reluctance to divulge any details. He settled on humouring me. "Okay. I'll be back in a flash."

I braced myself for the brightness of the mirror. I moved to the edge of the couch furthest from the doorway. Looking through the doorway, I could watch the stairs Douglas had gone up.

When he started down, mirror in hand, I gave him a couple of instructions. "Remember, I really don't like to be around those things. Just stand in the doorway and keep the mirror behind you. I'll turn my back to it." Once Douglas was in position, I twisted on the couch so that I was facing the wall.

"Now what do I do?"

"Just hold up the mirror, point it at me, and look at my reflection. When you've got that, let me know."

"Okay. Seems pretty odd though. I can tell you what you look like without this thing."

I counted to five after that comment. "Can you spot me?"

Douglas' voice was agitated. "No, I can't. I can see the couch, right where you're sitting, but I can't see you in the mirror."

"Put it back then. That's what we were looking for. And you might feel better if you pulled out that cross again. Just don't come near me." I heard his footsteps start up the stairs. I turned, watching for his return.

It took longer this time. I heard a door closing, and then everything was quiet.

He reappeared in the doorway, his cross a beacon on his chest. "All right, Patrick. Tell me what this is all about."

I chose my words carefully, giving him little to disagree with. "I am suffering from a belief that I am a vampire. What's worse, I can't disprove it. In fact, the only evidence I've got tends to reinforce the belief. That's why I'm here."

Douglas frowned. "You really believe this? Why?"

"Well, the most compelling evidence is that I don't have a reflection. You saw that. I didn't even tell you what to look for, so it certainly wasn't a matter of the power of suggestion." Douglas' eyebrows lifted, conceding the point. "There's my reaction to crosses and mirrors. I also can't stand garlic."

"So how do you think it happened?"

"You'd better have a seat; preferably at the other end of the room." As Douglas settled himself, I began my story with the ringing of the telephone a few nights earlier.



With a sigh, I put aside the remains of my Caesar salad and picked up the phone. The voice on the other end of the line was a teenage girl's, tight with nervousness. She explained that she was calling about the death of John Casey, a seventeen year-old in my parish. I had buried him that week, an apparent suicide. She hinted that there was some deeper motive than simple angst, and asked me to meet her.

She asked me to avoid standing out, including looking like a priest. I supposed that she was worried about her image with whoever passed for her friends. It was a minor request, easy to grant.

She met me at the bus depot, recognizing me from my description. Her own appearance was unremarkable; I couldn't have picked her out of the crowd. When she came up to me, the only impression I had was of a teenage girl with short black hair. She introduced herself in quick, nervous tones, and asked me to come outside with her. She was uncomfortable staying still. She felt exposed. It seemed natural to try to put her at ease.

We began walking, with her leading the way. As we walked, she began to talk about street life. I thought she was steeling herself to talk about whatever was bothering her, and listened attentively for conversational clues. I lost track of where we were. I had to focus on her voice, or her words just slipped away. It was as though I were listening to a poem, hearing the metre and the rhyme instead of the meaning.

I don't know how long this lasted. When we stopped, I felt like a sleep-walker suddenly awakened. Looking around, I saw that we had wandered into a run-down residential area. We stood in front of an old house, indistinguishable from the rest. Obviously, this had been her destination from the time we left the depot.

She apologized for taking so much of my time; she had to be sure that we hadn't been followed. She had to be sure that she could trust me. Almost shyly, she invited me in.

I couldn't turn away, when she seemed so close to opening up. And there was something else — I wanted to do as she said.

She unlocked the door, and stepped aside to usher me in. I stepped into an unlit hallway. As she swung the door shut, I was plunged into utter darkness. Turning to speak, I heard the key turn in the inside lock.

And then she was upon me. I didn't even have a chance to struggle: I was so disoriented, she had me gagged and bound with handcuffs on my wrists and ankles before I could react.

She carried me downstairs and secured me to a pole. Only then did she turn on a light, revealing the windowless basement room.

