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Novel Excerpt from THE STRICKEN FIELD by DAVE DUNCAN





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# ON THE INSIDE

## FICTION

<i>Body Solar</i> .....	Derryl Murphy .....	6
<i>Sommelier</i> .....	Catherine MacLeod .....	18
<i>Child of the Bomb</i> .....	T. Robert Szekely .....	26
<i>Jazz Fantasia</i> .....	Robert Boyczuk .....	32
<i>A Four Letter Word</i> .....	Ivan Dorin.....	46
<i>Home</i> .....	Luke O'Grady .....	56
<i>Family Harmony</i> .....	M.A.C. Farrant .....	66
<i>Virginia's Next Christmas</i> .....	A.R. King .....	74

## POETRY

<i>Call Me Playdough</i> .....	Wesley Herbert .....	72
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## NOVEL EXCERPT: *From THE STRICKEN FIELD*

<i>Westward Look</i> .....	Dave Duncan .....	78
----------------------------	-------------------	----

## NONFICTION

<i>ON This Issue</i> .....	<i>ON SPEC</i> Editorial.....	3
<i>ON the Dark Side</i> .....	Jena Snyder .....	31
<i>Ask Mr. Science</i> .....	compiled by Al Betz .....	55
<i>The Inner Mind</i> .....	Tim Hammell.....	91
<i>ON Cons</i> .....	Canadian Convention Listings .....	92
<i>ON Our Contributors</i> .....		93
<i>ON SPEC Information, Subscriptions &amp; Merchandise</i> .....		95

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# ON THIS ISSUE

by Jena Snyder

**CORRECTIONS & APOLOGIES:** We screwed up big time in our last issue, and incorrectly credited ROBERT BOYCZUK's "DISTANT SEAS" to WESLEY HERBERT. How it happened is unimportant; getting the facts straight is what counts. And so to both Robert and Wesley, we offer sincere apologies. For more work by both of these talented authors, please see Robert Boyczuk's "JAZZ FANTASIA" on page 32 and Wesley Herbert's "CALL ME PLAYDOUGH" on page 72.

**FRENCH/ENGLISH EXCHANGE:** Anyone who hasn't read ERIK JON SPIGEL's "KISSING HITLER" in our Over the Edge issue (Spring 93) can soon have a second chance—the story was the first one chosen by the acclaimed Québec SF magazine *SOLARIS* to be translated and published in their Spring 94 issue as part of the French/English story exchange we promised a few issues back. We hope to have HAROLD COTÉ's "LE PROJET" ready for our Summer 94 issue.

**NEW LOGO:** How do you like our new look? We were going to wait for our 5th Anniversary (Spring 94-Hard SF Issue) to unveil our new logo, designed by STEVE FAHNESTALK, but we just couldn't wait.

**GUIDELINE CHANGES:** Regrettably, we no longer have the time or resources to read manuscripts that do not adhere to our required format. For the past five years, we have asked for submissions in competition format because it allows us to judge each work on its own merit, without being influenced by the author's name or publishing track record. Manuscripts submitted in incorrect format will be returned **unread**.

Also, we will now be sending acknowledgement cards only if we expect to take more than four months to respond to your submission. Publication deadlines are quarterly, with response about 10 weeks after each deadline. Unless you request otherwise, manuscripts that miss a deadline will be held for the next one; this may be up to 3 months.

**HORROR & DARK FANTASY:** We've decided that our next theme issue will feature Horror & Dark Fantasy, so sharpen your wits and pencils, and send us your submissions. Please see ON THE DARK SIDE, page 31, for more details. ☺

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(Theme: Horror & Dark  
Fantasy)

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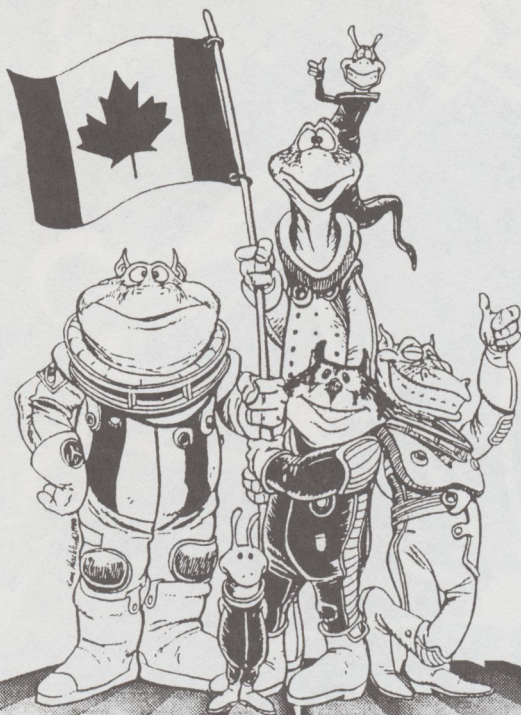
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# BODY SOLAR

by Derryl Murphy  
illustrated by Peter MacDougall

**B** *reathbreathbreathbreathbreath* . . .  
I can't remember how to breathe, he thought. Panic began to set in, but he managed to fight it back down, turning it into a cool lump in the pit of his stomach, rather than a piercing starburst.

*There's a breath now.* He felt himself begin to relax. *Remember what the lady said . . .*

The voice in his head seemed to become urgent. He turned his mind away from the new sensations and tried to concentrate on what was being said. Words and thoughts danced away from his grasp for a moment before he found the ability to focus.

"Simon, this is Anna." The voice sounded lovely, and familiar. He imagined himself frowning as he tried to place it. "We need to test all systems before you get too far away from us. Can you please try to take a breath?"

A breath? With a shock he realized for the first time that he hadn't been breathing. Fear started to override his somewhat dulled senses and he tried to take a great, shuddering breath, like a swimmer who had dived too deep and only just made it to the surface in time. Instead, he felt his chest lift very slightly and a small amount of air move into his lungs.

It didn't feel like enough, and he struggled for another. His body wouldn't cooperate.

"No, Simon," said the voice in his head. "Don't try to take another.

Your body knows what to do now and will breathe when it needs to."

"Who is this?" He had tried to speak, but rather than hearing words from his mouth, it felt like he had spoken inside his head.

"It is Anna, Simon. Dr. Schaum. Do you remember where you are?"

His thoughts slowly stirred about for a moment, then as they neared the answer they seemed to pick up speed, making him think of the rats in Africa scurrying about when newslights were turned on them. When he managed to pin one thought down, it struck him as the right one.

"Space."

His back felt warm. Kind of itchy, too. *Turn my head*, he thought. Then, *I remember, it takes a long time. But I can wait.*

His eyes took in everything around him. Mostly, it was just blackness, punctuated by dots of light. *Nothing but stars all around me. Stars and me and my sail.*

He hadn't turned his head enough to see the sail, yet. Funny how he hadn't thought to look at it before now.

*How long have I been out here?*

Eyes still seeing the black velvet with the pinholes, he tried to remember the name.

Oh. "Anna?" There was no answer, but he didn't feel hurried. He easily remembered that patience had never been one of his strong points, but he felt no anxiety

now.

A shock of recognition went through him. *My arm. I can see my arm, stretched out, reaching up and to my side.* His head was still turning, slowly, as he could gauge the rate by watching how long it took to move the view along his arm.

"Mr. Helbrecht?" A voice spoke in his head. It didn't sound like Anna, but he thought it best not to take a chance.

"Anna?"

Again, he waited. He could see his hand now, at the end of his arm. It looked funny, with the sail attached to it, like it was caught in the middle of metamorphosing from flesh to gossamer. And just beyond his outstretched fingers he could see where the sail broke into the vacuum; the optical distortion that made the sail look as if it were broken in two at the divide. Like looking into or out of water.

*A fish in a bowl*, he thought. *That's me. Except that my bowl is going places.*

"No, Mr. Helbrecht. This is Michel Giroux. Dr. Schaum is not currently monitoring this frequency. Are you in need of something?"

"I don't remember you."

The sail seemed to go on forever, shining from the light behind, a beautiful thing to see. He pretended he could see the little photons crashing up against it, forcing him faster and faster towards . . .

*Hmm. I can't remember where I'm going either.*

That could wait. His head had

turned enough that he could see the top of his shoulder now. It was covered with green, a sort of algae. That much he could remember.

Ironically, he felt his body take a breath.

"Yes, Mr. Helbrecht, I know you don't remember me. I am new at this position. Now. Did you have a question for me, Mr. Helbrecht?"

A question? *I wanted to ask . . . No! I mean,* "I wanted to ask, how long have I been out here? And before I forget again, where is it I'm going?"

If he watched closely and for some time, he could see the algae shift position along his arm and down over his shoulder blade to where he couldn't see.

The sun felt warm on his cheek.

•  
"How do you feel?"

Simon heard the voice, but he didn't want to open his eyes. Instead, he grunted.

"I'll take that to mean lousy, which was expected. Do you know who this is, Simon?"

"Anna," he grunted, "Why do you always ask me that question?"

She laughed, and the sound of her unforced humor drained a bit of the pain away. "You've gone through two years of sessions and restructuring, Simon. You tell me why."

He finally managed to pry open his eyes, blinking the lids to try to lose the gumminess, but she

was nowhere around. Then he remembered his neural input. "Because I'm likely to forget all sorts of things while I'm sailing. So you are doing your best to at least imprint your name into my memory."

"Very good. Now, is your back itchy?"

He paused for a moment to sort that question out. Then, "Yes, it is. Oh, I wish you hadn't said anything! Now I want to scratch!"

"Well, please don't, Simon. The algal implant needs about three days to take hold. And if you can't control your fingers we may have to strap your arms down."

Simon kept his arms down, trying not to think about the light tickling sensation of the huge mass of algae growing on his back. He had already spent an inordinate amount of money, over half of his personal fortune, and if any step of the procedure was unsuccessful he would lose his chance and forfeit the money spent. Many others had spent almost as much, only to lose out on the newest vacation of a lifetime because their bodies and psyches could not handle the stress of the transformation.

Aside from some minor mechanical details, the algal implant was the second last stage in the process leading to his trip. It was also one of the single most important. Without it, he would have no air to breathe and no food, as it were, to eat.

•  
"Mr. Helbrecht, I'm not al-

lowed to tell you how long you've been gone. Remember? We don't want you getting hung up on time. You paid good money to take a trip where you didn't have to worry about what the time was.

"As for your destination, you are proceeding to a predetermined location approximately equal to one-point-five A.U. from the sun."

"Oh. Thank you very much. Can I talk to Anna now?"

His neck seemed to have reached its maximum extension. He tried to turn his head further but couldn't.

Happy he had seen this view, Simon started turning his head again. This time he would look down, to his feet and beyond.

The man had said he didn't have to worry about time. Certainly he wasn't bothered by the length of time it took him to move his head, so he guessed this to be true.

"Hello, Simon. This is Anna. How are you doing?"

"Hello, Anna! I'm doing wonderfully, thank you! I don't know how long it has been since I launched, but I think that for the first time since then I'm really and truly aware of things!"

Off to his right, where his head was still facing, he saw a bright light that made him pause in his thoughts. It flared brighter than anything else he could see in the sky, and seemed to be lasting for a very long time. Only after it had decreased in size by a bit did he remember he had been talking to Dr. Schaum.

"It's very beautiful out here, Anna. I just saw a very bright light. Was it a ship, perhaps even your ship?"

After seeing the flaring light and the shine of the sun reflecting off his sail, the rest of space seemed very dark. As his head slowly turned to look down, his eyes moved along his body. It was in shadow, lit only by the low light of distant stars and by the one dim light of a small box embedded in his otherwise naked belly.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Simon. I must warn you that we can't keep this link up for very much longer."

"That's all right, Anna. Hey! What's this little thing on my stomach for? I can't remember."

The light from the box was a steady, mesmerizing glow. The box was small, only a few centimeters by a few centimeters. He felt his body take a breath and watched as the box rose and sank, slowly and not very deeply.

"Yes, Simon, it was a ship. A barge boosting for the asteroids. You saw its fusion rockets."

"Oh."

The box eventually lost his interest. He focused his eyes beyond the box; first on his feet, then on the vacuum below. His mind experienced a brief moment of vertigo as he stared down into nothingness, but he quickly recovered.

"That box, Simon, is your force-field generator. It helps keep you alive."

•

He felt like a freak. Standing in front of the floor-length mirror, his body had to be the most bizarre thing he had ever seen in his life. Perhaps, he mused, if things didn't work out he could join one of those old-time circus side-shows that were now sweeping the continent. Or maybe hide away in some religious retreat.

Simon was naked, standing and staring at his body straight on. A small gray box was on his belly, embedded in his skin so that it was partly inside his body and mostly out, fixed in place just above his belly button. He touched it with his hand; it felt warm, but not uncomfortably so.

Then he raised his arms straight into the air and watched as the mutant algae slowly migrated from his armpits and around to his back. He then shifted a couple of the mirrors and watched all of his back, a brown and green carpet slowly but constantly changing positions.

Next his gaze fell downwards along the mirror, to his buttocks. The only area along his backside where there were none of his life-giving little plant friends, but only because of the waste reclaimer. It looked for all the world like somebody had mounted a shiny metal helmet on his ass and crotch to function as a diaper. Which was essentially what had happened, except his wastes were undergoing drastic changes in composition, and this diaper took those wastes

and changed them into something he could use.

Finally, he looked at his right arm. Several dozen small yellow bruises marched up and down the length of his upper arm, signs of the time-delayed implants that would slow his bodily functions to help him survive his trip, although they could also contribute to the forgetfulness Anna had warned him about.

"You ready for the last stage?"

Simon turned around to look at Anna, who was standing on the other side of the force-field that kept him safe from contaminants. She had her hands in her pockets and was obviously making an effort to look into his eyes, and nowhere else.

"Sure," said Simon. "When do we start?"

"Right away. I'll get you to go place yourself in your body sling, and then we will be shutting off gravity and putting you to sleep."

He walked over and strapped himself in. "This is the last time I'll see you, right?"

"I should be on the ship when it picks you up. But yes, this will be the last time for some years."

"Mm. Then perhaps I can invite you to meet me back on Earth after this is over; I can buy you lunch in Paris or Frankfurt."

She smiled warmly. "I'd like that very much, Simon."

He returned her smile. "Until then, Anna. Thank you for all your help."

"You're welcome, and thank

you. I hope you enjoy your sail, Simon."

He tried to tell her that he thought *enjoy* wasn't necessarily the best word to use, but he felt himself nodding off and so just went with the flow of sleep.

•

There was a lot that could be said for solitude. Since his last conversation, Simon had not tried to contact nor had he been contacted by Anna.

At first he did talk to himself, at least within his head. Short little discussions, reminders to himself to do something or another when he finished this voyage; more often than not they were business related. But over time the need for that tapered off, and now he rarely did anything like that any more.

Instead, he just was. Existence was enough. He was a part of the blackness that was in front of him, and of the light that he was slowly leaving behind.

No more thoughts of home, of either his penthouse flat in the coop in Bruxelles or of his winter retreat off the coast of Thailand. No more thoughts of business, the nano company he owned that he had left in capable hands while away. No more thoughts of family, his sister who he dearly loved and who had cried uncontrollably when he had boarded the railgun shuttle, and his brother whom he despised and yet was saddened by the strength of that hatred.

His awareness was limited, but in the few moments of reflection

he did have, he realized that that made it all the more complete. He was a piece of cosmic dust, being carried by the solar wind.

He supposed that time was going by, but it didn't really seem to be anything to concern himself with. He was where he was, and he would get to where he was going when he got there.

•

There was a large clump of algae that had made its way up his neck and around to the side of his ear. It was now hanging from his left earlobe. He couldn't see it and he could barely feel it, but Simon guessed that it looked like a strange green and brown earring.

He currently had his head tilted down and to the left, eyes gazing off onto the dark. Thus he felt, more than saw, the algae break loose from his ear and slide slowly through the air to the front of his throat. It stayed there for a long time.

•

He spent all of his time just watching the algae. It now covered his chest and was halfway down his belly.

It moved slowly, but whenever his body took a breath he could see little pools of it stirring within the main mass. He had no idea why it was still alive on his dark side, facing away from the sun, although a distant part of him did remember seeing it collect under his armpits before he had been launched.

•

"Simon, this is Anna. We have received a distress call from the barge you saw boosting last year." *Last year? Last year!* "We are the closest ship and have been asked to attempt a rescue. I'm afraid we won't be able to pick you up, as we are just about to commence acceleration.

"Instead, a ship is being prepared in lunar orbit right now, and will be able to leave in just under three weeks. It should be there to pick you up about four months later than planned.

"I'm sorry, Simon. I really wanted to be there when you came back on board. I hope the extra time doesn't hinder you. The company has asked me to tell you that they will refund some of your money, and I'd like to ask if we are still on for lunch. Take care, Simon."

An extra four months.

It took him, he supposed, some time to find the words, as he had used none for what must have been a very long time. "Anna, this is Simon. Since I haven't been paying attention to the passage of time, I would say that it is not a big problem. I hope you are able to save people on your mission of mercy. And yes, I do remember something about lunch, so I hope to see you back on Earth. You take care as well."

That was that. He had extra time, but no way of really perceiving it.

•

The algae had surrounded his

force-field generator. With his head hung down he watched, curious as to what the little plants would do next.

They had been there for what seemed a long time, although he conceded to himself that it could have just as easily been almost no time at all. But now it seemed that something was happening; the generator started to fizz and shake, and he was suddenly afraid that some algae had managed to worm its way into the box.

A few sparks flew, and then with a loud BANG! a bolt of electricity shot out and found the only other power source within the field; his neural input.

The jolt fried his connections with the input. As the device was intertwined with his speech centers, the shock he suffered caused an immediate loss of his ability to speak, or even to form cognitive thoughts that he could translate into words. As well, the input's link with the company command vessels went down.

When the main shock hit him, Simon lost consciousness immediately. His body reacted at the same time, however, much stronger and faster than it had been for some years, as the surge of electricity forced his muscles to override the time-delay implants.

A sudden, involuntary jerk pulled his right arm in towards his body, which caused the sail on that side to begin collapsing. The force-field generator, while damaged, was still operating, and

sensed the fall of the huge solar sail. It immediately cast out a micron-thin force-field fan, propping up the sail until it could again fill out with solar wind.

In the meantime, Simon's course had changed.

•  
"We've lost a signal."

Dr. Petrone rushed over to the board. "Whose?"

Karl called up the readout. "Simon Helbrecht. Nothing coming from his input unit as of forty-five seconds ago."

"Try to coax it back on line. I'll get Claire to plot his trajectory."

Dr. Petrone thrust his body into the slot and pulled himself along the tunnel that connected the tracking station with the ship's control deck. In his hurry he cracked a hand against one of the grips and then bashed his head against one of the daylight-balanced light panels when he pulled back in pain. Nursing his sore hand he pulled himself along a bit more cautiously. Claire, the ship's brain, had anticipated the call and had the trajectory projection ready when Dr. Petrone pulled himself into the control deck.

Captain Galvez and two of her crew were also waiting for him. "We can leave in eight days, Beni," she told him. "No sooner."

He studied the trajectory map and sucked on his sore hand, nervous and angry.

•  
He couldn't remember who he was, but that didn't really bother

him. It felt like that was a normal state of affairs.

Come to think of it, he didn't know what he was, either. Turning his head slowly, he looked at as much of himself as was possible.

All he could see was a brown and green mass, lumpy and shifting ever so slowly. And beyond that mass was blackness, punctuated by points of light.

•  
"Our scans aren't turning up anything, Captain." Claire spoke out loud for the benefit of the two people on board who did not have neural inputs.

Captain Galvez floated over to her chair and strapped herself in. The rest of the crew did the same. She turned on the pager and spoke. "All hands, strap in for boost to next search zone. Thirty seconds."

After the thirty seconds the fusion rockets kicked in, and she was punched back into her form-fitting seat with a force of over three gees. The boost lasted for three minutes, followed by a break of equal length, before an additional two minute boost.

Then the search continued.