She carefully explained that she wanted me to understand the gift she was giving me: an eternity at her side. She showed me that she had no reflection before she fed.

I regained consciousness with a painful bite on my neck and vague discomfort in my stomach. Within a few hours, that incipient heartburn grew into an inferno. I was reduced to groaning and whimpering into my gag.

She kept checking on me, obviously worried. In some twisted way, she really did care. She kept telling me that it wasn't supposed to be like this at all. She tried to comfort me, holding me and murmuring to me.

In spite of the pain, I fell asleep in her arms. The demands of my body sent me into complete unconsciousness.

The second night she ungagged me. She even let me pray aloud, though it obviously bothered her. God, she told me icily, hadn't just abandoned us, He had made Himself our enemy. For the crime of simply being what we were.

I lay on the floor, drifting in and of delirium. Along with the constant companionship of pain was the sick certainty that God would not even let me die. He was letting me become one of the undead, the damned. I prayed, but was no longer sure why.

The third night I awoke screaming. The cross I wore under my shirt was burning like molten steel. She burst into the room and loosed me, so that I could tear it off. It burned my hand when I flung it away.

My transformation was complete.

She cradled my head, and brushed the tears from my cheeks. The pain in my stomach reasserted itself with a vengeance. I belched, and the air carried the stench of garlic. It was my last meal, the Caesar salad. It had boiled in my stomach since my change had begun.

A pure, driving need to get away swallowed all rational thought. The next thing I can remember, I was running down the street, alone.

I found a cab and gave Douglas' address.

†

I broke off uncomfortably at the end of my story; the memories had

been painful, and it had taken longer to give the summary than I would have guessed.

Seeing that I had finished, Douglas asked me to stand. I saw that he had put his cross back under his shirt. "Patrick, you aren't hungry right now, are you?" I shook my head, and he continued. "I'm covering my cross because it'll make things easier tonight. We have to make some arrangements for you to stay here, safely. It'll be better if you don't have to stand across the room from me."

I had never explained just what sort of help I had come for. I didn't want to make it real by saying it aloud; I had hoped that Douglas would infer it. Since he hadn't, I had to make it plain. "Douglas, I didn't come to you for refuge."

"Then why did you come?"

"I came because I'm afraid. I'm too dangerous. I'll get hungry sometime; you know that. I can't take a risk on what I'll do when that happens. You don't understand how powerful all of these sensations are; the revulsion for garlic, the pain of the cross. I'm afraid of just how terrible my hunger will be. I want you to help me die, now, while I can still control myself. I just can't do it alone."

He gaped at me. Throughout all of my tale, he had listened calmly. Now he was astonished. "What! How can you even think of that? Look, I know you're frightened. You're going through a terrible trial. But you can't just give up, toss aside your life as though it were nothing more than an inconvenience. You're a priest! You know better than that."

Then he delivered his pronouncement. "God has given us this opportunity to understand, to act. We must use whatever time He has given us." His tone was final.

That made me angry. "What He has given us? God hasn't given me anything! Don't you get it, Douglas? I'm one of them. The undead, the soulless. I'm a vampire, damn it! He's turned His back on me! I'm damned already."

Douglas just looked at me mildly and brought me up short. "Prove it."

Prove it? What did he want? I'd shown him I had no reflection. I'd given him my symptoms. I'd told him my story. What other explanation could there be? "Haven't you been listening? What more proof do you want? I suppose I could try to turn into a bat. I must be able to, if I could find out how. How else can I prove to you that I'm a vampire? Stand in the sun and fry? I'm afraid of what I'll do to get out of it. I thought you understood that."

He shook his head. "No, I'm willing to accept that you are a vampire, at least as a working hypothesis. We might be able to determine a few other

tests for reassurance, but that's a minor concern. What you haven't proven is that you're damned."

"Douglas, I'm driven off by crosses. Doesn't that suggest something to you?"

"Well, being driven off by a cross certainly isn't a necessary condition for damnation." He was using his academic's voice, talking about this as though it were some abstract puzzle. "Is it sufficient? My first guess would be that it isn't. God is rarely so obvious."