•  
The first few times that he had felt his throat begin to be blocked he had managed to swallow. Whatever was in there would drop down to his stomach and he would feel comfortable again. But during one lengthy period where his mind was elsewhere, the constriction became too much to swallow



away.

Because he was used to taking breaths far apart from each other, it took a long time to realize he was no longer breathing. By then, his mind had slipped into an almost total fog. What used to be Simon tried one more time to claw to the top of his consciousness, but the well was too deep.

Still, something of him remained.

•

Captain Galvez exited her ship. Ahead of her hung the massive bulk of the research ship *Waldsemuller*, its bulbous front end pointing her way. Her personal force-field irised minutely and for only two seconds, and air jetted out behind her, pushing her towards the other ship.

Claire spoke in her head. "Dr. Schaum is requesting that you use port number three, Captain. And to please maintain silence unless you are talking through me. Her own ship's brain is not as sophisticated as I."

Galvez grunted in response and irised her field again, this time in front. She bumped up gently against the ship and then created a pseudopod to grab hold of a handle while she waited for the airlock door to open. When inside and the ship's oxygen had finished cycling in she shut down her field and waited for the inner door to slide open.

When it did, both Dr. Schaum and Captain N'Dour were waiting for her. Schaum was tall and blond,

greying a bit, with light blue eyes. Worry lines creased her face. N'Dour was a huge, dour-looking Azanian, hair shaved off and with three earrings in each ear, emulating the style of imagined pirates from long ago. Where the doctor wore a jumpsuit, N'Dour wore shorts and nothing else. His body was well-muscled.

All three nodded tersely and exchanged quick greetings before the two turned and led her down a short hall to a small, plain room with a low round table and four chairs. They sat down, although Captain Galvez found the artificial gravity strange, having been living under SAR procedures for the last four months on her own ship, the naval vessel *Mitterand*.

"Claire tells me you think you've found Mr. Helbrecht, Captain," said Dr. Schaum.

"We think it's him," she responded, "But . . . he's not in good shape. Even for someone who is probably dead. We sent a snooper and the graphics it brought back were not very promising." Galvez pulled a portable viewer with multiple jacks from her kangaroo pouch.

Both Dr. Schaum and Captain N'Dour plugged in and watched with the snooper's eyes as it probed alongside the lumpy brown mass that seemed to have once been a human body. Captain Galvez noted with interest the looks of horror and then sadness that crossed the doctor's face. They both unjacked.

Captain N'Dour leaned his

imposing bulk forward, elbows on his knees and hands clasped together. "I understand that Claire has briefed you on the need for silence from the navy, Captain?"

Galvez nodded, angry that she had to follow orders to serve the needs of a conglomerate over the needs of an individual, and angry that N'Dour was emphasizing his point with his bulk. She leaned forward as well, putting her face uncomfortably close to his. After a brief hesitation, he leaned back a bit.

"I sympathize, Captain Galvez," said Dr. Schaum, looking a bit confused at what was playing out in front of her. "It infuriates me, too. But if this gets out, the regulatory boards would shut us down, and I think you'd agree the research we do for you is too valuable to lose. But our commercial public ventures are important to us getting, and I quote the company line here, 'much needed short-term capital to aid in the financial upkeep of the corporation.' And since the boards check our ship's brain every time we re orbit, we have this need for secrecy even out here."

"So we just leave him out there?"

She nodded. "We can come up with a half-dozen reasons that his telemetry shut down, all having to do with his actions or else the people who installed his neural input, which was manufactured, incidentally, by a Chinese company. We'll get a little bit of heat,

but not enough to shut us down.

"But if we bring the body on board, then people will see what happened to the algal implant. That will be the end of this business, as well as the end of research that has supplied you with things like your personal force-field."

Captain N'Dour stood, evidently trying to tilt the intimidation factor back in his favor. "He's gone, Captain Galvez. Consider him our latest message to the stars." He walked out, followed by Dr. Schaum. Then a crewman came in and led Galvez back to the airlock.

As she coasted back to her ship she watched the blackness beneath her feet, and wondered what it would be like to drift this way forever.

•

The thing lit up and moved away. Watching it leave, it was as though he were looking through a thick gauze.

It had been with him for some time: above him, below him and beside him. And then when it left he was alone again.

For a long time he waited for it, or something like it, to return. He seemed to expect it, although he wasn't sure why. But nothing else came.

When he finally realized he was truly alone, he turned all of his attention to the distant stars. Arms spread wide as if to embrace them, he glided silently towards the unknown. •

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# SOMMELIER

by Catherine MacLeod  
illustrated by Kenneth Scott

The sign above the door read, simply, *Sommelier*. There was no storefront. The carved wooden door was set in the brick wall between a used-book store and Cerene's music school, and Henry Garret regarded it warily as he approached. Aurelie watched unseen as she unlocked the door, allowing light and warmth and the fragrance of mint to seep into the cool morning. *Sommelier* was open to the public, even though it was too early to be conducting business.

But then, it was also early enough that no one would see him here. She knew his need for secrecy. For this he'd evaded his bodyguards and carried a briefcase full of greenbacks into a neighbourhood where he saw an even chance of being murdered. He glanced over his shoulder to be sure he was alone, and turned back to an open door.

Aurelie Rupert said, "Right on time, Mr. Garret. Come in, won't you?" She stepped back to let him pass.

And he hesitated. Actually paused. Not because he suddenly doubted the worth of his errand here; or because of the sudden dreadful certainty that she could deliver what he wanted. Not even because the eyes that regarded him with professional indifference were a truly unnerving shade of blue. But Henry Garret, native of the boardroom and veteran of countless takeovers, wasn't used to being looked at as if he wasn't God.

Aurelie waited, accustomed to the reaction, gazing out at Cawley Road where no one had ever been murdered, where Victor Ludin was dragging out café furniture and his young wife, Kiri, was brewing coffee. Aurelie raised a hand in greeting, and the acknowledgment of people in the street sent Garret racing past her into the waiting room.

Surroundings more alien than those outside. Small room painted in warm, neutral colours. Comfortable furniture covered with tapestry. No leather, no chrome. No receptionist. Aurelie closed the door and sat in the nearest armchair. "How may I help you, Mr. Garret?" She didn't invite him to sit.

He sat immediately, glad she'd dispensed with courtesies for which he had neither talent nor taste. He pulled a scrap of newspaper from his breast pocket and passed it to her. She took it between two fingers. She didn't wrinkle her thin nose at his odour of vaguely-obtained wealth.

He said, "I want you to make me a brandy from this."

She read the obituary quietly. Andrew Hall, millionaire industrialist. No doubt a fine enemy: Henry Garret was hardly one to request remembrance of a friend, assuming he had one.

She smiled coolly. "This will take a year, Mr. Garret. The work is delicate and time-consuming—and it cannot be done cheaply."

"Fine," he said impatiently. "Anything."

She moved to the squat cabinet sitting beneath the room's only window, and returned with an account ledger. "Anything" was the usual price offered by her customers, but Garret seemed prepared to be taken at his word. She wrote his bill in a swift, spidery hand and gave it to him. One million dollars.

"In advance," she said. He paid in cash.

Then she held the door for him, nodding politely to Cerene's first student of the day. Garret left without goodbyes or unnecessary cheer. She watched him for a long moment, then dropped Andrew Hall's obituary in the trash.

Begin with hatred, Aurelie mused, and plucked a vial from a high shelf.

Essence of anguish. Dreams half-remembered. Dash of pure glee.

Suspicion for colour.

She stoppered the beaker and locked it away to age in the dark. She sighed quietly and hummed as she cleaned her workroom. Henry Garret's life would be terribly empty without his cherished foe.

*Emptier*, she amended, and turned off the lights.

She passed through the wine cellar on her way out, regarding the bottles with an expert eye. Five hundred bottles glowing in the light from the stairwell, containing tangos and carnivals and baby's first smile. Jewelled moments, favour-

ite weeks, entire lives aging slowly and well.

Aurelie climbed the stone steps to her office and brewed mint tea for her next appointment. Business was up. Times might be tough out there, but little changed on Cawley Road, and nothing changed at *Sommelier*. She laughed softly at the whimsy of the name: wine steward—maker of fine wines and keeper of secrets not hers. Her clients were the very rich, the truly joyous, the criminally insane. Sometimes they were the same person.

They came wanting a glass of autumn; a goblet of May; a chalice of birdsong. There was always a market for memory.

Surely none of them were innocent enough to think she actually pressed grapes.

•

Tess Edmund said, "Do you have children, Mrs. Rupert?"

Aurelie gazed into eyes filled with shadows and ash. "Yes. Two by my first husband, two by my second." She didn't elaborate. Tess didn't need to know she'd outlived them all, or how long ago. "Their childhood was a wonderful time for me."

"Yes—but did you know it at the time?"

Tess, "a woman of a certain age," faced Aurelie with none of Henry Garret's doubt. She was twice-divorced, mother of three, as dark as Aurelie was fair. According to the polls, the president of Edmund Cosmetics was most-influ-

ential, much admired and the best-dressed.

She came to *Sommelier* and told Aurelie a secret her analyst didn't know.

"I want you to make me a wine." Tess clearly wanted to get up and pace. She didn't. "I was busy building up my company when my children were small. I spent more time in the boardroom than in the nursery. I missed school plays and softball games, and I didn't see any of them take their first steps. They're not resentful—but I am. I know I couldn't always be there.

"But I *wanted* to be there." She laughed sadly. "Can you believe I'm nostalgic for scraped knees and car pools?"

"Why not?" Aurelie smiled: there was something comfortable about this woman. "You want what you've missed. You'll have it a year from today." She wrote the bill and passed it over with a second cup of tea.

"One hundred thousand dollars. In advance."

•

She mixed the spirit from memory:

Sticky fingerprints on the windows. Jam-flavoured kisses. Three sets of first steps. Piano lessons. Halloween. It-followed-me-home-can-I-keep-it? Nights spent battling stubborn fevers. Report cards and early sunlight on little faces. Elusive lightning bugs.

Essence of peanut butter.

She sealed the bottle and set it

near the workshop window to absorb the fragrance and mystery of the four winds. It would be bittersweet. It would leave Tess Edmund giddy and breathless, or calm and content.

It would tingle on the palate and leave tears in her throat.

•

His name was Bram Owen. He was a slight, short man who'd aged quickly in the three months since the death of his wife, Laurel. He came to *Sommelier* with her photo and letters in her handwriting. Aurelie set them aside and said, "Tell me about her."

He spoke slowly at first, then faster as the memories grew more vivid.

The herbs in her garden. The fragrance of her soap. Her cat, Sphinx, whose eyes were the colour of Aurelie's.

The Staunton chessboard he'd given her as a birthday gift, and the way she caressed the wooden chessmen as they played. She loved violets. She cried over old movies. On Sundays they'd gone to the park to feed the swans.

Her slender softness in their old bed, her breath warm on his face, sweet pale rain against the windows.

The afternoon was far gone when she finished. Next door, Cerene's students were playing Bach, a piece of sheer joyous power.

Aurelie thought of her second husband, a misshapen hulk of a man whose voice was a narcotic,

and said, "One year from today, Mr. Owen, you'll have your wine." She presented his bill with a small flourish.

His surprise was evident. "One dollar?" he said.

"In advance."

•

Summer now. Aurelie stepped outside leaving *Sommelier's* door unlocked. The phone rang in her office. She made no move to answer it. She'd spent a portion of her morning on the phone with Henry Garret's secretary, a curious young man who'd found her name in Garret's personal calendar.

It was kind of him to call her, she said. Yes, she'd read the paper, knew that Garret had died this morning. Peacefully, in his sleep, really?

In his sleep, perhaps. Peacefully, she doubted.

Yes, she admitted, he'd called to confirm their appointment. No, he'd placed no order. She thought he would have preferred to do that in person. Yes, thank you for calling.

And she fetched Henry Garret's wine up to her office. It was a glowing, dark, almost toxic brandy; how sad he would never taste it. She opened the bottle, poured a little. Its surface sparkled vilely. She swirled the wine, inhaled sharply: a clot of hatred rode on her breath, sizzled in her mouth. It was indeed a fine revenge. She lifted her glass to his memory and touched her lips to its rim.

Her head spun. It was the kind



of hatred for which the world stops. It was intent, murderous, bizarre. Aurelie had dispatched her own enemies by outliving them, but if Garret's rancour was any gauge, she'd never imagined so magnificent an enemy as Andrew Hall.

She set the glass aside and lifted three tiny vials from a deep skirt pocket. She worked quickly, sitting behind her desk. The brandy gleamed malevolently: she was almost sad to be altering it. She opened the first vial and held it up to the narrow window beside her desk. It contained a century. She poured it slowly and marvelled at how the hatred faded. She cracked the second vial: compassion. The brandy turned the colour of pearls, the hue of quiet sadness. She opened the third—love—and stopped the bottle immediately. The brandy would release a flow of fine memories. It would also poison the drinker: such love, undiluted, would kill.

She set the bottle in the cupboard beside her account file, locked the workroom door, and went outside.

A warm, spice-scented wind blew through Cawley Road, lifting the hem of her dress. She watched Cerene, in gypsy silks and ribbons, seeing a student to the door. Aurelie thought she'd aged considerably during the winter, when she'd had fewer students and little to fill her time. But now there was less grey in her auburn hair and her step was light. She seemed refreshed and lively, as she always

did after teaching class. Her student offered Aurelie a shy smile in passing. Behind him, Cerene closed her door and strode across the street to Victor's café.

Tess Edmund passed her on her way to *Sommelier*. She was early for her appointment, but her smile was full of such anticipation Aurelie could not think of making her wait: it would be like making children wait for dessert.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully. "Come in."

Tess closed the door and turned to see her bottle held at eye-level. It was a carafe of blue glass, the exact colour of the perfect Saturday sky. Tess' mouth twitched as though aching to laugh. Or cry out. Aurelie wrapped the carafe in heavy paper, eased it into her hands.

"If you're not happy with this, please call me."

"Thank you," Tess said absently. Aurelie took her arm, saw to it she didn't stumble over the door sill. She watched her until she turned the corner, still smiling at nothing-in-particular. Aurelie realized her own smile was similar. She noticed the open window in the studio over the bookstore, saw no sign of the young potter who'd taken up residence there. But she heard the faint whir of his wheel and imagined wet clay writhing beneath his hands. She'd never met him. But Victor's Kiri, wondrously pregnant, moving among the customers with heavy grace, served coffee in the cups

he'd sold them. Tall mugs glazed in shades of turquoise and gold, colours that became purple and rose when hot coffee was poured.

Aurelie wondered if he would make her a wine pitcher.

•

Aurelie shook Bram Owen's outstretched hand and drew him inside.

"Would you mind if I left the door open?" she asked.

"Of course not, Mrs. Rupert. You wouldn't want to miss a moment of such a day."

"Just so."

He smiled as though the worst of his mourning was done. She brought his wine from her office and set it on the low table between them. He considered the nondescript bottle carefully. Guessing at its contents, she thought. Wondering, *If Laurel were wine, what would she be?*

"Champagne," Aurelie said, and he glanced across the table at her.

"My God," he said softly.

"Excuse me?"

"Your smile just now was like Laurel's when I missed the obvious." Aurelie didn't have an answer for that one. "Mrs. Rupert," he asked suddenly, "do you ever drink with your customers?"

"No one's ever asked me."

"I'm asking you," he said boldly. "Do you have glasses?"

She found a pair of champagne flutes, the blown glass almost invisible until the light touched it.

She was genuinely pleased to share his wine, knowing there were few people with whom he could share his memories. The cork exploded from the bottle, bounced off the far wall, and the wine fizzed lightly, a sound like faint laughter in another room.

"Will it always fizz like that?"

"Always. Just a little, Mr. Owen—don't waste your wife on me."

He poured an inch into the bottom of her glass; the flutes chimed as they toasted Laurel, and he drank. Aurelie watched curiously, never having seen the first tasting. He closed his eyes over unexpected tears. The lines on his brow smoothed themselves out. She noted the exact moment the memories took him.

She tipped her glass and went with him.

A month in Paris. A year in Vienna. Children grown and gone in the space of minutes. She opened her eyes to look into his. He whispered, "Thank you."

She wrapped the glasses in a narrow box with Laurel's champagne and saw him out. She offered her hand, wasn't surprised when he raised it to his lips. She was surprised to see it was evening. The champagne had distorted her timesense, no question of it. She would have to be careful of that.

But it wasn't the worst way to pass the afternoon.

A half-dozen customers lingered at Victor's, drinking coffee

beneath paper lanterns. Closing time. She stepped back to shut the door.

"Wait." He was a young man, thin and ragged.

"Yes?"

"I need a bottle of wine."

*Need, not want.* Desperate, she thought. Capable of violence. But—so am I.

"Come in." She heard the door click shut. "What would you like?"

"A . . . gift for my wife."

This is the one, she thought. He was nondescript, a man who'd go unnoticed in a crowd but for his eyes: warm grey and too-sharply focused. They looked bruised; he was near exhaustion, but made no move to sit down.

"Tell me about her."

His silence was that of a man with much to say and no time to say it all. Finally he said, "Julie's home tonight. Tomorrow she goes back to the hospital. I . . . we . . . don't think she'll be coming home again."

She brought Henry Garret's brandy from the cupboard, leaving her ledgers inside. There'd be no discussion of price. Even if he could afford to pay—and he couldn't—he wouldn't be back to settle the bill. Aurelie didn't think he'd let Julie drink alone. He intended to take the bottle by force if necessary, not knowing he couldn't. And if she killed him, Julie would have no release.

She wrapped the bottle in newspaper. "Drink what you want.

Dispose of the rest." He nodded. And paused. "Thank you."

Not for the wine, Aurelie knew. For her mercy. She watched him struggle for unnecessary words.

But finally he just left: Julie was waiting at home.

Aurelie locked the door behind him, wondering if Bram Owen had ever wished for such a wine. Maybe. She had herself, once. There'd been a time when a stiff drink would've been a kindness.

*Kindness.*

Yes. She turned out the lights and went downstairs, the steps lit by the glow of five hundred life-times anchored in the wine racks. Several would be needed tomorrow. She wondered if anyone would mourn the young couple. *I will remember them. I have a good memory.*

Kindness, she thought. Release for Julie. Release for her husband, who'd shown Aurelie that solace wore many guises. She'd made fortunes from memory's comfort, of course, but perhaps it was time to expand the business. Tonight's visitor had paid in possibilities: there were those who would pay for release.

The burdened, the ill, the terminally alone—she had no doubt that, if they needed to, they'd find her. Hadn't all the others?

Aurelie understood perfectly the law of supply and demand, and she sang sweetly as she worked.

There was a market for mercy out there. •



# CHILD OF THE BOMB

by T. Robert Szekely  
illustrated by Robert Boerboom

**T**here! Near the base! See him? No? Hold on, let me just adjust the slide to a higher magnification. Now do you see? No, he's not life-sized; I don't think that size or space have anything to do with it now. He's beyond that. Much beyond that.

See the look on his face, so sad, so lost. This is the most recent photo; I had it smuggled out of the Middle East after the test. His hair is a soft blond, not that dark color in this slide. All he needs is someone to hold him, to tell him it's all right.

I'm sorry, I . . . I have trouble sometimes; it's been so long for me and so short for him. He is still only six and there is so much he cannot understand, so much I could tell him. It took him four tests before he realized that he was trapped, that he was somewhere else and he couldn't get out. You can tell by the way his expression changed from one of joy to confusion to fear. It took four more tests before he started to cry. I missed that first tear. I couldn't get pictures out of the Soviet Union at that time; my contacts were much more tenuous then and I knew much less.

How did it start? In the simplest of ways. With a picnic. No, I'm telling the truth; I'm seventy years old but I'm not senile. I still remember the day I lost him. I was stationed in the U.S. during the war. I was one lucky bastard, did nothing but drive VIPs around. Colonels, scientists, Generals, one star, three star, I drove them all. One night the scientist I was driving started bragging about the project he was working on. So proud of his marvel, so ignorant of its power. He spoke words that sounded foreign and frightening to my ears. He said that if I wanted to see the biggest bang ever I should drive out to the New Mexico desert about the middle of the next month. I asked him what he was on about, but he just shushed me and drew me a small map. Take a lunch, he said, make a day of it. The date on the paper was July 16. I made a life of it.