He continued, hand gesturing as it would in a lecture. "When you first told me of your condition, you were trying to avoid telling me flat-out that you're a vampire. So you chose to describe your symptoms, as though you had one or more illnesses. I think that approach has merit."

I broke in. "But I'm not sick. I break physical laws. I'm a supernatural creature."

"But you are bound by rules. We have to understand those rules and what lies behind them. We can't blindly accept the superstitious explanations." He fired a question at me. "What does an aversion to mirrors suggest about the state of your soul?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"And what if your aversion to crosses is of the same nature as your aversion to mirrors?"

It was Socratic cross-examination at its finest. He asked the right leading questions, and I was forced to state his point for him. "Okay, so what if being driven off by crosses doesn't prove that I'm damned? I'm still either going to drink human blood, or starve to death. I don't know if I'll be able to choose the starvation and stick to it."

"I'll make you an offer. Stay here as long as you feel you are in control. Then, if we can't arrange a restraint, I will help you die. But first, we must make every attempt to find an acceptable source of food, or a way to reverse your condition."

I agreed to the deal. It isn't easy to dispute a Jesuit.

"Wait a minute." Something was glimmering in Douglas' eyes. "Run through the list of symptoms you know about, or can remember from the legends."

"Well, I can personally vouch for being burned by the cross. I don't have a reflection. I couldn't come into your house until you invited me. I can't stand garlic. Crucifixes and crosses look so bright that I have to avoid them. I became a vampire because one drank my blood."

Douglas nodded, encouraging me to go on. "Aside from that, there's just what I can remember from movies and the like. Holy water and communion wafers burn vampires. Crumbled communion wafers form a barrier

to them. They can't pass over water, except during certain tides." I had reviewed this list in my mind many times during my captivity. It came to me easily. "A stake through the heart kills them. They can transform into mist, bats or wolves. The sun burns them, and they have to sleep in coffins. They can command animals, and dominate people's thoughts. I think she used that power on me, that first night."

Douglas waited to be sure that I was done. Then he mumbled the religious items in my list. "Holy water, communion wafer, cross, crucifix. . ." He pursed his lips, and then spoke up. "Patrick, have you ever heard anything about vampires and communion wine?"

That was a puzzler. I rummaged through my memories, and came up with other examples involving the symbols I had already listed. But nothing about communion wine. I shook my head. "No, I can't think of anything. Why?"

"Oh, just a thought. There's something I'd like to try, if you're willing. I can guess why every major aspect of Catholicism except the communion wine is in the legends."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"I'd rather not say just yet. I wouldn't want to influence your expectations any more than I have already. Is that all right?"

"I'll accept just about anything to fulfill my part of the agreement." I left unstated my challenge for him to do the same.

Douglas stood. "Good. Let's start now."

I was a bit surprised at his abruptness. "If you like. Anything I can do?"

"Celebrate the Mass with me. I'll preside in the dining room; you can stay in the living room."

"What, you have the materials here?"

Douglas smiled sardonically. "Not the usual ones, but at least I have some bread and table wine."

He was right; it was just jarring to associations reinforced by years of habit. Before the ceremony, there is nothing special about the makings of the sacrament.

The Mass could have been a parody. Celebrated in a dining room, attended by a vampire, and held expressly to manufacture communion wine. The strength of the ritual instead made it real and true. At the end, God had given us the miracle that we needed: transubstantiation. The bread and wine became objects of communion.

I dipped a toothpick in the communion wine, as Douglas had suggested. I touched the wet wood to my arm, tensed for the pain that didn't come. With that assurance, I tipped the glass, pushing the tip of my tongue through my lips to lick at the wine. And tasted ambrosia.