My wife felt the whole idea was waste of time and refused to come along. She died in '53, but I can still feel her shame in me in every rain and every sunrise. I lost her only child. She never forgave me.

Jeff, my boy, was pretty excited and kept asking where we were going, and I kept saying I didn't know. He was real wound up by the time we reached the spot on the map. We had no idea what to do, so I sat down, pulled out a beer, and watched Jeff burn off energy in the cool morning air.

I could see the helicopters circling in the distance, but none came near our spot. We waited two hours and forever.

Suddenly, a blinding flash, a huge boiling cloud in the shape of a mushroom formed; it got dark and somehow light at the same time. Someone had grabbed the sun and set it upon the desert sands. Jeff yelled with delight and ran toward the boiling red mass. No. Please. Stop . . . I couldn't move, I couldn't stop him. It's not every day that you see hell and even rarer when it reaches for you. As I watched I could feel the ground shake; the air seemed to shimmer and hum. I don't know what exactly happened, but I do know that the atom wasn't the only thing split that day. A sandstorm pushed against us and I thought I heard Jeff yell out, but the wind stole away all sound. When it stopped Jeff was gone, and I stood there, mouth open, mind numb, while the jeeps surrounded me and the MPs took me away.

It was four days later when they finally stopped asking questions and let me go. They told me that my son was dead; the sandstorm killed and buried him. They said that I was not to tell anyone what I had seen, and if I did, I would be charged with treason. I returned to an empty house and a bitter wife.

On August 24, 1945, five days after my discharge, I saw the first picture of the explosion which

destroyed Hiroshima. Something in the photo was familiar; yes, I had seen one such explosion before, but there was something more, something bordering on the subconscious. In the middle of the cloud, about half way up, was my little boy, his arms stretched out, a smile still on his face. I grabbed my wife to show her; I jumped and danced and sang. I had found my boy and he was alive. I felt that God had forgiven me for my stupidity.

My wife was too blinded by grief and bile to see. She left that day. I did not try to stop her; I had found my boy and nothing would keep me from him. I spent the next few years combing the papers for pictures of the tests from all around the world. I would write to the Pentagon requesting photos and the FBI would come calling and threaten me. One day one of them actually looked at the photo I thrust under his nose. They never came back, but every so often I would get pictures in the mail, no note and no return address. I was harmless, only a grief-stricken father, someone to be pitied and humored.

I have quite a collection now, for every bomb dropped or set off above ground is documented. They are snapshots of a family torn apart. He's in every one, caught like a deer in the headlights of a speeding car. Action frozen, emotion implied. Most parents worry about missing the highlights in their child's life. I'll never live long

enough to see any of his. He exists only during the blast, when reality is sufficiently sundered to allow time to once again pull at him. He lives a mere thirty to thirty-five seconds in each test; he's barely one day older. He always looks so scared after the underground tests. The dark was never his friend.

I realized that I could only do so much from the sidelines, so I went back to school. I learned the language; I mastered the technology. I became one of the best, the one to be deferred to in all matters nuclear. I understood the nature of the beast far better than my peers. The grief-ravaged father was masked by the determined scientist. People see what they want, passions can be mistaken: lust for love, desire for need, obsession for dedication.

I have been to almost every detonation of a nuclear weapon on this planet. Some I watched from the control rooms of many nations, the great and honored guest. Some I observed from behind sand dunes and hillocks, the invader and spy. I call out his name and hope it reaches him, so he will know that he's not alone, but the blast steals away my voice like it stole away my son. I've shown his picture to survivors in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and prodded memories best left buried to piece together what I need to know. I hope each time that he will break loose, but he's too young to understand what

has happened. He's trapped in a maze that has only a few doors in time open, fewer and fewer every year.

In October of '62 I prayed for the war to happen. I wished on every star for the bombs to fly. You see, I know that if enough bombs and missiles go off at once, he will be put back. He is a hostage to our sensibility. I beg for his release and for mine.

That is what I offer you, General, a release from those nations that preach and push at you. I will give you the means to strike back

at those who would oppress you and your small country, a chance to prove that you have the ability to back up your word. All that I have learned is at your disposal. You provide the materials and I will provide the knowledge that nations have killed for. I care not for ideology and less for religion. The tests I have witnessed are taking their toll upon me; the race between old age and cancer is near its final lap. I ask for no payment, no reward.

Let the bombs fall. My boy is lonely and he needs his father. •



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## ON THE DARK SIDE

by Jena Snyder

*Stephen King, on horror: ". . . the genre exists on three more or less separate levels, each one a little less fine than the one before it. . . . terror on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion."* (from *Danse Macabre*)

Our theme for the Spring 95 issue of ON SPEC is **Horror and Dark Fantasy**. We're hoping for a record number of submissions so we can showcase the best stories our readers have ever seen and we welcome submissions in any and all forms of the genre. The deadline for submissions is AUGUST 31, 1994, and we still want stories in COMPETITION FORMAT, 6000 words MAXIMUM. For full guidelines, send a SASE to ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

We are looking for well-written stories featuring three-dimensional characters. We appreciate plots which advance, and motivations which are believable. Elements like conflict, pacing, and rhythm are welcomed. What we will toss out immediately are stories featuring cardboard characters in a stereotypical situation; one-liner stories relying on a joke or shock ending; gratuitous violence, sex, or whatever—if you're going to go for the gag reflex, please have a plausible reason to do so.

There are always exceptions; we might accept a story with corrugated cardboard characters, or an original handling of a plot that's been done a million times before. We like surprises, even nasty, wet, oogie ones. So come and play. We don't bite . . . too hard. •

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# JAZZ FANTASIA

by Robert Boyczuk

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

When Hamilton first heard the note he thought he'd dreamt it, so pure and aching clear it was, sparkling before him in the air like a cut diamond. It hung there an unimaginably long time, piercing the smoky grey half-light and smell of stale beer, burrowing relentlessly into his clouded brain until at last it found purchase, disturbing his addled and aimless thoughts, no longer a dream, another of his aborted fantasies, but suddenly real, very real. His slight alcoholic sway ceased abruptly, a momentary disturbance of his beery contemplation of a dark formica table top with its cigarette burns and legion of dark rings. The note caught him like a bright, razor-sharp hook, sank into his skull and began turning his head, slowly and cruelly, so that before he knew what was happening he found himself staring down the length of the dark, narrow room, past the end of the bar, to where the band played.

Hamilton blinked, once, twice, then rubbed his eyes to clear away the trailing wisps of muzziness. The band—*JJ's Jazzmen* had been chalked on a blistered blackboard near the door—was sandwiched in a small area, not even a stage, really, just an empty space that needed filling, jammed between and around two pillars supporting enormous smoke-blackened beams that ran a foot or so above head height the entire length of the room. It seemed impossible that they might play in such circumstances,

the bass and clarinet (*Who still used clarinet?* Hamilton wondered) on the outside of the pillars, all but invisible to the trumpet and guitar inside. Yet the players seemed as oblivious to their surroundings as the bar's other patrons, their music reflecting this indifference, listless and dull, a minimum of energy expended, empty, mechanical playing.

Hamilton listened. Had he heard that impossible note? He wasn't even sure he could have said which instrument had given it life—the clarinet, perhaps? His memory had faded, leaving only a vague recollection of what it had stirred in him. He watched the band play, squinting through the gloom to make them out: but they were indistinguishable, four enervated faces, glassy-eyed, tired, passionless.

A dull throb in Hamilton's head distracted him; he lost interest in the band and began rubbing his temples, hoping to massage away his incipient hangover, forgetting the moment of excitement, what had roused him from his stupor, licking his dry lips instead, thinking of whether he might have enough change in his pocket for one more.

He rubbed; the band played.

Then the note came again, powerful this time, not from the clarinet, no—how could he have believed that?—but from the trumpet, the unmistakable ring of a trumpet. *Listen to me*, it commanded. *Wake up, Hamilton, listen*. He stared at the trumpet player,

watched his leathery, wrinkled cheeks distend as he blew into the mouthpiece, his fingers stationary on the buttons. He listened as the dark figure blew another like the first two, shifted his fingers and blew a third and fourth that crackled with ferocity, Hamilton ridiculously counting them, savouring each one as if it were a rare wine to be sipped and appreciated, feeling inexplicably disappointed as they faded, only to be buoyed when the next note growled around him. Five, six, seven, and Hamilton began humming—eight, nine, ten, a tune he had known, one he had once played years ago, with Buzz Snider, wasn't it?

He pushed his chair back and got unsteadily to his feet, staggering closer so he could see who was cooking on the trumpet. But when he approached, he was puzzled, for though he could still hear those driving, forceful notes, he could see only a stooped old man whose rheumy eyes had none of the intensity he'd expected to see in someone wailing, really *wailing*, but instead had only a sad, objectless stare. Yet . . . yet, when his fingers moved, the notes came spilling out, one after another, faster now, a riff Hamilton recalled as tremendously difficult, but executed flawlessly, big brash blustery notes of energy and life that took his breath away. He shook his head as if to clear it, and looked around for another player, thinking perhaps he had missed something, that maybe someone else was teasing the brass.

But he realized there couldn't be: he knew this bar too well, every dust covered case of empties and rotting ceiling tile long ago catalogued in his memory. There was no one else.

Hamilton took a step closer, now uncertain, hearing those startling notes but unable to connect them with the man before him. He collapsed at the table closest to the band; the others continued playing in their uncaring fashion, the sound of their instruments harsher and more irritating next to the heart-wrenching clarity of the trumpet's voice. He could sense the band becoming aware of his presence, purposely ignoring him—he could hear it in their playing, the apathy replaced with a bristling defensiveness. He had always had an ear that way, a *gift* he'd called it back then. Listening to the better players he'd been able to tell them what they were feeling, sometimes—when he knew them well enough—exactly what they'd been thinking. He even acquired something of a reputation as a prophet, an unerring judge of raw talent. Somehow, he could block out the uneven edges and discordant notes, smooth away the rough spots and *imagine*—no, *hear*—what they might be like some day. His band leaders often asked him to sit in on sessions just to listen to hungry youngsters, and then asked him, "What'd ya think? Any good?" waiting for him to say, "Yeah, he's got it," or, "Nah, no heart," sure that whatever Hamilton said would show itself to be

true. His gift had made him a lot of enemies over the years, and spooked enough people to get him fired once or twice; but he had only laughed when it happened, young and hopeful and sure of himself.

But it had been a long time since he'd been sure of himself, of anything really, not since he'd lost himself in a bottle and drunk his music away, sip by sip, until even his gift deserted him, those who had hung on his opinions now passing him on the street without so much as a look.

Closing his eyes, he blocked out the squawking of the others, willed them away, concentrating solely on the man blowing wild, the man talking to him unlike anyone had for some time.

He listened with an astonishment and joy he had not felt in years, losing himself in the music, nodding his head in time. The notes sang through him, resounded in his skull as if it were a concert hall. He could feel the tingling in his fingers, he was the old sax player, his fingers moving along the same lines, imagining how *he* might play it, pausing when the trumpet took off on a ride, running out of control up and down the scales, improvising, yet managing to work seamlessly with the whole, moving with such authority Hamilton's whole body moved with it, in it, around it. *Yeah*, he thought, his heart pounding wildly. *Go, man! Blow it!*

And as it started so it stopped, abruptly and without warning, the final note lingering, echoing, drift-

ing past Hamilton, down the length of the bar, past the pimps and their whores, out the battered little door, into the night.

Hamilton clung to it, as a dying man might hang onto the hope of a last-minute cure. But it died, extinguished, a last coal winking out, followed by harsh, raucous laughter and the angry voices of the pimps arguing over one of the girls.

He opened his eyes.

JJ's Jazzmen were packing their instruments into battered cases.

Hamilton pushed himself away from the table. "Hey, man," he said, his tongue thick with drink, looking at the trumpet player. "Hey."

Eight dark eyes turned towards him. Their movements stopped.

Hamilton suddenly felt foolish. He had wanted to say something, had wanted to acknowledge the thing of beauty he'd just been given, to thank someone for it. But now he wasn't sure what to say.

"Yeah?" It was the trumpet player, his voice cracked and raspy from too many cigarettes, teeth and hair yellow with nicotine.

"I . . . I played," he said hesitantly. "The sax, I mean."

The trumpet player shrugged.

"Man, you were really smoking out there! You were great! I haven't heard playing like that in years."

The trumpet player narrowed his eyes. Hamilton could see the wrinkles in his dark skin, could almost imagine the dust in them. "What'd ya mean? Huhn? What'd

ya mean by that?" he said, his voice crackling with anger.

"Nothin', nothin' at all."

The old man scowled and stooped over to pick up his case; the others were already packed and moving towards the door.

"Wait," Hamilton almost shouted at the bent figure. "One question. Okay? Just one question."

"What? What'd ya want, man?"

"What you were doing. That little ride right at the end. Man, that was great. As good as I ever heard. And I've heard a lot."

"Well, you ain't hearing so good now. I didn't play no ride."

"Sure you did," Hamilton said excitedly. "You know what I mean, where you spun off just before the all-in. You know," he said again, and began humming it as best he could, though he had never heard it before, trying to recall every note of that unlikely improvisation. As he hummed he watched the old man's expression, watched his face freeze, become cold and hard as winter stone. He stopped humming. "You know," he said again, quietly, a question this time, not sure why, but aware he had done something wrong.

"I didn't play no ride like that." Anger filled the old man's voice, and Hamilton could see his hands trembling. "I can't. I couldn'. Not in years. I ain't played nothin' like that in years. What do ya mean makin' fun a me like that for? What do ya mean?"

"I . . . I didn't mean anything. I just heard—"

"Who put ya up to it? What son-o-bitch asked you to do this?"

"I just heard it, man. That's all."

"You didn' hear nothin'. Nothin' at all. You just like to make fun a ol' men, that's all."

"But I did, just before—"

"You ain't nothin' but a low-life, son-o-bitch drunk. Why you gotta be draggin' other folks down too. Huhn? What you gotta be doing tha' for?"

"But I heard it, man," Hamilton insisted. "I did. That was so sweet. You were great. Really great."

The old man began backing away. Hamilton could him hiss through his teeth. "What for, man? What for? Can't ya leave me alone? What'd I do to you? Jus' let me be." He shuffled quickly towards the door. Then he was gone, following his notes into the night.

•  
Waking in the dark.

*Perspiration soaked, heart hammering wildly, breathing raggedly, uncertainly, as if your body had forgotten how, believing that, had you not woken, your lungs might not have remembered.*

*A short while later, when you've calmed down, when your respiration has become more or less regular again, when the banging in your chest has been reduced to merely a steady knock, the reality of your flat brings you back down, all the way down, the torn and discoloured wallpaper, dripping sounds from the rusty sink, the*

*startled roaches scurrying for cover whenever you move, the creak of the old bed as you roll over to find that half-finished smoke, all nailing you firmly down to earth once more, placing you squarely in the monotony of your wasted unchanging life—not a life, really, you think, merely an exercise, mechanical, without meaning.*

*You remember, then, and your heart skips a beat. You close your eyes, trying to bring it back, but it's too late: the memory has faded, the music has fled.*

•  
When Hamilton returned the next day, all that remained of the band was the faint, half-erased word *zzmen* on the blackboard, over which a new name had been raggedly scratched. Hamilton stood there, trembling slightly. He hadn't had a drink for hours, wanting to be as clean as possible. Ordinarily he didn't pay much attention to the shakes, considering them to be a natural rhythm; but this time there was something else, something he couldn't define that made his condition intensely uncomfortable.

They had gone.

Where, the sullen bartender couldn't—or wouldn't—tell him. So Hamilton left, and wandered down the street, searching through bus shelters and dark alleys for newspapers that might have club listings. And though he managed to collect a few, JJ's Jazzmen were nowhere to be found in their pages. He returned to his small, damp room, turned on his hot plate and warmed

his hands. They still trembled; yet he felt detached, as if they were someone else's hands, that his craving for a drink was not his—or at least had been replaced, usurped by another need, something that ran stronger and deeper.

When the room began to warm a little, Hamilton moved over to his bed where he had laid the soggy papers and read through them again, hoping, though he knew better, to find some sign of the Jazzmen.

•

Delivering flyers didn't pay much—anyway he never delivered them all, sometimes trashing them, other times putting three or four in every mailbox. But it did pay enough for his room, and gave him a few dollars which he normally spent on beer, or something stronger when he could afford it. He hadn't been reduced to bitters yet, though he had been tempted once or twice; it was still a point of pride with him.

This time, however, Hamilton didn't run out and buy a bottle when the route manager placed the money in his hand; rather he closed his fingers around the bills tightly, and with them balled up in his fist he walked back to his flat, past his usual haunts, stopping on the way only once, to buy a newspaper.

At home he placed the paper carefully on his bed, gingerly turning the pages until he found the entertainment section. He ran his finger down the columns with club listings. Nothing. He guessed they

were a local band; with the exception of the trumpet player, they weren't talented enough to be anything else. He searched again, this time noting all the clubs that held jam sessions. He carefully folded the paper, moved it to the end of the bed and lay down next to it, shaking slightly, sweating despite the cold.

•

Hamilton began with the local clubs. He spent the first few days drifting from one bar to another, managing to visit four that were within walking distance. There were two or three others he would have liked to go to, but he didn't think he would be able to get past the bouncer, or at least not looking as he did; besides, he reasoned, a band like JJ's Jazzmen would have been as welcome in those places as he was. But who could tell where they might surface next: jams seemed the most likely, but when and where was difficult to say. Most sessions were held only once a week in each bar, and though Hamilton looked and listened intently, he saw only hungry young musicians paying their dues, unable to find any trace of the Jazzmen.

In the second week he took the crosstown bus, saving his money for the fares and, when necessary, cover charges, so that he might visit two clubs a week.

By the third week, Hamilton had run out of legitimate clubs; there simply weren't that many places these days—at least not many for clientele of his type. He



began moving into the empty hours of the night, going to dark after-hours clubs, chasing them to their elusive locations, only to be disappointed after paying dearly to enter. This occupied two more weeks and he found himself growing steadily despondent, watching his meagre resources dwindle, figuring in his head how many beers he might have had instead.

Then, walking home after a day of delivering flyers, intent on the hard, cracked concrete of the sidewalk, oblivious to the crowd shouldering past him—

—he heard *it*.

Amid the honks, the hiss of tires sighing on the pavement, obscured by the thrum of engines, Hamilton heard it. He stopped dead, heart pounding, ignoring the pressure of the crowd, straightening up from his habitual stoop, straining his senses. Different this time, he thought, a cornet this time, not a trumpet, but somehow still the same. Still the same arresting quality, the same pureness, the same beauty.

Then it came again, a playful note, chased by another, laughing music, chittering and skittering across the heaps of metal to Hamilton. The sound was full of joy, jumping from car to car, deliriously happy to be free upon the world. The notes swirled and skidded around him, tittering and chortling, inviting him to jump and run, to dance and sing, to cry out with delight.

Across the street he saw the

source.

But it wasn't the old trumpet player.

It was a gangly boy, all elbows and knees, standing, his back to a wall of large grey cinder blocks of the new bank building, long fingers jumping frenetically from button to button on his piece, rocking wildly back and forth on his heels, looking like he might lose his balance at any moment. He played his laughter. It flowed out of the bell of his horn in great bursts, electrifying the air, infecting Hamilton with its enthusiasm. Hamilton could see the boy's face beneath a shock of red hair, could see the ecstasy written on it, could read clearly in the notes the wild abandon, the soaring delirium.

Hamilton struggled back against the current of the crowd, shoved his way across the intersection, until he stood in front of the boy who was still free-wheeling, hammering crazily on those keys so hard Hamilton thought he might push them right into the valves. This lasted only a moment, because with a sudden nerve-jangling rip—a short rapid glissando cutting off hard on the last note—the boy finished.

Hamilton found himself staring into deep grey eyes, eyes that stared back, unabashedly, above a huge grin. The boy nodded at Hamilton, then squatted down to scoop up the change in a battered black fedora at his feet.

"Not great," he said, jingling the coins in his hand and looking

up. "Care to add any more?" He held out the hat teasingly. When Hamilton didn't respond, the boy said, "I didn't think so," and laughed merrily, not at Hamilton, but as if it were some kind of private joke the two shared. "Maybe next time I'll sound better." Then he winked.

"What?" Hamilton was nonplussed. "What do you mean?"

The boy laughed again. "Hey, it's okay, man. Relax. I won't play any more, honest." He smiled broadly. "You get what you pay for," he said, flipping the hat lightly onto his head, tucking his piece under his arm and moving towards the street.

"No, wait," Hamilton said, plucking at his sleeve. "You don't understand. I don't want you to stop." He could hear the desperation creeping into his voice. "You're great, man. Incredible. Don't stop."

A look of puzzlement settled on the boy's face. "Naw, not really."

"You are," Hamilton insisted. "I could hear it. You could be picking your gigs. You could pick your bands. People would be begging you to let them play with you!"

The boy gently removed Hamilton's hand from his sleeve. "Naw," he said once more. "Not yet. Someday, maybe. I have this feeling, you know. You ever get those feelings? I do. Someday I may be as good as you think I am. But not now, not yet. I just graduated to street corners, and I'm not even very good at that. I mean, you were here. How much of a crowd was

there? Huhn? I just got barely enough to buy dinner. But some day, you wait and see." Then he walked towards the street.

"No!" Hamilton shouted after him, and the boy, hearing him, turned to wave goodbye as he stepped off the street corner.

The car that hit him wasn't going that fast; the owner afterwards could find no dent where the bumper had broken the young musician's leg, and only the slightest indentation where he had slammed into the hood.

Hamilton ran out into the street.

The boy's leg was twisted beneath him; his expression was dazed, unfocused. Hamilton knelt down next to him, cradling his head. Beneath his left hand the boy's temple felt soft and sticky. "Shit, oh shit," he said under his breath. Then: "You're going to be okay," trying hard not to shout. "Hang on, man, just hang on."

But the boy's head lolled indifferently from side to side, blood trickling down his jaw and dripping onto the cold pavement.

Hamilton wanted to say something to comfort him, something that might put him back together, to straighten his crooked leg, fix his broken head. "God, that was great work, man," he whispered. "Unbelievable. I never heard better." The boy's head stopped moving, his eyes wandered for a second, then paused at Hamilton's face, tried to focus. "Yeah, man. You're some player. I wish I could only play half

as good." Big sea-grey eyes, innocent, untried eyes, stared at Hamilton. "Shit, you could be playing anywhere, man, anywhere in the world. You don't need no street corner. If I could blow like you, man, I sure as hell would be somewhere else."

The boy's mouth opened slightly and a bloody bubble formed, broke. His lips moved, but no sound came out. Yet Hamilton could read the eyes, knew the words those lips formed: *Me too*, they said. *I wish I could too*.

When the ambulance finally arrived, Hamilton had been pushed to the back of the crowd by urgent hands. He stood there, no longer able to see the young man, rubbing his hands harder and harder on his frayed, bloodied pants.

*Dark, thick glass you find on the bottom of a bottle.*

*Comfortable, cool. It swung in its own way, played its own tunes. You could look at the world through it between swigs. It gave you a whole new attitude, and not a bad one either. Sure it wasn't the real thing. Sure it lasted only a little while. Then the darkness seeped back in to fill that hole in you, that empty place somewhere inside, not your stomach, which needed nothing but drink and an occasional bowl of soup, not your heart which had withered years before anyway; no, it was somewhere in between those two, between body and soul. And though you don't want to think it, you know it's the music, it's in*

*the way those notes seduce you, the way they make you remember what it is to be alive, to hope, the way they fill you up and make you whole. Something you'd forgotten years ago. Or thought you had.*

*Why won't it let you go?*

Empty.

The rye bottle sat atop his useless radiator, and from where Hamilton lay he could see the distorted neon glow of the sign on the Chinese restaurant across the street. He had spent his last few dollars to buy the rye, and now it was gone.

Curiously, though, Hamilton felt none of the depression that usually followed the last swig. Instead he lay on his bed staring abstractedly at the bottle, thinking how foolish he'd been, how completely out of his mind. He couldn't have heard what he thought he'd heard. No. No one else did. Did they? It must have been the rum. Too much rum'll do that to you. Yeah, he decided, that must be it. I'll stick with rye from now on.

For a time Hamilton didn't move; his mind seemed to be working wonderfully fast, everything seemed clear to him. He felt elated, as good as he could remember feeling in many years.

But then the glow began to fade. He knew what would follow, so he decided, while there was still time, to see what he could do to sustain this state. There was a bar not too far from his flat where, two weeks before, he had gone looking for the Jazzmen. They didn't know

him there; he might be able to cadge a few drinks. Anything seemed possible tonight.

The bar was a step up from Hamilton's usual haunts, although the surroundings were much the same: cheap plywood chairs with broken backs and splayed legs; round formica tables, hard to ever imagine new; dark, stained floorboards, sagging in places, cracked in others; pillars with tattered posters on them, advertising bands of years past. The place was almost empty, and he bit back his disappointment, knowing the crowd was too thin, that he'd have to go elsewhere to find a free drink. He looked around and was about to leave when he heard laughter coming from the bar. Sitting on a stool was a fat, middle-aged man talking with the waiter, engaged in animated discussion, his round arms and belly shaking as he spoke, his balding head bobbing up and down as he made another point. He looked no different than half the men in the bar, wearing black pants with a plain belt and a white, short-sleeved shirt. He laughed again, a sound that seemed at odds with the place. A toothless, shrivelled man looked up glumly at the disturbance, then turned his glare back on the far wall.

Then the fat man glanced in Hamilton's direction and, catching his eye, smiled at him and nodded as if they were old friends. Hamilton found himself smiling back.

He decided then to stay a bit; he was still feeling pretty good, and

he took this greeting to be a sign. He found a table and flopped down in a chair, still watching the big man who was now sipping from a glass as the waiter made his rounds.

"What'll ya have?"

The question surprised Hamilton, who hadn't noticed the waiter creeping up.

"Hey buddy," he said again, "What's it going to be?"

"Uh, nothing."

The waiter glared at him for a long five seconds, but moved on without saying anything more.

Hamilton relaxed, slumping down comfortably in his seat. He looked back to the bar again, but couldn't see the fat man. He was startled, instead, to see his bulk loom suddenly around a pillar, and head directly towards him. The man walked up to Hamilton's table, nodded, and continued past.

Hamilton swung around.

Behind him he saw a small area of the floor had been cleared; there were two folding chairs, one into which the fat man settled himself, the other on which an alto sax lay flat.

The fat man picked up the instrument, placed his lips carefully, lovingly, on the mouth piece and blew.

Hamilton went rigid.

The first note cut him slowly, excruciatingly, an unhurried knife of pain. He felt his heart stop as the fat man played another note and yet another, each of mourning, each a sigh, a mood perfectly embodied, thick raindrops, melancholy blues

beating down on him, washing him in their misery.

Hamilton couldn't say how long this went on: he lost all sense of time, absorbed as the fat man blew the blues out at him, the soulful lament of something lost that could have been, might have been, possible, if only, if only . . .

Flattened notes wove around him, through him, into him; an anguished slow curl dragged by him, almost pulling him into its dark, empty despair. He could feel something stir restlessly within his breast, a longing he had recognized only distantly—or one that he had buried, years ago, buried so deep he had thought he'd never feel it again.

"Thank you."

Startled, Hamilton opened his eyes.

The music had stopped.

He felt warm tears rolling down his cheeks.

"What?" He was confused, dazed.

The fat man smiled at him across the table. "It's not often I've had that kind of effect. Not for years, anyway. Ha, ha!" His laughs tumbled out of him like rolling barrels. "I guess it means . . . you understand, huhn?"

Hamilton said nothing, only stared.

"Not many people do, you know," the fat man continued, sighing, for a moment looking more like his blues. "There was a time. I can't play it like I used to, but if I had had the time, I think, anyway,

maybe . . . But hey, no use in talking about it now. Ha, ha!" He smiled broadly. "But you heard anyway, didn't you? Sure it wasn't perfect, but I can see you could hear what it should have been."

The fat man had an expectant look on his face, a half-smile, an invitation. Hamilton wanted to tell him how great he was, how wonderful his music had been, but instead he said, "What happened?"

The fat man's expression fell. He said nothing for a moment, then looked down at his arm. Hamilton saw the needle tracks.

Hamilton shook his head, angry. "No! You coulda been great. The greatest. I can tell, you see. I got the gift!" The words tumbled out, propelled by their weight. "It's . . . it's . . . this *thing*, you know. I can hear what you might have been. Yeah. I know. And you do too." He looked directly into the fat man's eyes, and could see the constricted pupils, the drooping eyelids, the watery brightness of his high. "Why?" His voice began to rise. "Why did you do it? You could've had everything. You still can!"

The fat man raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Sure," Hamilton said quickly. "Sure you can. All you've got to do is clean yourself up. That's all."

The fat man mocked Hamilton's tone. "Why?" Then he laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. "Maybe I don't want to. Maybe I can't. Maybe I just don't have a choice. Maybe none of us ever do."

"What do you mean?"

The fat man smiled wickedly.

"You play, don't you?"

Hamilton stared blankly at him.

"How'd you know?"

"Your fingers. They moved when I played."

"I used to," Hamilton said uncertainly, holding his hands above the table and staring at them as if they weren't part of him. They shook.

"Used to?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice suddenly small.

"Sax?"

"Yeah," unable to meet the fat man's glassy eyes. "Yeah."

"Well, there it is." The fat man gestured, still smiling crookedly.

"Go ahead. Play."

"No . . . I don't think . . . I mean I haven't in years . . ." His stomach churned and his heart beat wildly. For a moment he thought he was going to be ill.

"You got the *gift*, man. Use it. Find out if you're the one, if you're the golden boy." He laughed boisterously now. "Man, it might be too late for me, but if what you say is true, all you gotta do is listen."

Hamilton shook his head. His lips formed the word *No*, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. What if he got up now and played, played like he'd heard the others play? Was it too late for him? Or might he still have a chance, had this gift been given to him for this moment, to let him know things could still change?

He felt giddy. With a start he

realized he had stood up and walked over to the sax; now his hand rested calmly on the neck.

"Go on, man, go on," the fat man hissed. "Go on or you'll never know."

Hamilton reached down, lifted the sax till the mouthpiece moved back and forth slowly in front of his lips. He flexed his fingers, testing the movement of the keys. He felt frightened, but excited too, not sure whether to be scared or exhilarated or both.

"Blow it, man," the fat man jeered at him, Hamilton hazily aware of the mocking tone, but no longer caring. A strange belief in himself began to grow. He knew what he'd hear, and had only been too frightened all along to seize what was his. Everything had been leading to this, he thought, an elaborate preparation for this moment, a trial, a penance he'd been forced to endure.

He closed his lips around the mouthpiece and blew.

He played a bar, and then another, falling into the music, forgetting to listen, so wrapped up in remembering, in remembering what the notes should sound like. He heard it in his head, powerful and straining, vigorous and wild, sensing that he was the centre, the room turning about him, as if he were the only thing fixed to the earth, while all else spun in a frenzied circle around him.

He played on, two more bars, his fingers moving confidently now, blowing with the authority he had

always felt but had never been able to manage, taking great rushes of air into his lungs to drive the sax.

"Do you hear?" The words were distant, almost inaudible. "Can you hear it, man?"

*What*, Hamilton thought as he played furiously. *Hear what?*

"Can you?" the fat man said again, this time his boomy voice working insistently into Hamilton's spinning head.

*Hear?* Hamilton thought. He listened to his sweet notes.

Yet somewhere, *somewhere*, he heard . . . squawks and skirls, nerve-jangling transitions that jarred him, that assaulted his ears and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Distended, labouring notes, twisted mangled creatures. He was puzzled, confused, and paused for a moment, dropping a note, and the irritating noises also stopped. Hamilton blew again, but now he was tentative; he could feel perspiration gather on his forehead with each bent sound.

*No*, he thought, *Please, God, no*.

A lump formed in his throat making it difficult to play, making him gasp for air. He felt something important was slipping away from him, that the hole in his middle was growing larger and larger, bigger than him, pushing beyond to completely fold around him, swallowing everything that was Hamilton, becoming so big it could never be filled. He felt himself lost, disap-

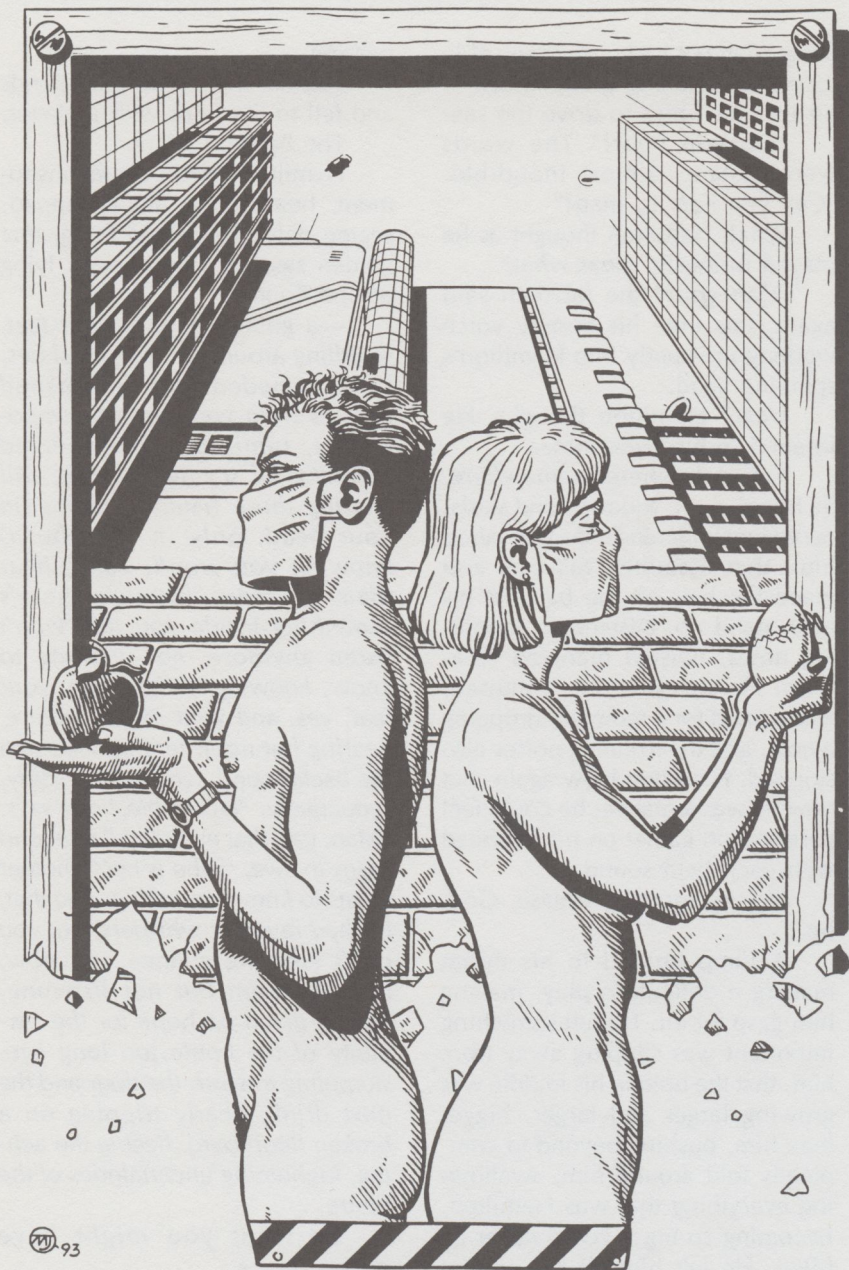
pearing.

The sax slipped from his hands and fell to the floor with a clatter. The bar was silent.

Hamilton stood over the instrument, head hung, heart stopped, seeing only that dented thing, that golden sax, a dying animal, lying on the floor—

—*a golden pool at your feet, puddling around your worn shoes, head crowded with unfinished phrases from your almost compositions, tumbling disconnected moments of scattered script, still hearing those haunting notes (in your head, only in your head) knowing you won't, can't, hear them anymore, because there's something inside you that won't listen anymore, not wanting to know, knowing instead only your fear, yes, and your maybe failure, hearing but not listening, voices in the background, whispering, softly, seductively: "Incredible," one says, "Man, can that guy play," a second gasps in awe, "Who is he?" another wants to know, and things like that, hushed reverent whispers, but you can't take the chance, not now, hearing them but not listening, having given up hope for the certainty of the bottle too long ago, stumbling towards the door and the next drink, nearly tripping on a broken floorboard, fleeing the aching, frightening uncertainties of the future.*

*Of what you might have been . . . •*





# A FOUR LETTER WORD

by Ivan Dorin  
illustrated by Mike Jackson

**F**or Mildred, the memory is like the object which conjures it; fragile, smooth on one side, slightly rough on the other. She can feel the piece of eggshell with only the tip of one finger now, but it was once part of a whole that seemed to beat with the threat of betrayal as she stole it from her mother's refrigerator. In her room, she watched it like a hostage, afraid that it would hatch and raise the alarm the moment she turned her back. When her mother called her to the kitchen, Mildred surprised herself with her coolness under pressure. First she remarked quite offhandedly that she had discovered one chipped egg in the bag left by the Digestibles For Less delivery boy that afternoon, and had thrown it out. Then she took smaller portions than usual and skipped back to her room demurely, leaving her mother to congratulate herself on how dainty and virtuous her daughter had become.

After returning the dishes, Mildred willed her watch, which she had synchronized with Harold's, to move faster. She locked the door to her bedroom and removed her only piece of clothing, an opaque blue plastic cover for her nose, mouth, and jaw. She replaced it with a much smaller

mask of sheer black nylon, sufficient to cover only her lips, and watched the fabric stretch and ripple as she chewed, puckered, and pouted in front of the mirror. Then she put her regular mask on over top of the black one and waited, cupping the egg in her hands.

At 7:29 and 30 seconds, she opened her bedroom window and Harold emerged from the shadows of her back yard. She savored the danger for a moment, imagining herself as Juliet on the balcony. Then, as Harold reached up impatiently, they completed the perilous toss.

At least, it seemed perilous. The egg traversed perhaps a metre of empty space before landing in Harold's trembling hands, but to Mildred, blushing behind her mask, the catch seemed the work of a master chef.

She waited in her room until Harold rang the front doorbell and her mother called her. She came to the front door as she would for any of their regular dates, telling her mother that they were going to a school orgy and would be back well before breakfast.

They did attend the orgy, but left early; they stayed only long enough to fondle a few friends. Then they hurried to Harold's car. Neither of them knew much about lunchmaking, and both were afraid of discovery, but they had devised a plan to try it without fear of poisoning themselves. As a precautionary measure, Harold had drained the antifreeze from his car a few

days before, and thoroughly flushed the whole system with water. When they reached a deserted secondary road twenty miles out of town, Harold stopped the car.

They must have looked for all the world as though they'd had a simple overheating problem, as Harold lifted the hood of the car, put a cloth over the radiator cap, and carefully unscrewed it. But then he tore the cloth in half. He took the egg from Mildred (as one pick-pocket might pass a stolen wallet to his partner), wrapped the egg in the cloth, and pushed it in beneath the radiator cap.

As they started to drive again, Mildred found herself torn between her desire to have everything as nearly perfect as possible and her fear of showing too much knowledge of cooking matters. The fear was unjustified; Harold later told her that he had read few cookbooks, and when it came to coaxing a girl's mouth open, he was hardly a dentist. Neither of them could endure more than a few seconds of driving before they had to stop, open the hood, unscrew the cap, and check on the egg. The checking accomplished little, of course, since neither of them could discern whether the egg was cooked, or was certain how hot the water had to be.