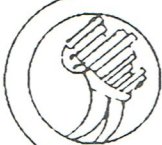
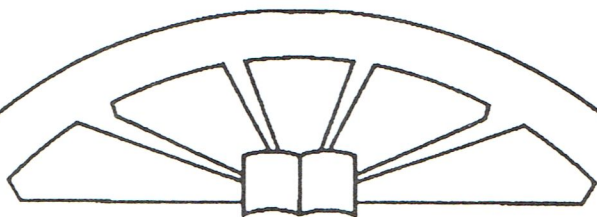
I poured the glass down my throat, drinking greedily. How to explain the taste, the sheer feeling of strength and well-being that went with it?

Somewhat dazed, I set the glass back down. I looked to Douglas for an explanation, too concerned with just how good I felt to reason it through for myself.

Douglas waited for me to speak. As the silence stretched, he saw that I didn't understand. "Think about it, Patrick. You're a vampire. You can only obtain sustenance from human blood. In the transubstantiation, wine becomes the blood of Christ, and Christ came to us as a man."

The curtain drew back further, revealing another small part of the mystery of God's mercy. He had not allowed this curse to be inescapable; it was only the legends that had made it out to be. Legends of darkness that discouraged anyone afflicted from holding onto any hope.

For all that this curse had taken from me, God had granted me a new purpose: I now embodied a refutation of those legends. For as long as I lived, I would stand as a testament to the Word made flesh. And blood. †



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ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

- BRENT BUCKNER** is an empiricist living in the national capital region. This is his first professional sale.
- DOT FOSTER** lives and writes in Calgary. She enjoys motorcycles, guinea pigs, mountain bikes and writers' retreats.
- BARRY HAMMOND** has published a novel, *Cold Front*, and a poetry collection, *moral kiosk*. Recent poetry is in *Sure* (the Charles Bukowski newsletter), *The New Quarterly*, and others. Look for "The Lesson" in *Horizons SF* this fall.
- ALICE MAJOR** won Alberta Culture's 4th Write for Youth Competition for *The Chinese Mirror*, and has published poetry and short fiction.
- CHERYL MERKEL** is a registered nurse, pilot and air traffic controller who was just transferred to Yellowknife for 3 years. Another of her stories, "God Rest Ye Merry," appeared in *ON SPEC* Vol. 2, # 2.
- ANNA MIODUCHOWSKA** of Edmonton is on the Editorial Board of *Other Voices*. Her work has appeared in *Canadian Women's Studies* and *Secrets from the Orange Couch*.
- J. NELSON** lives in Victoria in a house of great writers who occasionally let him wash their dishes. This is his first publication.
- KEITH SCOTT's** plays have been broadcast on CBC Radio and appeared on television. He is currently retired, living in Toronto and writing as a member of the Cecil Street Irregulars.
- JENA SNYDER** has published short fiction, poetry and *At the Mirk and Midnight Hour*, a novel based on the *Beauty and the Beast* series.
- DIANE L. WALTON**, by day a systems training analyst, has had two mainstream stories read on CBC radio. "Cheesecake" is her first published SF story.

ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

- ANDREA BAEZA** is currently procrastinating over her BFA and dearly wishes for a sabbatical. She is working at Beaver Flats Pottery, and drawing her face off.
- JIM BEVERIDGE** of Edmonton is new to *ON SPEC*. He says that he has done too many projects to list but we wheedled out of him that he has done murals, posters, album covers, t-shirts and "other stuff."
- LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK** won an Aurora for her Fall '90 *ON SPEC* cover; she has sold a cover to *Sepulchre House*, a new Edmonton horror magazine.
- MARC HOLMES** is currently busy at Ground Zero Graphics and with other projects.
- CATHERINE LUCE** of Edmonton, temporarily of Cambridge, Ontario, is also new to *ON SPEC* but has been published in small press publications. A graphic designer/illustrator with a ten-month-old son, she attended Sheridan College.
- NANCY NILES** is well on her way to becoming a professional illustrator and comic artist. She is a member of the steering committee of Art Canada SF.
- MARTIN SPRINGETT**, our cover artist, temporarily of Gabriola Island, BC, has done many covers for Guy Gavriel Kay's books, the latest being *Tigana*, and is Artist Guest of Honour at NonCon 14. ●

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