After what seemed like miles of stops and starts, the suspense became unbearable. They were ravenous with hunger and anticipation as Harold finally pulled the egg out with the cloth. They removed one

of the hubcaps from Harold's car, which he had cleaned carefully beforehand, and Mildred removed her outer mask. Then, crouched in the front seat of the car, behind windows clouded by the steam of their first meal, they cracked the egg.

The yolk was still runny, but they wouldn't have eaten it anyway, since both of them had been taught the evils of cholesterol from an early age. The white, however, was only partially cooked. Mildred was glad that Harold didn't try to remove her mask, and not just for the sake of modesty. She worried that he would see her grimacing. She gave him a glimpse of her lower lip at one point, but it was nothing like the pout she had practiced in front of the mirror.

They drove home in silence, and it was no longer the silence of nervous anticipation. They were most of the way to Mildred's house before Harold finally spoke.

"So, what do you think?"

"Oh, it was very good," Mildred replied quickly, trying to sound as lighthearted as possible.

"Oh." Harold paused, weighing the risk of embarrassment before going on. "I thought it was awful."

Mildred giggled. Only a small giggle at first, but it grew and spread until they reached the curb in front of Mildred's house, giddy, relieved, and twice as hungry as when they had started.

A few days later, Mildred began to crave some memento of their

grand romantic crime. She returned to the scene in her parents' car and searched the ditch. She found only one fragment of shell, but it was enough.

Now she sits as she has many times over the years, running her index finger over the bit of shell, her eyes focused somewhere beyond it, smiling fondly behind her mask. But each time she repeats this ritual, the fragment seems a little smaller.

Harold pauses at the curtained recess, fascinated and repulsed by the pleas and moans issuing from within. He looks to either side, up and down the carpeted hallway, breathless with the fear of discovery, then gives in at last, peering through a narrow gap between the curtains.

The customer sits, shackled to the bench at the neck, wrists, and ankles, drooling helplessly in the throes of salty torture. A ripe-lipped young woman leans across the small table between them, on which are two milkshakes, two partially eaten hamburgers, and two large orders of French fries, brazenly overflowing their cardboard containers. The waitress hovers, her naked mouth only inches from his, as she dabs at the corners of his mouth with a paper napkin. His eyes bounce back and forth between the twin glories of her pouting lower lip and a single golden French fry impaled on a delicate two-tined fork held in her right hand. The two converge, and he

gasps as her lips stretch and part in a wickedly sensuous tooth-baring smile. Then the teeth part, and her wet pink tongue folds the french fry over as it disappears into her throbbing love tunnel. He watches, transfixed by the hypnotic rhythm of her lips and jaw muscles, as she raises another French fry and holds it before him. She closes her eyes as she swallows, and then enunciates slowly, invitingly, each syllable a carefully orchestrated display of tongue, teeth, and lips.

"Would you like one?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" he moans, straining to push his head as far forward as possible, as she moves the fork closer, closer—

"Oh dear," she says with a coquettish sigh, the french fry poised just out of reach of his outstretched tongue.

"What? What?"

"I forgot the ketchup."

The waitress has already stood up from the table before Harold realizes the jeopardy of his situation. Then he recoils as if stung, and sprints down the hall on the balls of his feet, spurred on by the agonized cries of "Oh, hurry, hurry!" receding behind him.

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Mildred creeps upstairs to the kitchen, locks the door, and draws the curtains. There is no one to see her, but she finds the ritual comforting; there is a reassurance in the scrutiny of her own actions. She removes her mask and places it on the counter. She reaches into the cupboard above and withdraws a

two-litre jar filled with vitamin pills. She selects a rounded disc shape first, and warms up with a simple manoeuvre; an underhand throw from a one metre distance, in which she rolls the pill off the end of her index finger, causing it to carom off the cupboard, arc upward, and fall back to where she can catch it in her mouth. Then she progresses through more intricate manoeuvres with more irregularly shaped pills, ending with her favorite, the rounded cylinder double carom thrown over the shoulder while looking through a mirror. She succeeds only on the third attempt, but is pleased nonetheless. She indulges herself on these occasions, sometimes fancying that she is a rebel. In her more sober moments, however, she doubts that anyone would reproach her for her method of taking pills. Hers is a pleasure too small to be taken away.

•

Harold stands over the sink in the locked McDonald's washroom, face pressed to the mirror, frantically flossing his teeth. He finished the meal half an hour ago, just before he began flossing, but the lurid aftertaste of beef and secret sauce still lingers.

He reaches for the wastebasket. He has not used most of his dental floss, but he throws it all in anyway. The lid swings open to reveal a heap of soggy paper towels, dental floss, toothpaste and toothbrushes, half-eaten rolls of Certs, Clorets, Roloids, and TUMS ("SMUT spelled backwards," he

remembers someone saying). There is a pool of fetid brown puke on top.

No, Harold says to himself. Not that method. He opens his briefcase, then the false bottom within it, and withdraws a folded paper cup. He pumps some liquid soap from the sink dispenser into the cup and smells it. No, it is not perfumed. He fills the rest of the cup with water, drinks, gargles, spits, fills and gargles again, then rinses. As he dries his face, he notices a tiny drop of special sauce just above the right knee of the man in the mirror. He wipes it off. Then he replaces his mask, throws the cup away, closes the briefcase, and leaves. As he enters the dimly lit entry hall, a cheerful girl, probably eighteen or nineteen, lifts her elbows and breasts from the front desk, and lifts her tiny mask slightly. Behind the yellow "M," glossy, carmine-tinted lips form the usual words.

"Thank you. Come again."

Harold shudders as he opens the door slowly, looks up and down the street, and tiptoes out onto the pavement. He paid one hundred dollars cash for the "Big Mac Special." He didn't even enjoy it. In three hours, he will be hungry again.

I must be hungry again, he says to himself. He leaves the nondescript brown building with the tiny yellow "M" on the handle of the front door, and jogs the eight blocks to the parking lot in the less seedy part of downtown, thinking already

of the laps he must swim and the calories he must burn.

Harold is glad that he didn't spend the three hundred dollars for the McKinky Meal, but this seems like small consolation. He is gripped by strange, undefinable fears; he imagines the Mildred he married slowly disappearing beneath her mask, being replaced by someone else. Without apparent changes, an absence has taken over their meals. Mildred belches as regularly as ever, even has multiple belches sometimes, but during its brief periods of exposure, Harold can find no reassurance in the only face he knows, loves. Harold can scarcely find words to express what he feels. His male friends use phrases like "I got fed last night." His female friends would consider it inappropriate to discuss such things. His attempts at satisfaction only make him feel more keenly that something is missing, and that he cannot have what he wants.

He wants to see his wife smile.

Mildred jogs down the street, making a mental list of offhand excuses. Oh, hello. Lovely day for exercise, isn't it? Well, perhaps a little warm, that's true. It might be good to run indoors; wouldn't want to get dehydrated. Yeah. That's what they all say.

Mildred keeps running anyway.

When she reaches her destination, she wishes she had walked, or better yet, not come at all. She hurries through the door, thick and wooden with a large fish symbol,

but pauses just inside to admire the stained-glass windows. Then she lingers over the paintings of Adam and Eve, who wear more clothing than most people do; although they are naked from the neck down like everyone else, they peer out over their fig leaves with little more than the pupils showing. Didn't the artist do a marvellous job with the eyes? she rehearses. They seem to follow you all over, don't they? How do you think they do that? Are you afraid of losing your husband too?

Mildred takes a deep breath, and walks through another set of doors to the main exercise area. The pews occupy the middle space of the oval running track; two or three people kneel there, while several more plod around in a steady counterclockwise stream. Mildred bypasses the Nautilus machines, and takes a quick drink from the water fountain. As she approaches the booth, she tries to think of ice cubes, snow, cool breezes; but when she sees the light through a crack at the bottom of the door, it's no use. She is sweating before she reaches it.

She enters, and shuts the door behind her. The heat is like a slap. The booth is almost too narrow to sit down in, and the walls are lined with bulbs. Her skin is assailed from all sides. She is a flightless insect on an endless expanse of mid-July asphalt, slowly baking beneath the magnifying glass of God.

•

"Bless me, Father, for I have

sinned. It has been five days since my last confession."

Mildred pauses, feeling more than seeing the emaciated figure behind the sliding panel of smoky ultraviolet protection glass.

"I . . . have . . . been having . . . impure thoughts."

She pauses again, ashamed, hoping to be asked, prodded. There is only patient silence. She feels dizzy.

"I think about things; about putting things in my m— You know."

Sweat beads on her forehead, trickles down the back of her neck. Her breath comes in shallow gasps. She holds it, stores up the obscene p's, arranges, aims, then breathes them out in one agonized burst.

"Pepperoni pizza."

Silence. Mildred's toes curl, clench, as if to gouge the hardwood floor. Her head begins to throb.

"Taco chips."

Even here, the images don't leave her alone. When she tries to shut out the glaring light, lurid cookbook and magazine pictures dance over the insides of her eyelids—

"With guac—with dip."

All the more alluring because she has never tasted—

"And, and—"

Lights throbbing beating confess, confess, confess or fry—

"Twinkies," she whimpers.

"Unwholesome, fattening, sinful— if my husband knew, oh! —But our dietary relationship—well, it's not very—not that he ever complains,

but—I'm afraid that he'll leave me for someone thinner."

"God loves all of us, fat or thin," says the voice at last, even, patient. Cool.

But Mildred doesn't want God. She wants Harold.

Her penance is forty leg lifts and twenty laps around the track. A lift for a lick, a lap for a lap. As she circles with the healthy sinners, Mildred recalls a news article in which nutritionists questioned the unwholesomeness of Adam and Eve's fruit. Apparently, the peeling was found to be a good source of dietary fibre. How could anything with fibre in it be sinful? It's dangerous to think that way, though. It leads to other things; a little fruit here, a little seasoning there and before you know it, you're into the hard stuff. The road to Hell is paved with good nutritions. Not that being healthy isn't good.

It just isn't good *enough*.

Mildred accelerates, and mutters a silent prayer to Saint Sylvia the Anorexic.

•

Harold opens the car window to let the breeze blow through his quickly drying hair. He still savors the moment of relief behind his swimming mask when he opened his McTainted mouth to welcome the guilt-concealing swish of chlorine. On his way home from the pool, Harold still has time to stop off at the supermarket. He pulls into the Safeway parking lot and finds a parking spot close to the front door of the men's store, the left one. Keys

and money in hand, he walks along the brick front of the building to the "In" door. It is glass, but painted over with a large "S" on a white background. It swings open to reveal a white partition which blocks the view of the rest of the store from the outside.

Inside, the air-conditioned store is nearly deserted, as usual. The staff is busy mopping the smooth white floors, wiping the long white shelves. The shelves have doors that open like cupboards, and appear identical from the outside. A few customers stand waiting, pretending to read magazines, their bare toes silently tapping the cool floor.

Harold is approached by a discreet young man in a white mask with a red "S" over the nose. A badge over the forehead reads Hi my name is BOB.

"May I take your order, sir?"

"Yes, thanks."

Harold is handed a pencil, a piece of paper, and a detailed list of items, prices, and codes, which he scans carefully. He does all the impulse shopping. Mildred doesn't like to go to the women's supermarket, and the men's has the better selection anyway. He scribbles a few of his regular numbers on the sheet, and then pauses.

"I'm looking for something a little different, you know, to take home to the wife," he whispers. "Can you suggest anything?"

The clerk leans over and scans the page. "May I recommend—" he points to a code on the page with the tip of his pencil.

"This, sir. A new item. Very popular." The clerk's pencil starts with the least suggestive variety then passes slowly down, down the list: Granny Smith, Spartan, McIntosh, *Red Delicious*. Harold wonders if he will have the nerve to bring sweet things into the house.

"Okay, I'll take two."

"Will that be all then, sir?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I'll be right back."

The clerk disappears around the end of the first row of bins that runs across the width of the store. Harold sees the corner of a curtain swish into and out of view, and imagines the clerk drawing it behind him as he steps between the aisles. All the other rows of bins are blocked from view.

Harold dawdles past a row of opaque lidded shopping carts to the cashier. The clerk is nearly there first, carrying a plain white paper bag which will be filled with plain white paper packages.

"Sorry for the delay, sir. I don't have the new location codes yet."

"Oh, that's quite all right."

"\$32.79, please. Thank you, here's your change. Have a nice day."

Harold passes a billboard on his way home: SALMONELLA: IT'S EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS. Incredible, thinks Harold, licking his chlorinated lips. Next thing you know, they'll have Safeway commercials on TV.

He pulls to a stop outside his house. Only the briefcase goes with him, for the moment. He shivers as his penis brushes against the cool metal of the gate, and wishes that summer would last.

"Honey, I'm home!"

Mildred greets him at the door, and tells him that dinner is already cooking upstairs. Tofu. Again.

"I ate a big lunch, Harold," she lies. "I'm afraid I'm not that hungry."

"That's okay, dear."

The paper bag stays in the car. Harold embraces his wife, and wonders if she and the Digestibles For Less delivery boy are swallowing behind his back.

"Do we have time for some sex before we make lunch?"

"Don't we always?" It really is a substitute, Mildred thinks.

Two magnificent bodies recline on the living room couch. They are evenly tanned (except around the edges of the masks), well muscled, and lean, the product of years of nutritious, flavorless meals.

The respite, as always, is too short. Seconds after her orgasm, Mildred is thinking of whipped cream, chocolate, sugar, fresh fruit. She buries her face in her husband's neck.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she whispers. A tear rolls off the end of her nose and into her mask. Just once, she thinks.

Just once, I'd like to eat an apple with him. •



**Ask Mr. Science** compiled by Al Betz

**Q: MS. DM of Vancouver, BC, asks:**

How can one sharpen dull velcro?

**A:** Velcro is inherently dull and cannot be made more interesting by sharpening. If you feel that you simply must sharpen it, however, the following method should be employed: First identify which side is made of "hooks" and which side is made of "eyes." Immerse only the "hooks" themselves, not the backing fabric, in a solution made of anhydrous ethyl ether containing 14% by volume of methyl ethyl ketone, 3% by volume of benzene and 2% by volume of absolute ethyl alcohol. After immersion, support the strip by its edges with the hook side down, and allow the solvent mixture to drip off. The hooks will become sharper as their surface material is dissolved away. Repeat as many times as necessary to achieve the desired sharpness. No sparks or flames must be allowed within 50 meters of the experimental area. It is best not to inhale during this procedure, as benzene is a known carcinogen.

**Q: Mr. AB of Surrey, BC, asks:**

What should be done with writers who use too many commas?

**A:** Mr. Science, the writer of this column, must assume, correctly, he hopes, that you are not referring, in this instance, to him, but are instead referring, with muted dismay, to the many writers, or, at least, to those who pretend to be writers, who use not only too, too many commas, but use them, to our great frustration, incorrectly. They should be recycled in paper pulp and used for printing Gor novels.

**Q: MS. LG of Coquitlam, BC, asks:**

Why do cats stand on their hind legs when one pats them on the head?

**A:** If someone much bigger than you came along and patted you on the head, you would feel insulted by this demeaning act. Its response is to assume an upright fighting stance, thereby freeing its claws for action. Beware!

**Readers:** If you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe, please send it to "Ask Mr. Science," c/o ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.



1983

# HOME

by Luke O'Grady  
illustrated by Jim Beveridge

**T**he military bus let off most of the soldiers at the Mess, one of the big pleasure centres where nearly all of them took their annual two-month leave. Jack looked out the bus window at the high concrete wall, painted olive-green, surrounding the several acres of the complex. Soldiers only. Already the huge men and women whooped, jumped and jostled each other, celebrating even as they passed through the gate. The Mess was their reward for enduring the ten months of uncompromisingly strict regulations necessary for war in space; for being pressed up against the same faces and bodies day after day; for the endless repetition of various safety procedures and duties; for the hango-ver-like sickness caused by the space jumps; for the shitty, concentrated food.

For a soldier, Mess was always capitalized.

The bus pulled away with an electric hum and Jack watched the daunting green wall shrink away. He was going the extra ten miles into town, going home. It was the fifteenth consecutive time he'd done so; he'd only missed the first two years of the war against the Lugans. He'd visited the Mess several times, partaking in most of its available pleasures, but he'd always spent most of his time off with his family. Each time he felt a little further removed, a little more alien, yet he refused

to let it all go like so many others had. Perhaps because something inside him remembered how good it had been at one time, many years ago.

There were four others on the bus heading into town, forgoing the Mess, at least for the moment. Each looked a lot younger than his thirty-nine years. They all sat alone, silent, looking out the window.

The bus slowed as it neared the town centre. Jack felt coils tightening within him as if a child were turning a key in his back. An antique, tin soldier.

The driver looked around and shouted, trying a little too hard to sound friendly, "If any of you want a drive somewhere, I'll take you, right to the front doorstep. It'd be an honor to serve you young chaps—and ladies." Jack noticed the man's hesitation. The driver knew a crew cut and bulging muscles didn't necessarily mean male, but he wasn't absolutely sure. He was right though; two of the passengers were women.

Everyone declined the offer, wanting the preparatory walk to wherever they were going, everyone nervous as hell. The bus pulled over and let them out.

Jack clutched his handbag tightly as he began the two mile walk home. Practically all of his non-military belongings were at home. All he carried was a change of clothes identical to the leisure uniform he had on—green pants, black boots, and a brown T-shirt—

plus some earrings for Annette and an imitation space-gun for his son Troy.

People couldn't help staring at him as he walked. They were polite and enthusiastic with their passerby nods and greetings, but they could never completely hide the awe that hovered beneath the surface. Was it the shaved head? Or maybe the nearly three hundred pounds of rippling, metal-hard muscle that made up the bulk of his body? Jack smirked to himself. Yeah, maybe that was it. Drugs and hard workouts, both mandatory in the services, made the body beautiful—or at least gigantic. And there were drugs for the reflexes, and drugs for clarity of sight and night vision. And whatever it was they popped before battle, that made the mind sizzle like a computer powered by a source of controlled rage. It was rumoured there was a handbook for army physicians: *How to Make a Killing Machine*.

The quaint suburb he was walking through seemed dainty and fragile compared to the harsh practicality of the battleships and the barren wilderness of the worlds where they sometimes set up outposts. Flowers were in bloom everywhere and the streamlined buildings were swathed in solar panels that glistened in the glow of their god. An old memory of childhood—bedtime stories—surfaced unbidden and he felt like a character in one of the fairy tales his mother used to read him. He was

lost in a mystical, magical land. He allowed himself to look around for a distant castle upon a hill but, of course, he didn't see one.

The memory made him feel lowly. He hadn't visited his mother in years, though he wrote her once in a while. He couldn't face her. She wouldn't know him anymore. He hoped she had some friends, that she wasn't all alone. And his father, well, he wasn't even sure where his father was living these days.

Jack passed a group of men sitting and drinking beer on a front lawn. They saw him and started singing a military song praising the strength and courage of Earth's warriors. They were a little drunk. Some of them saluted him in fun, and one shouted for him to come over and join them for a beer. He tried to smile as he briefly and informally returned the salute and walked on. Jack knew the government subtly encouraged all this respect and friendliness. Join the military and be loved by everyone.

He was getting close now, and really nervous. He started going over things, trying to get ready. The boy would have changed a lot in a year: his looks, his tastes, his hobbies. Jack panicked. He passed the street he was supposed to turn down and walked some extra blocks trying to sort out his memories and feelings. When he'd recovered some, he headed home, still not feeling right.

He walked up to the door, hesitated, then pressed the doorbell. His finger shook. Annette would be home; a spouse could always get time off work when their mate came home on leave.

She opened the door and they stood staring at one another. She smiled, but looked a little nervous and uncomfortable. Jack felt the same way. He embraced her awkwardly, not knowing what else to say or do. She gasped though he'd purposely tried to be gentle. He lightened his grip and they stood that way for a long while.

Finally he let go, it being ridiculous to stall any longer.

"Come on in," Annette said. "I have a special meal all ready. I just have to get it together. I wasn't sure exactly when you'd be coming in."

He followed nervously, looking around, trying impossibly to feel at home.

"Troy's at a friend's. He's grown so much. Should I call him and get him to come over?" Each sentence was followed by an ill-fitting pause. She didn't know what to do or say any more than he did.

"Uh, no," he said. "Um, later." His voice sounded deep, dull and ponderous compared to hers.

She rubbed her palms on her hips and shifted around a bit, looking at him. Then she stepped over and led him to a big comfortable chair. "Okay, you just sit here and relax. I'll go get dinner ready. Do

you want a beer or something else to drink while you're waiting?"

"Beer." His harsh sounding voice made him feel rude and rough. A few seconds later he added softly, "Please."

Annette grabbed a remote from the coffee table and put it in his hands. "This'll give you something to occupy yourself—help you catch up on things." She smiled at him, a little more sincerely this time, a little more relaxed. She went and got him his beer then returned to the kitchen. She called out, "Just tell me if you need anything."

Jack breathed out and sipped his ale, the coils inside him unwinding the slightest bit. The beer tasted strange but pleasant, the musky bubbles nipping at his mouth and throat as he swallowed.

He pressed buttons on the remote until the far wall came alive in three dimensions. A slick-looking newsman was discussing the economic slowdown in grave tones: unemployment had surpassed two percent for the first time in eleven years, and current living standards were no better, all in all, than they had been two years ago. It was the first time Jack had heard any negative news about the wonderful economy in a long time—over a decade.

He flipped through the channels but he couldn't find anything about the continuing wars. There was a time when he was sick and tired of seeing war news on television when he was home. But Jack

supposed after seventeen years and no end in sight it wasn't news, just a necessary, ongoing part of life.

He stopped at a commercial for some kind of cereal. Three lovely young women with perfect smiles and bouncy voices, each a different ethnicity, discuss its benefits, taking turns with their lines. "You can eat all you want and you don't gain an ounce. It's delicious, it fills you up, but since it's not absorbed, neither are the calories. And regularity is never a problem when you eat Bulkolax."

Jack started to giggle. Then he began to laugh really hard. Then *really* hard. He wanted to stop the obscene sound of his laughter but could not. He shut off the television but his laughter kept getting louder and harder. Soon he was doubled up in the chair, sounds coming from his throat like some enormous, injured bird. It became difficult to breathe, painful.

Annette came out. "What's so funny?"

God, he wanted to stop. But there was no way. Louder and harder it came.

"Are you okay?" Her voice was timid, a little frightened.

After a while and with much effort, he managed to get out a strangled sentence through his laughter. "Yeah, just something on the screen . . . funny."

His wife hesitated then went back to the kitchen, looking a little worried. Scared.

Finally, after many minutes, he got himself back under control, though he still had to bite his lips and the insides of his cheeks from time to time so the laughter wouldn't explode from within him again.

He sat there shaking, more wound up than ever now, feeling like a lunatic. There was no real reason for laughing like that. Everything just suddenly seemed so hilariously impractical all of a sudden. What the hell was going on with him?

Jack took a deep breath and sat there, trembling and feeling stupid. No matter how nervous and uncomfortable he'd been in the past, he'd never cracked up like that.

Things were going to be harder than ever.

•

Jack sat in the kitchen reading the newspaper and drinking coffee with Annette. He'd been home a week and he still had to force himself to sit out in the open. His gut instinct was to close himself up in the study where he knew he wouldn't be disturbed. Annette made the arrangement years ago, knowing once in a while he would need a place where he could go to be alone and gather his wits. He'd spent most of the week in the study, but enough was enough. He had to give it a go.

Troy came into the kitchen and looked at him eagerly. "Hey, Dad." The kid still acted like Jack was

the boy's favorite sports hero instead of his father.

"Hey, Troy, how's the hand?" Two days ago, he'd thrown a baseball to his son hard enough to chip a bone in his hand. It wasn't the first time he'd accidentally hurt Troy, and again he'd felt like a monster.

"Oh, it's nothing. Doesn't hurt at all." The boy paused. "Do you think it'd be all right if some of my friends came in to visit? They want to meet you, but I told them I had to ask first."

Annette answered before Jack could even cringe. "No, honey, Dad still has to get used to the place. Maybe later on."

Troy's face fell and Jack felt like a shit. Surely he could say hi to a few kids if it'd make his son happy. He spoke up before he could change his mind. "Oh, I think it'll be all right. Just a short visit though, okay?"

All smiles. "Okay." Troy turned and ran for the front door.

Annette looked at him, concerned. "Are you sure?"

Jack nodded.

The kids must have been waiting already, because a minute later about fifteen boys and girls filed into the kitchen. It occurred to Jack that a few of these kids probably had military parents that they hadn't seen in years, and probably never would again; either the Lugans or the Mess had taken them away. They formed a semi-circle around him, gaping in silent awe.

Already he regretted his decision. The children's wide-eyed expressions reminded him of the way his face felt the first time he'd seen the wet, shiny grey of a captured Lugan's convoluted skin: fascinated revulsion. It seemed like a long time before anyone spoke.

A boy asked, "How many aliens have you killed?"

"Um, I can't really say. Sometimes . . ."

"A lot?"

Jack was having trouble talking. "Quite a few."

The kids found that funny. Flutey, high-pitched laughter.

With the silence broken, they were no longer shy. They moved closer, making him feel claustrophobic.

A little girl spoke next. "Why do you kill them?"

His thoughts were thick. Why the hell were they at war? It'd been so long. He stared at the kids, dumb for almost a minute, until he remembered. One of the first exploration jump-ships had been incinerated by the Lugans without warning or explanation as soon as it went through an explored jump-point. So much for first contact and so much for the short-lived Age of Exploration.

But before he could answer he was bombarded with children talking at him. He heard only a few.

"My mom says the soldiers do bad things out in the country, in the Mess, when they come home. Worse than rock stars."

"My daddy says nobody wants the war to stop 'cause it makes more jobs and less people and it's better for everyone."

A boy turned to Troy. "Make him lift something heavy."

Some kid sneaked up beside Jack, reaching out to touch his bicep and then jerking back and squealing like she was afraid Jack would clobber her. Someone else did the same on the other side. He was starting to breathe heavily, still unable to move or say anything. It seemed as if the room's light kept dimming and brightening.

Suddenly Annette was on her feet, deftly hustling the children out the kitchen and outside. She sounded calm and natural as she cleared the place and said something to Troy about treating everyone to ice cream.

Jack's heart was clubbing in his chest and he was gripping the edge of the table so hard his arms were shaking. He pushed himself up and stumbled to the study. He wanted to slam the door with all his might, but he forced himself to close it gently and quietly. He locked it and lay down on the soft, beige carpet, stretching himself out with his eyes closed and willing himself to relax. Deep, slow breaths.

Was this honestly worth it? Jack was having sincere doubts whether, in two months, he could ever feel comfortable even with his own family. Even when things were



going well, he felt like was acting, playing a part. He was not himself at all, not the way he was in space with his comrades. And why did he dream about the Mess and his friends every night when he eventually fell asleep?

It was the same with Annette and Troy. For all their smiles and kindness, they were not themselves around him. He noticed the slight but unmistakable change when he entered a room and the two of them were talking. Conversation had to be adjusted so Jack could understand and take part. And the sense of relief felt whenever they had to leave the house on an errand was not just his own, he was sure of that. Everyone was getting a much needed breather, a chance to be themselves again.

Not that they didn't want him there really, it was just . . .

Well, he didn't know exactly what it was.

•  
Six more days had gone by. It seemed like a lot longer. The uneasiness in him had subsided noticeably, but it felt as if nothing had taken its place. Emptiness.

Jack was in bed, sitting up against the headboard, listening to the slowing, deepening sounds of his wife's unconscious breathing.

The time had come; there was no question in his mind. He didn't think it was working for any of them. Troy's fascination with Dad, the war hero, had died down since Jack had frozen in front of his

friends. The boy might be a little embarrassed. Annette was still pleasant and accommodating, but he sensed she was getting a little edgy, a little bored. She'd been staying away a little longer doing errands, and she mentioned she might have to go into work for a few days because they were getting bogged down at the office.

He didn't blame them a bit.

Jack watched the gentle rise and fall of her body's silhouette. He wished he could freeze time somehow and gently caress and examine her frail beauty at leisure while she slept. Some part of him still loved her, he realized, but it was an inaccessible region within him, a part he could no longer comprehend, like the skills and insight needed for some abstract physics problem that had eroded with disuse. He guessed it was the same way with her.

It would've been nice to make love to her on this last night, but he'd failed once again, his penis remaining a still, curled lump, as if it had journeyed to the place between his legs in order to die. He'd managed only a single clumsy time in the two weeks he'd been home.

He couldn't remember ever having that problem in the past. Certainly not out in space, where sex was one of the few forms of entertainment consistently open to them. Or at the Mess.

Annette was asleep enough, Jack decided. He slipped from the

bed, reaching under it to retrieve his travel bag. From it he took one of the two cleaned and pressed leave uniforms and put it on as quietly as he could. Then he took out the authorized statement that turned over most of his savings to Annette. He'd gone to the bank to arrange it a couple days ago when he suspected he'd be leaving soon. There was a note clipped to the statement. "I don't belong here anymore. I hope you know I wish you both nothing but happiness."

He set the papers on the dresser. He realized the money was an unnecessary and nearly meaningless gesture, but he also felt it was all he had to give. Long ago he'd set things up so that half of his salary automatically went into his wife's account and he'd leave it that way, but maybe they'd do something special with the extra money, something to remind them that he'd tried hard. Anyway, he simply didn't need it; the military took care of all his basic needs and he'd make more money soon enough.

He left the room and looked in on Troy quietly. He felt like an empty hulk standing there, not sure what final thoughts would be appropriate. He hardly knew the kid. For some reason it felt right to salute the sleeping form. A proper one: back, knees, and hand straight, and elbow locked. Jack moved his lips inaudibly. "Strength and good luck, boy."

He left the house with only

his handbag and change of uniform, determined to walk the ten miles to the Mess. For some reason it was important that he walk. He estimated he would arrive at four a.m.

The streets were mostly deserted, quiet. Once again he was a child in some fantasy land. The moon was full and bright and he could see sparkles of dew on the grass. Some of the trees looked exotic in the dimness, several budding with spring flowers. The smells were sweet and wonderful, seeming much stronger in the silent, empty darkness. His nostrils wrapped around the scents, drinking them in.

Emotions and old memories began to ebb, flow, swell and ache within him. He knew it was best not to try too hard to see them clearly, knew it was best to let them be.

He moved at a brisk pace and was glad when he got to the highway that would lead him out to the Mess. The traffic was not heavy, but still he walked far off to the side of the highway. The going was rougher, but Jack knew any motorist spotting his huge frame heading out towards the Mess would stop and offer him a lift. They would feel it was their civilian duty. Instinct told him he needed to make this long walk in silent solitude as strongly as he had ever needed anything.

The night air was cool and sharp. Invigorating. The damp grass

swished beneath his feet, soaking his boots. Jack felt like he could keep walking through the darkness forever. Under the pallid moon and crisp stars, past the shadowy shapes of buildings and trees, things felt utterly right. He walked.

After about three miles, Jack noticed he was crying. His face was completely relaxed, was not contorted by grief in any way, yet tears streamed down his face steadily. Let them fall, he thought. This too felt right. He walked.

Around the seventh mile Jack began to feel as if he were walking against less resistance, though logically his body should be tiring from the long walk and lack of sleep. It was as if wind-catching streamers had been flapping along behind him, gently but firmly pushing against his steps, and now, one by one, these streamers were letting loose, detaching from him to be blown silently away in the other direction. A startling insight, or hallucination, had Jack envisioning those streamers as ghosts of his younger selves who, realizing his decision, had resolved to leave him. They did not belong where he was going; they were meant to stay here. They were leaving with barely a whisper, just as he had left.

Jack realized he was glad they were staying behind; they would be happier here. He wished he could do something for them, one final thing, but perhaps his wish-

ing was something enough; they were parting on good terms. Jack felt the last one that was going, go, and he sighed, a little sadly, even more alone now. He walked.

Less than a mile away he could see the dark, looming shape of the Mess. At certain moments he could hear the carousing still going on, snatches of music, laughter. His tears had stopped completely; he did not know when. He felt good, strong, better with every step.

Three hundred meters out he could clearly see lights atop the surrounding wall, could make out the singing of songs he knew. He let out a few calls as loud as he could, the battle-cry first, then, more appropriately, the call given out when one is awaiting the pickup crews after becoming separated during battle. A couple of guards answered him in good fun from the top of one of the towers. They could tell by the way he called that he was for real, not just some kid messing around. Their recognition made him feel like laughing, like singing.

Two hundred meters away he felt like running to the gates. He didn't allow himself to, though. He made himself go slowly and enjoy the feelings that were coursing through his veins, pumping him up, making him feel like shouting with joy.

He felt like he was coming home. •



# FAMILY HARMONY

by M.A.C. Farrant  
illustrated by Ron Holmes

## 1. GRANDMA

It's unfortunate that we have to keep Grandma on the leash now when we go out for our daily walks. She's taken a sudden and dangerous dislike to other Grandmas and starts screaming as soon as she sees one. If she weren't on the leash she'd be running at them, grabbing their glasses and smashing them to the ground or else pulling at their hats and scratching their faces. Our neighbours hurry to the other side of the street when they see us coming, nodding curtly as they go by, especially if they've got their own Grandma with them.

Grandma's screaming is loud and high pitched, like the sound of a factory whistle. So far we've been unable to pick out any distinct words but some of the noise sounds suspiciously like the word "No!" We often wonder how it is that Grandma can sustain her screaming for so long, with barely a breath taken. It's really quite a marvel.

The screaming and straining at her leash stops as soon as the other

Grandma has passed by. Turning to us she'll then begin commenting about the cherry tree in Mrs. Robert's yard, almost as if nothing has happened.

Grandma doesn't mind her leash; she'll often pat it where it lies curled up on the table as if it were a beloved dog. Sometimes she'll polish it with shoe polish, sometimes with lard, which presents a problem—it's liable to slip through our fingers. Which is what happened last Thursday. Mrs. Robert's mother-in-law, old Mrs. Roberts, was out in her front garden dead-heading daffodils. She's a small, wide woman and on Thursday was bending over the bed of flowers with a pair of scissors in her hand. It's not that she meant to hurt Grandma, it's just that in her surprise when Grandma rushed her from behind, she turned suddenly with the scissors and slashed Grandma across the side of the head. (Grandma is even smaller than old Mrs. Roberts—a tiny grey person with long white hair who's fond of wearing black rubber boots.) Grandma's screaming took on a terrible pitch then and she knocked old Mrs. Roberts to the ground, wailing all the while, and punching the old woman about the head and back. It was terrible to see. It took us a while to pry them apart because, by now, old Mrs. Roberts was fighting back and, despite arthritis, managed to stab Grandma again, this time on the hand. Blood was everywhere and

the flower bed was ruined.

We told the authorities that, except for the daily walk, Grandma is as normal as any other Grandma—prunes for breakfast, cream of chicken soup for lunch, a game of dominoes at four, a chop and potato for supper—but they insist that if we can't keep Grandma securely on the leash, she'll have to be taken away and locked up.

We've had a family discussion about Grandma's eccentricity and feel that the authorities are being unfair. After all, they allow old Mrs. Johnson to roam the streets in her faded red and yellow jester's costume without so much as an official scowl in her direction. And Mrs. Johnson is lewd. That costume she wears is much too small for her, revealing her genitals in a most grotesque way. She may not be shrieking and lunging as Grandma does but she's certainly an affront to decent vision.

And since last Thursday, the senior Mrs. Roberts has begun the peculiar habit of crouching in the rose bushes behind the fence at the front of their yard. We suspect she's lying in wait for Grandma but so far she's only barked at us when we go by. If we were less circumspect neighbours, we would alert the authorities to the menace old Mrs. Roberts now presents.

Still, we've complied with the authorities' suggestion and purchased a stronger, chain-link leash for Grandma, which, like her pre-

vious leather leash, she doesn't seem to mind. It's only when another Grandma crosses her vision that our Grandma loses all sense; it takes two of us to keep her reined in. If it weren't for her dogfight skills with our resident teenagers—the bloody skirmishes at the front door—we might be tempted to let Grandma wreck havoc in a home for the aged. Our daily walks would certainly be more peaceful without her. But we've decided to keep Grandma. It's terrible to imagine life at home without her; we've come to rely on the time-honored military tactics she uses so adroitly on the teenagers—ambush, surprise attack, divide and conquer. And she's very good at blowing up their nefarious plans, too.

## 2. UNCLE EDDY

Another small family problem we have is Uncle Eddy and the way he always disappears whenever we have visitors. Not just to his room as you'd expect from one so shy and sneaky, but down the street and across the empty field to the Dragert's back yard. Two or three days will go by before someone notices that Uncle Eddy has been absent from the dinner table. *That's right*, we say in amazement, *he's gone again!* It's only then we remember a recent visit from the Shrub Committee or the Mailbox Committee or the Overall Complex

Committee.

But it's really a nuisance when Uncle Eddy disappears because of the procedure we must go through to bring him back. Suddenly everyone must drop what they're doing and run off in search of the parade costumes. And it's got to be the same costumes every time or else Uncle Eddy won't budge from the Dragert's back yard: Father in the clown suit, the teenagers in military band attire, Grandma on her leash, of course, but wearing the purple tutu, the younger children dressed as lions, tigers and elephants, and myself as a Kiwanis float. The dog in her special harness gets to pull the huge red wagon that is to bear Uncle Eddy home, the wagon being a recent addition because Uncle Eddy is nearing three hundred pounds and beyond our ability to carry him via the St. John's Ambulance four-hand seat as we once did.

Then, when everything is in order—we have to wait until sunset to begin the parade, another part of the ritual—we're off, the teenagers in the lead banging on kitchen pots and playing pretend flutes, Father bringing up the rear with Grandma and his fireman's siren.

It doesn't matter what the weather—it can be a raging Christmas blizzard or a sultry evening in July—but to satisfy Uncle Eddy the parade must always proceed in the same manner. As soon as we're out of the driveway it's my job to

start screaming: *De, De, De, De*, over and over until we've reached the Dragert's back yard. Grandma says I sound deranged calling Uncle Eddy the way I do, that I don't call him the right way, the way she used to. *A mother knows*, she lectures. *Whatever works*, I counter, wishing at this juncture that we'd invested in a choke collar to go with her special chain-link leash.

You might wonder at the reception our parade gets from the neighbours. Alarm, frenzy, excitement? Not exactly. For the most part, they barely glance at us when we go by, content to remain sealed in their living rooms embracing the cool blue light of their television screens. If old Mrs. Roberts is on the loose she's liable to hurl paving stones in our direction, and that's something. But she only does this because of the recent feud with Grandma; it isn't meant as a criticism of the parade. Occasionally, if our parade preparations are noticed, a few stray children and elderly people in wheelchairs will line the route—a mere two and a half blocks—and for this reason I always carry a supply of hard candies to toss at them from my float as we go by. Once Ernest Beck, who isn't right in the head and lives in his parents' tool shed, wanted to follow along pushing his Safeway buggy full of old newspapers and that presented a problem. There's no way on earth Uncle Eddy would come home if the

parade included a stranger even though Ernest Beck is known to everyone and snatches our newspapers regularly each morning, sometimes while we're still reading them. We've had to subscribe to even more newspapers than we already do—seven at last count—and promise Ernest Beck we won't read them just so they'll be in pristine condition for him to pile into his cart. All this so he wouldn't join the parade. And the Dragerts? We have to consider them because, after all, it's their back yard we're headed towards and if they were to get difficult, who knows where Uncle Eddy would go then. So far the Dragerts have been agreeable, claiming they never notice Uncle Eddy in their back yard. If he's there, they tell us, he's as crafty as a cat, slinking around on all fours, hiding. This has the ring of truth about it because Uncle Eddy is amazingly agile for a large person. We figure it's his Wednesday night tango lessons that accounts for this.

So you see what a nuisance Uncle Eddy's disappearance is for everyone: the sheer logistics of mounting a parade on such random notice. But the strange thing that happens as soon as we get underway is that everyone's mood suddenly turns from one of irritation to one of outright glee. We are at a loss to explain this. One minute it's all squabbling and shoving and the next, a lively carnival: the normally morose teenagers pull out their Walkman headphones and



toss them aside in ecstasy like crutches at a revival; the smaller children cease hitting each other with 2x4s; Father gives a little more rein to Grandma's leash, for which she is so grateful she actually begins to skip; and I assume a truly regal countenance, my cardboard Kiwanis float spread about me like the enormous bulk of some queenly whale. And we always experience a mounting excitement as we near the Dragert's yard: Will Uncle Eddy be in his usual place? What if he's not? What if we can't find him? What if he's missing for good? And when at last he's spotted where he always is—crouched giggling behind one of the Dragert's rusted Fords—then it's all anxious whispers amongst us because we don't want to say the wrong thing and scare him off. Once Father yelled, *Come on out, ya brass monkey!* upsetting Uncle Eddy so much he wouldn't move until we went home and started the parade all over again. So we have to be careful. Usually it's Grandma or me uttering the final, gentle coaxing—*Come on, De, De come on*—until he breaks through the tall grass, softly dusting the rust from his grey

Perma-Prest slacks and, grinning bashfully, comes towards us.

Melting everyone's hearts then because he's in such a sorry state—the crumpled suit, the dirty bald head. Gathering around and hugging him like the long lost uncle he is, the relief all of us feel. And Grandma gently leading him by the hand to his seat in the wagon for the triumphant processional home which, fortunately, is slightly downhill or the poor dog would never make it.

Uncle Eddy is always famished after his little sojourn in the Dragert's back yard; you'd be amazed at how much he eats upon his return—ten times his normal amount—and it's got to be roast turkey and all the trimmings or watch out. And sleep! If he weren't so high-up at the Bank of Commerce—where he's known as Edward J. Randall—he'd be losing his job for sure and that would be a huge problem because Father and I would have to go out to work. And if we weren't at home twenty-four hours a day making sure every little detail was looked after, what would happen to family harmony then? •

I am an independent researcher who is collecting instances of **SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY**—that is, shapes on maps that suggest people, other places, or things. Some of these instances are well known: the "boot" of Italy kicking the "ball" of Sicily; the "question mark" of the continent of Africa; the "profile" on the western coast of Spain and Portugal which is suggestive of Columbus looking towards the New World, etc. Some of these images are readily apparent, others are farfetched. Some are pedestrian, others are poetic. All are of interest to me. I am sure there are a great many comparisons, images, likenesses, lookalikes, matches, models, replicas, representations, reproductions, resemblances, twins, etc. I would be pleased to hear from anyone who has knowledge of them. I will acknowledge all correspondence.

John Robert Columbo, 42 Dell Park Avenue, Toronto, ON M6B 2T6 Canada.



Choked once and woke with condom wrapped fingers  
stuffed past teeth formed of Palmolive vomit.  
And the foot of a thought the size 13 of the Green Giant  
stepped down, crusher, and the know of it bloomed:  
first time ever I felt my bod grown around me  
a blacked-out, long sedan. A rundown Jaguar with  
arms and legs, not chrome hubbed tire caps.

Call me Playdough. I've made Playdoughnic love.  
That's fucking without handfuls of nail scratched  
play-dough flesh.

I look and love. I taste the salt of skin with  
eyes alone; breathe in the fine texture of rabbit-soft hair  
of neck nape. I run my bod's fingers through the  
mist of jasmine, female, pheromones that bloom  
open flowers on underjaw and wristpulse.

The drumbeat plunder of your hotblooded hormones  
burns over my backteeth, my tongue and down my throat  
like cherry-tree brandy.

So, don't rub my shoulders, squeeze my hand or lick  
my lips; cause this is all a spare-rib prison  
and I'm doing time in the bars of a ribcage  
and you'll never even leave fingerprints on my  
wet-serpent self, only hump the meat-puppet  
I wear for show. •



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# VIRGINIA'S NEXT CHRISTMAS

by A.R. King

illustrated by Anna-Marie Ferguson

*Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.*

Francis Pharcellus Church, *The New York Sun*  
September 21, 1897

**F**or a few weeks after the letter in *The Sun* appeared, Virginia O'Hanlon's friends were in awe. After Christmas had come and gone, though, their skepticism returned.

They taunted Virginia with chants: "Yes, Virginia, there is an Easter Bunny." "Yes, Virginia, there is a tooth fairy." "Yes, Virginia, there is a sand man." It was too much, even for Virginia. Her faith shattered. She decided another letter was in order.

*Dear Mr. Santa Claus, she wrote. You didn't bring me what I really wanted last year. I don't care if you bring me coal this year. My friends are right; there is no Santa Claus. I don't believe in you anymore. I hate you. Love, Virginia O'Hanlon.*

On Christmas Eve, 1898, after her mother and father had gone to bed, Virginia O'Hanlon crept to the front room. She pulled the stiff cotton of her nightdress tight at her side so it would not rustle.

She hid behind the high-backed, paisley love-seat at the hearth. The chair was her father's favorite, where he sat to read *The Sun* with her.

She was determined to stay awake all night to prove her point.

Every Christmas her father left one lamp burning, above the mantle, for Santa Claus. It was turned down so, instead of throwing light on the room, it cast up shadows which made it ominous, rather than inviting. There, in the near-dark, she waited. And waited.

Dust must have been settling on her eyeballs; they felt gritty, hot, itchy. She gave in for just a moment to the weight pulling her eyelids down, and felt a soothing cool.

The clock on the mantelpiece, above the striped stockings, chimed twice and she tore her eyes open. Her chin rested on the arm of the chair. Something else, not the clock, had woken her. Virginia squished her eyelids together again and opened them quickly to clear her vision to see the figure which appeared in the gloom.

Santa Claus was tall and thin, and wore a long red coat trimmed with white fur. He had a mustache but no beard. The mustache was a sloppy piece of work, drooping on the sides and shaggy in front so that he could, and did, suck the hair in between his lips.

Virginia watched him work. Her mind denied that he could be who he seemed to be, even as he filled the stockings. He did not fit the description. Besides, she reminded herself, there was no such person as Santa Claus. He was, therefore, some sort of trickery.

From her own mind or someone else's, but trickery nonetheless. She took short, silent breaths.

She managed to stand without being heard and stepped behind the man. He placed a final package under the tree. Virginia could see her own name, printed in a strong hand, not unlike her father's, on the card. The man in red straightened and turned to face her. He blinked. Twice.

The time had come to be bold. "Santa Claus," she said and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "My name is Virginia and I don't believe in you."

"The name is Saint Nicholas," he said with irritation and looked down into his sack. Virginia did not see anything jolly about his face. It was craggy and pinched and his eyes were hard.

"Virginia?" He draw a long, noisy breath in through his nose. He looked at her again. "You sent the letter. I *should* give you coal." His glove left a soot mark on his chin where he rubbed it. "You see me," he pointed a sooty finger at her and lowered his face until it was level with her own, "and still don't believe?"

Virginia lifted her chin in defiance and wagged it back and forth. His breath, laden with nutmegged egg-nogs and shortbread, hung heavy in the space between them. Her braids swung and the loose ends tickled against her cheeks. She wore a smug smile.

Saint Nicholas, if that was his real name, turned and lifted her stocking from its hook on the mantle and dropped it into the sack. "You are a special case." He paused to grin. "Virginia, I don't believe in you, either."

A movement to the right drew Virginia's attention. She turned in time to see all her presents fade from under the tree.

On Christmas morning, 1898, Mr. and Mrs. O'Hanlon sat together on the paisley love-seat. Mrs. O'Hanlon's cheek leaned over her husband's shoulder. Breakfast was done, the gifts opened and a cheery fire crackled in front of them.

"It's times like this," she said with a sigh, "I wish we had children." •

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# WESTWARD LOOK

from Chapter 6 of *The Stricken Field*

by Dave Duncan

illustrated by Tim Hammell

1. The forest giant had toppled years ago, and its trunk was thickly encrusted by moss of an especially nasty green. Higher than Rap's head, it lay across his path like a wall. "Path" was a misnomer, of course. There was no path. There was almost no light to see by, or solid ground to stand on, or space to squeeze between the branches and suckers and vines. The rain did stop sometimes, briefly, but such momentary droughts made no difference at the bottom of that sea of vegetation, where water dribbled and dripped continuously. He had been clawing his way through this nightmare for more weeks than he could bear to think about. Had there been any way to give up he would have given up long ago. Even fauns were not that stubborn.

Thrugg had found handholds somewhere and swung his great form onto that fallen trunk—peering up, Rap could see his enormous feet and calves like flour sacks. The rest of him was hidden in leaves. Then he crouched down, coming into view with the usual spray of water. He

From the book *The Stricken Field* by Dave Duncan. Copyright ©1993 by Dave Duncan. Reprinted by arrangement with Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

bared teeth in a grin. "Coming?"

The troll went naked and there was not a single mark on his doughy hide. Rap was swathed in garments of stout linen, yet he had almost no undamaged skin left between scars, scrapes, rashes, bruises, and insect bites. He had renewed his entire outfit from hat to boots just three nights ago, and put a preservation spell on it, but already it was rotting and falling apart.

The surprise was not that the Empire had never conquered the Mosweeps; the surprise was that it had ever wanted to.

*Stop!* He was veering perilously close to an attack of self pity, and he seemed to be doing that far too often recently. Go on, or sit down and die—those were the choices. Or use sorcery and be snapped up by Zinixo, of course, which would certainly be a worse ordeal than this. Fauns did not sit down and die! Nor did jotnar.

Thrugg's big paw was waiting. Rap grabbed it with both hands and felt a familiar humiliation as the young giant yanked him effortlessly skyward. A rush of wet leaves in his face, and he was standing at the troll's side, feeling childlike and helpless.

Thrugg pushed aside vegetation and peered at him with an expression of bestial ferocity that would have given a professional torturer nightmares for months. Rap could identify it now as mild concern, just as he had learned to

make out the slurred mumble of trolls' speech—the words were all in there, if you listened carefully enough.

"Not long now. You manage?"

Was his frailty so obvious? "Sure I can manage! Race you to the next castle . . . if you'll just tell me where it is."

Thrugg chuckled, a deep rumbling noise inside the barrel of his chest. He thumped a friendly hand on Rap's shoulder in approval. The moss crumbled under Rap's feet, and he shot down into a soggy, crumbling paste, coming to rest with his arms on the green carpet and the troll's horny toes in front of his face. *Oh Gods!* Again he felt black blankets of despair envelope him. What was the use?

"Not down there!" Thrugg said.

Rap summoned his resources. *Fight on!* There would be humor in this situation somewhere, if he could find it. "I think you're cheating!" he moaned. "Do troll rules let you nail your opponent into the ground?"

"Sure. Now I stamp on your head."

"It's not fair, you know! You must outweigh me three to one, and I'm the one who falls through?"

"Standing with feet wrong way."

"Well it is restful, like a warm bath."

"That's good! Dead trees usually full of many-legs. No bites? Stings?"

At once Rap's skin began to crawl with a million tiny feet, real or imaginary. "Get me out of here!" he yelled, close to panic.

Thrugg lifted him out and jumped, still holding him like a child. They came down on the far side of the tree with a splash, knee-deep in mud. The brief stay in the rotted wood had been long enough for Rap's clothes to be invaded by the many-legs, and several no-legs also. With howls, he began stripping them off.

"Use sorcery?" the troll asked urgently. He hated to see anyone else suffer, although he had endured months of slavery at Casfrel rather than wield his power against another human being.

"No!" Rap said. The Covin seemed to have abandoned its search, but the fugitives had agreed to continue their avoidance of magic in the open and he would not be the first to give in. He clawed at something squishy feeding on his thigh. "Ugh!"

"Next castle's shielded."

"Wonderful! How'd you know that?"

"Been there before. Almost there now." How Thrugg found his way though this impenetrable maze was a complete mystery. He thought he did it by smell. He could navigate just as well in the dark during a thunderstorm. He never lost his sense of direction, and he invariably found some sort of shelter for the night—not that he needed shelter, but the visitors

did. He did not use sorcery, for Rap would have detected that.

"Then I'll clean up there. Lead the way." Leaving his infested clothes where they were, Rap set off in only his boots and a bare minimum tied around his middle. When he wore clothes, he sweated to death in the steamy heat. When he didn't, he was stung and scratched unbearably. He could never decide which was worse. But if there was shielding ahead, then he could put everything right in a few minutes. New clothes, new skin. *Cold beer!*

Today they had crossed a single ridge, covering less than a league, and Witch Grunth's home was a long way off yet. Insidious voices whispered that this expedition was a terrible mistake. The moon was past the full again, so Rap had been floundering around in the mountains for more than two months. He had no idea what was happening outside in the real world. He had no way now to communicate with Shandie or the warlock. For all he knew they might both have been captured, leaving him to fight a hopeless singlehanded battle against the Covin. At the present rate he was going to die of old age before he achieved anything at all.

Krasnegar itself might no longer exist. He could not bear to think of Inos and the children. In the letter he had sent with Shandie, he had urged Inos to leave and take refuge at Kinvale. She might

have sent the kids away, but he doubted she would have abandoned her kingdom. She took her royal responsibilities more seriously than anything else in her life, and at times she could be as stubborn as a faun.

Would he ever see her again? More likely he would die of old age in this Evil-begotten morass. What had ever possessed him to come here? Lith'rian would have been a far better bet than Grunth.

And always, that haunting half-memory that whispered he had forgotten something important and was overlooking a winning move . . .

Thrugg had been right again, though. In a few minutes they heard running water and the ground dipped steeply. Rare was the stream that had no castle on it. Trolls spent their lives home-making, building huge edifices of rock, almost always straddling running water. A cataract in every room seemed to be the most desired feature in domestic architecture, except possibly incompleteness. As soon as he saw his work nearly finished, a troll would wander away and start again somewhere else. A man's gotta do something, Thrugg said, and what else was there to do in the Mosweeps? Most of the jungle was edible for trolls, so there was no need to farm. Once in a while they would run down a deer—usually just for sport, but rarely for a taste of meat. Wood and paper and cloth turned

to mush in days. Fires would not burn. Heaving rocks around creatively was better than doing nothing.

Every stream bore abandoned castles, many so ancient that they were buried in jungle. A surprising number of them showed evidence of occult shielding. That abundance of shielding was the only encouraging thing Rap had discovered on this mad pilgrimage. It confirmed his theories about the best places to look for sorcery. For untold centuries, the gentle folk of Faerie had been exploited for words of power. The Nogids and the Mosweeps were barriers on the road home to the mainland. Many geniuses and adepts must have been shipwrecked, and words of power outlived their transitory owners. He had assumed that the trolls and anthropophagi would include more than their share of mages and sorcerers, and so far his guess seemed to working out.

Gathering them together, even with Grunth's help, would be another matter altogether. One lifetime would never be enough.

Somewhere just ahead, though, was another troll castle. Soon he would discover who lived in it, if anyone. Many trolls were completely solitary. Others lived in strange groupings—two or three men and one woman, or the other way around. Once or twice he had met bands of children living together with no evidence of adults to care for them. Little Norp had

attached herself to one such band without even a word of farewell. Trolls were peaceable and could eat anything. They had no need for social organization.

Yet they had a culture, of a sort. He had not known of their singing and dancing before, but they existed. Although they were strange to him, he could appreciate them as art. Trolls made strangers welcome—indeed their hospitality toward other trolls was unlimited. They would share even their mates without jealousy. Rap had refused several offers in the last two months, always with as much tact as he could muster.

Darad had no such inhibitions. Even after exhausting days of scrambling through impenetrable vegetation, he could never resist challenging the men to wrestling matches. He never won, and he never learned. His activities with the women had perhaps been more successful, but he had suffered numerous broken bones in both sorts of encounter, despite his partners' efforts not to hurt him. Had Thrugg not cured his injuries, Darad would have long since been left behind, a helpless cripple.

Darad and Urg were following, probably quite close, but the dense undergrowth blocked noise.

A glimpse of weepy gray sky showed through the trees ahead, and the noise of water grew louder. The day was far from over, but the promise of rest was too tempting to refuse. At this rate, Rap was

going to be as old as Sagorn before he even met up with Witch Grunth.

His gloomy meditations were interrupted by a thunderous roar from Thrugg. Trees shuddered and cracked as the giant hurled himself forward and disappeared down a bank. Rap scrambled after, hearing more ferocious bellows, and then others in answer. He emerged from cover at the edge of a small pond. Thrugg and another man were rolling around in the center, roiling the water to spray, punching, roaring, and struggling as if bent on mutual murder. Such was the normal friendly greeting between male trolls. Fortunately, they were rarely so affectionate toward men of other races.

Beyond them stood a wall of gigantic rocks, with the stream cascading down from the front door. Venturing a peek with farsight, Rap established that the castle was indeed shielded against sorcery. That was welcome news, and so was the relative absence of moss on it. It must be very recent—and that suggested a sorcerer in the neighborhood.

\*

Shortly thereafter, Rap was reclining at ease in a comfortable chair identical to his favorite chair in Krasnegar. Cold drinks stood on a table nearby. He was clean and garbed in loose cotton slacks. He had healed his scrapes and bruises, including the dislocated shoulder he had suffered in being introduced

to Shaggi, his new host. Sorcery had a much greater appeal in the Mosweeps than it did anywhere else.

The room was troll-size, a modest cathedral, although in shape it was more like a cave, with few level or vertical surfaces. It was dim and relatively cool. A waterfall cascaded down the rear wall to feed a series of pools crossing the floor to the entrance. Jungle was already clambering in through the windows. Apart from Rap's innovations, there was no furniture.

Thrugg and Shaggi sprawled side-by-side on a rock ledge, growling and gabbling at each other incomprehensibly. They appeared to be old friends, for they laughed often, and jovially swung killer punches at each other. Shaggi was something of a mystery. If anything, he was even larger than Thrugg, and of about the same age. He was not, apparently, a sorcerer. Or else he was concealing the fact superbly.

Just when the mayhem seemed to be slowing down and Rap thought he might manage to enter the conversation, a shadow darkened the doorway. Urg came striding in, carrying Darad. He was delirious, thrashing and struggling vainly against her greater strength. Thrugg leaped up in alarm and his image brightened in the ambience as he inspected the damage. Snakebite, Urg explained casually. A sorcerer of Thrugg's power could heal anything short of death, and

in moments the jotunn was sitting up and looking around with his usual ferocious grin. Rap organized another, very solid chair. But of course Darad would have to meet his host, and there would be more violence.

Rap could contain his impatience no longer. "Shaggi?" he demanded hastily. "Who put the shielding on this house?"

"Uh?" Shaggi scratched his head. "Shielding?"

Thrugg chuckled. "I did." He was sitting on a rock by the stream, crunching on a thick tuber he had magicked up for himself.

Rap's mood turned black again. "Oh."

"He's my brother."

"Oh!" Well, that explained the joviality. "I was hoping maybe we'd met up with another sorcerer."

"You did!" said a new voice. A monstrous old female came lumbering out of the shadows under the waterfall. Her hair was gray and tied behind her head in a ponytail, which was an odd affectation for a troll. She wore a loose cotton gown, which was even odder.

Thrugg leaped up and tried to embrace her. She swung a sideways punch that would have smashed any normal skull like an egg. It bowled the young giant right off his feet, and he flipped into the pool with a splash that soaked half the chamber.

"Idiot!" she snarled. "Why did

you bring these vermin here?"

Wiping water from his face, Rap sprang to his feet. He had done it! All those weeks of torment in the horrible jungle had not been wasted—he had found the woman he came to seek. He bowed low.

"Greetings, your Omnipotence!"

Grunth glared at him and then spat. "Go away!" she said. The ambience flared dangerously, with images of molten rocks. "Go away before I burn you to ashes."

## 2.

Shaggi bounded over the stream to Rap and enfolded him in a bone-creaking hug. "He is my guest!" he bellowed, apparently believing that his mother would be unable to damage Rap without hurting him at the same time—which was far from the case, of course.

Even before he had spoken, though, or Darad had stopped blinking his surprise, Thrugg spoke out in the much faster world of the ambience. In a stream of images almost instantaneous, he described Rap's attempt to rescue the slaves at Casfrel. He explained how that had been an act of pure altruism, and a very dangerous one. His appreciation and gratitude were obvious—embarrassingly so. Rap himself had almost forgotten the incident, and thought nothing much of it anyway.

But it cooled the witch's an-

ger. She sat down on a convenient rock and scowled at him. "My thanks, then," she said reluctantly. "But you are not welcome here."

"I see that," Rap muttered, still breathless from Shaggi's embrace. "Can we talk about it?"

The molten rocks glowed again briefly. "Talk. I'll listen." Grunth turned her attention to Urg, holding out her arms in welcome. While the two hugged in the mundane world, Rap started to speak in the ambience. Thrugg introduced Darad, who was as far out of his depth as usual, and Shaggi went splashing out down the stream. He returned very shortly with a double armful of branches for supper. And while all this was going on, Rap was bringing Witch Grunth up to date on everything that had happened since she had made her brief appearance in the Rotunda. It was a real shock to realize six months had gone by since that fateful day the old emperor died. During those six months, the usurper had undoubtedly been consolidating his grip on the world. Time was slipping away.

Only once did Grunth comment. When Rap described the new protocol he hoped would bring peace to the world, she projected a fragrant image of an ill-kept barnyard. Somehow that did not seem like a very hopeful sign.

As soon as he had done, her son flashed some queries at her. To his astonishment, Rap now learned that the two of them had

been corresponding mundanely, by messenger, ever since Thrugg reached the forest. He had never bothered to mention the fact, but many of the trolls he and Rap had met on their journey had then gone off to summon known sorcerers to this meeting, here at Shaggi's castle. Outside the Mosweeps no one would believe that trolls were capable of such organization, and the idea of them acting as messengers would be a joke, a contradiction in terms.

Grunth's scowl grew more hostile, and for a moment she sat in silence, giving away nothing.

"Well?" her son demanded. "Did they come?"

"Some," she admitted. She turned her gruesome glare on Rap. "You bring trouble! If that dwarf monster suspects what you do here, then he will enslave us all. No one can resist the power he wields."

"Will you do nothing? He will come for you anyway, when he gets around to it. He'll settle with Lith'rian first, I expect, then he'll come for you."

He thought he had scored a point; angry flames flickered again.

"How many sorcerers are there in the Mosweeps?" he demanded.

Thrugg was sitting with his knees up like a child, chewing a wad of leaves. "*Thousands!*"

"*Silence!*" His mother hurled a bed-sized boulder at him in the ambience.

He deflected it easily, grinning

a disgusting cud at her. "*How many, then?*"

"*Fifty, maybe. No more.*"

Fifty sorcerers together would wield power to move mountains!

Grunth jumped on Rap's thought. "*So they would, faun, but how do you find them all? How do you bribe a troll, faun? And do you think all fifty together could hurt the Covin?*"

Worry it a little, maybe. And how did one bribe a troll? Apparently Thrugg had invited some of those sorcerers to come here for the meeting. Either they had declined, or the witch had sent them home again, or she was keeping them out of sight. Rap had always known that she might refuse to aid his quest, but he had never considered that she might seek to block it. She was vastly more powerful than he was, and so was her son. Although Thrugg seemed more inclined to support Rap at the moment, surely in a crunch he would side with his mother?

Perhaps Rap had endured this nightmare journey to no purpose—the thought was crippling.

"And how many in the Nogids, would you suppose?"

The witch's muzzle wrinkled in a sneer. "None."

Rap's heart sank even farther. He sat down again to give himself a moment to consider, and took a swig of cold beer. "Zinixo got them already?"

She nodded contemptuously. "You thought you were so smart



that no one else would think of that?"

The dwarf had once been warlock of the west. He would have investigated the anthropophagi's islands very thoroughly in those days.

"When?" Rap demanded.

"About three months ago."

There was a hesitancy there, though. It showed in the ambience, where lies were impossible and even evasion improbable.

"And he conscripted all the sorcerers?"

"Most." She would volunteer nothing.

Rap took another drink, feeling more despondent than ever. His quest was starting to seem utterly hopeless.

Thrugg gulped down his fodder and said aloud, "Come on, you mangy old hag! What're you hiding behind that new shielding?"

Her response was a blinding bolt of lightning that shattered rocks in front of his toes. The cave rocked with the blast, the three mundanes yelled out in terror—and Thrugg just sat and leered while gravel ricocheted off his hide. As the echoes died away and ears stopped ringing, a newcomer came strolling out of those sinister shadows at the back. Darad growled. Rap scrambled to his feet. He had never seen such an apparition before.

The man's skin was a dark molasses shade, but his face and chest and limbs were scrolled with bright white and blue and green

tattoos. In size he would rank as taller than an average imp and skinnier, but it was only fat that was missing—the muscles were there and he moved with grace, even barefoot on rock. He wore an apron of white beads that jangled as he moved. He had a red flower in the bush of his hair and a bone through his nose, and when he flashed a smile at Grunth, he revealed very white teeth that had been filed to points.

"Begging your parson, your Omnivorous," the newcomer said apologetically, "I feel it is time for me to include on your deliveries." He turned his chilling smile on Rap and advanced with both hands out and the white beads of his garment clattering. They were human finger bones.

He was a sight to curdle the blood, and yet an enormously exciting one. He was a sorcerer, and probably a strong one. He was also an anthropophagus. Rap knew almost nothing of such people, and had never heard of them leaving their native Nogids, because any other race would kill them on sight. Was this some of Grunth's doing? Or a Zinixo trick? He bore no loyalty spell that Rap could detect; could even the powers of the Covin achieve that?

"Your repudiation has proceeded you, your Majesty King Rap. I am horrid to make your acquaintance."

"I am likewise honored," Rap said warily, submitting to an em-

brace. He thought of a stormy night many years ago, and a terrified sailor boy running along a beach with several hundred cannibals in close pursuit. None had come this close, fortunately. Those gruesome teeth were smiling much too close as the man continued his speech.

"My full name you would find quite unrenounceable, but you may abominate it to Tok." The dark eyes shone with amusement over the ends of the bone. It was probably a clavicle. "My title is Tik, conveying a heretical right to certain delicacies when my village feasts. My friends call me Tik Tok."

"And you call me Rap. I visited your native lands once, Tik Tok, but only briefly."

"Ah!" The anthropophagus sighed. "It was a shame you could not stay for dinner."

"The invitation was extended, but I felt I had to rush off."

Sharpened teeth showed again. "But your green friend remained behind? That was at Fort Emshandar. I was there, as a child. My first feast! But I should like to hear the perpendiculars from you some time."

"You mean that was how the goblin escaped? You let him go?"

"Of course. My grandfather and some others defected his destiny. Even we do not argue with the Gods, Majesty Rap!"

"You speak impish very well."

Mischief gleamed in the shiny black eyes. "I picked it up as a youngster, in the kitchens." Tik Tok

swung around in a clink of bones to face the trolls. "And I am delighted to meet Sorcerer Thrugg, the great Libertine. Your brother has been telling me how you emasculated so many slaves!"

Thrugg did not rise. "Looks as if I have some more to free," he said, still grinning like a hungry grizzly.

A line of trolls came lumbering out of that shadowed corner—male and female, ranging in age from a couple of youths up to white-haired oldsters. Big as it was, the chamber began to seem crowded. There was not enough level floor for them all, and some climbed up the slopes and peered down like living gargoyles from shadowed ledges. Darad was backing to the door, looking worried by such impossible odds. Shaggi wore a shamed expression at this treatment of guests.

Three of the newcomers barely showed at all in the ambience and thus were probably not full sorcerers. The other eight were. Every one of the eleven wore a sheen of ensorcelment. Grunth's occult image seemed to swell and solidify, and her glower had become even more threatening. These were her votaries. No question who ruled here.

Rap cursed himself for a reckless fool. He had blithely let himself be trapped in a shielded building at the mercy of a deposed witch. What sort of woman lurked within that hideous bulk? She was

very old. She had been overthrown after ruling a quarter of the world for twenty years, falling back from absolute power to heaving rocks around in a jungle. Had she managed to convince herself that she was enjoying an honorable retirement, or did she see it as humiliating exile? Either way, she would not want him intruding and reopening the wound. And why the gown? All the other trolls were nude. It showed she was not the innocent savage she must have been in her youth. She must know from her years in Hub how trolls were regarded by the rest of the world—and she could read his thoughts much better than he could read hers.

"Will you go now, faun?" she barked. "Or must I use force?"

Again the ambience gave her away, and Rap felt a surge of hope. She was not quite as implacable as she was trying to convey. Moreover, the limber anthropophagus at his side seemed completely unworried. He was studying the trolls, wriggling his nose thoughtfully to make the bone in it wiggle up and down.

"What do you think of the odds, Tik Tok?" Rap asked cautiously.

"Mouth watering!"

If one's taste ran to such beef, there was certainly a year's supply in view.

"The lady can overpower us," Rap said, fishing for information.

"But it would be unwise un-

der the circumcisions."

"What circum . . . To what do you refer, exactly?"

Tik Tok smiled his nightmare smile. "When the Covin invaded my homeland, I was not the only one to allude capture. Several of us made our escapade in a large canoe and came in search of her Omniscience. My companions are not far off, and are aware of my whereabouts."

"And how many companions do you have?"

"Nineteen sorcerers and five mages."

God of Battle! Rap felt a rush of relief and excitement. The witch was out-numbered! . . . but was she any worse than a cannibal chief would be?

Only Thruigg was still sitting, munching noisily on the stub end of a branch. "*You will have to repeat your proposal, faun. They were behind the shielding.*"

Rap glanced at Grunth but she made no move to stop him. Quickly, in case she changed her mind, he repeated the story he had related earlier, outlining the new protocol. The trolls listened with stolid faces, unmoved.

But Tik Tok beamed, and slapped him powerfully on the shoulder. "This is a preposition of hysterical significance, your Majesty! I should like to hear our meaty friends' reactants."

"Well, Mother?" Thruigg asked, picking splinters out of his teeth with a claw.

"They don't approve!" she snapped. "Trolls do not make war."

Rumbles of agreement echoed through the great chamber, momentarily drowning out the rush of the waterfall.

"But their views cannot differ from yours," her son said. He rose to his feet, moving lightly despite his enormous bulk. Then he could look down on her. "Why is what you have done to them better than what the imps do to us?"

Amen! Mother and son bared teeth at each other as if this was a longstanding dispute between them.

"Both would appear to be invaluable solitude," Tik Tok murmured.

Failing to move Thruigg, the old woman turned her anger on Rap. "I repeat that war is not our way. And suppose I did agree? I could loan them to you, to aid your cause. If I free them, they will just vanish into the jungles."

"No!" Rap said. "They join of their own free will, or not, as they please. They will not need to use violence. If they wish to limit their help to defense, I will still welcome them. We do not seek to destroy the usurper's agents, but to liberate them."

"There is much to be said for violets," Tik Tok murmured.

"Mother?" Thruigg demanded. He towered in the mundane chamber as a column of muscle, and in the ambience he was still the most solid of them all.

Grunth sighed, and waved a great paw. "Do it then."

The ambience blazed as the young sorcerer stripped away the loyalty spells. For a moment the released votaries just stood and stared, mumbling with surprise as they adjusted to their new thinking. Then, with deafening roars, they converged on their liberator, men and women both, some even leaping down bodily on him from their higher perches. Thruigg disappeared below a bellowing, squirming riot of monsters. Dust rose in clouds.

Tik Tok sighed and licked his lips.

Speech was impossible in that din. "Well, your Omnipotence?" Rap sent. "You seem to be mistaken so far. Will you also join our cause?"

The witch nodded sourly. "I suppose someone must keep you from blundering into disaster."

Incredible! Rap yelled in glee, and when he could not hear that himself, flashed a blaze of rose-pink joy in the ambience. He had founded an army—a small army, but a start on something greater. His sufferings had not been wasted after all. "Thirteen trolls and twenty-five anthropophagi?"

"And a faun for dessert." The bone in Tik Tok's nose wiggled. "That makes thirty-nine of us, if my calcifications are correct. An impassive display of millinery power!" •

the inner mind...

NOTHIN' ZAYZ  
LOVIN' LIKE  
ZOMETHIN'  
FROM THE  
OVEN!



THOMAS  
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## ON CONS — Canadian Convention & Reading Calendar

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honour, TM = Toastmaster, MC = Master of Ceremonies.

### • NOV 5-7 – NOVACON '93

Non-alcoholic. Holiday Inn, Halifax. GoH: Katherine Kurtz. Info: PO Box 1282, Dartmouth NS, B2Y 4B9; ph. (902) 462-6796.

### • NOV 12-14 – PSEUDO OPUS-CON

Relaxacon. Howard Johnson Hotel, Oakwood. Memb: \$20. Info: Kyle Duncan, 3325 Tallmast Cres, Mississauga ON, L5L 161.

### • NOV 20 – WHOCON '93

Auberge Ramada Contreville, Montréal. GoHs: Frazier Heines & Lalla Ward. Memb: \$18 at the door. Info: Box 311, Stn B, Montreal PQ.

### • NOV 21 – CHRONIC HYSTERESIS

Skydome Hotel, Toronto. GoHs: Frazier Heines & Lalla Ward. Memb: \$14 to Nov 1 1993. Info: 58 Penwick Cr, Richmond Hill ON, L4C 5B4.

## 1994

### • FEB 19-20 – CONV-ICTION 94

French-only. Info: CP 252, Succ. St. Martin, Chomedey, Laval PQ, H7V 3P5.

### • MAR 18-20 – ODYSSEY TREK 94

Skyline Brock Hotel, Niagara Falls. GoHs: Siddig El Fadil & Robert O'Reilly. Memb: \$34 to Dec 12

1993, \$40 at the door. Info: Box 47451, Centre Hall, Hamilton ON, L8H 7S7.

### • MAR 18-20 – ST CON 94

Quality Inn Downtown, Calgary. GoH: Lolita Fatjo. ArtGoH: Richard Bartrop. Info: Box 22188 Bankers Hall, Calgary AB, T2P 4J5.

### • MAR 19-21 – RHINOCON 3

Ramada Inn 401, London. GoHs: Judith Merril, Phyllis Gotlieb, Katherine MacLean. Info: Box 151, Ailsa Craig ON, N0M 1A0.

### • SEPT 1-5 – CANADIAN (Worldcon)

See ad page 5 for details.

## READINGS:

**Feb 24, 1994: ROBERT J. SAWYER** will be launching *Foreigner*, the third Quintaglio novel, at 7 pm at the Richmond Hill, Ontario, Central Public Library (Yonge St. at Major Mackenzie Dr.).

ON SPEC would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.

The bulk of the information in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

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# ON OUR CONTRIBUTORS

## ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

AL BETZ (*Ask Mr. Science*) of Vancouver is the Social Secretary for Mr. Science.

ROBERT BOYCZUK (*Jazz Fantasia*) is an optimist who lives in Toronto, where he teaches Computer Science at a community college. He has had two stories published in *ON SPEC*, "Falling," in our Over the Edge issue (Spring 93) and "Distant Seas," in our Fall 93 issue.

IVAN DORIN (*A Four Letter Word*) is a writer from Calgary, Alberta.

DAVE DUNCAN (*Westward Look from The Stricken Field*) was born in Scotland in 1933 and educated at Dundee High School and the University of St. Andrews. He moved to Canada in 1955 and has lived in Calgary ever since. He is married and has three grown children. After a thirty-year career as a petroleum geologist, he discovered it was much easier (and more fun) to invent his own worlds than try to make sense of the real one.

M.A.C. FARRANT (*Family Harmony*) of Sidney, BC, has three chapbooks published by Berkeley House (Silver Birch Press) in addition to her collections of short fiction, *Sick Pigeon* (Thistledown Press 1991) and *Raw Material* (Arsenal Pulp Press 1993). Her work has appeared in *What!*, *Paragraph*, *Rampike* and *ON SPEC*.

WESLEY HERBERT (*Call Me Playdough*) is expanding his cult following from the snowbound wastes of York University into the snowbound wastes of all of Canada. Culties everywhere rejoice over the birth of his firstborn, Tyren Paix Herbert.

A.R. KING (*Virginia's Next Christmas*) is a broadcaster living in Calgary. "Virginia's Next Christmas" is this Nova Scotia native's first pro sale. He wants everyone to know that he *does* believe in Santa Claus.

CATHERINE MacLEOD (*Sommelier*) has a degree in journalism and has published short fiction in *TickleAce*, *Secrets from the Orange Couch*, and *ON SPEC*. Her first novel is currently going through the delicate editorial process known as "dismemberment."

DERRYL MURPHY (*Body Solar*) is a professional photographer and writer who, so far, lacks the brains or drive to look for a real job. Readers sufficiently fooled by "Body Solar" can find his one other work of published fiction, "Father Time," in *Tesseract*<sup>4</sup>, or read the *Edmonton Journal* for his regular, inciteful, and often painfully off the mark SF reviews.

LUKE O'GRADY (*Home*) is a writer from Brockville, Ontario.

T. ROBERT SZEKELY (*Child of the Bomb*) is presently at work on several short stories and his first novel. Robert lives in Calgary and spends most of his writing

time shooing the family cats away from the keyboard. "Child of the Bomb" is his first story to appear in print.

#### ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

ROBERT PASTERNAK (*Cover*) of Winnipeg is steadily unravelling the threads in his mind, spinning them into puzzle pieces and leisurely putting himself back together. He is also putting together a second volume of his black and white works that will feature a screen-printed cover for his illustration for M.A.C. Farrant's "Fish" in the Spring 93 *ON SPEC*.

JIM BEVERIDGE (*Home*) is a dedicated freelancer, body and soul. He's been airbrushing folks' fantasies for quite a while and now has access to create in cyberspace through his 'puter.

ROBERT BOERBOOM (*Child of the Bomb*) partakes in local and surrounding area shows in his home town of Brantford, Ontario, where his drawings, paintings and sculpture are exhibited. Rob also freelances as a commercial artist, publishing work across Canada.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (*Jazz Fantasia*) of Edmonton won the 1993 and 1991 Aurora for artistic achievement, Lynne is Art Director of *ON SPEC*. Her work has appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Pulphouse the Hardback Magazine*, *Pulphouse Fiction Magazine*, *Science Fiction Review*, *Fantasy Tales*, and *ON SPEC*.

ANNA-MARIE FERGUSON (*Virginia's Next Christmas*) of Red Deer, Alberta, illustrates for Canadian, American, and British books and magazines. Currently she is working on an Arthurian Tarot deck called "Legend." Deck and accompanying book to be published by Llewellyn Worldwide Publications in 1995.

TIM HAMMELL (*Westward Look* and *The Inner Mind*) of Calgary was nominated for two print enhancement awards at the national PPOC convention in Québec. He hung three prints in the juried show.

RON HOLMES (*Family Harmony*) is a freelancer from Edmonton.

MIKE JACKSON (*A Four Letter Word*) is a freelance illustrator who lives in Vancouver, BC. His work regularly appears in *ON SPEC* and in the SHADOWRUN and BATTLETECH games. He is not made entirely of wood but wants to be.

PETER MacDOUGALL (*Body Solar*) is from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Credits include illustrations for *Horizons SF*, several years of design for the UBC Sports programs, and a variety of other freelance projects; he has also had several short stories published. All this, and he is a practising doctor as well.

KENNETH SCOTT (*Sommelier*) is a Calgary artist who is currently working on a cover for David Lee's horror novel, *Shark Palace*. •



## GENERAL INFORMATION

*ON SPEC* is seeking original science fiction, fantasy, horror, ghost or fairy stories, magic realism, etc. Strong preference is given to submissions by Canadians. Send your short stories (max. 6000 words), short short stories (under 1000 words) or poetry (max. 100 lines) to the *ON SPEC* address below.

All submissions **must** include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE) with sufficient return postage. **Do NOT send originals.**

Submissions must be in **competition format** (author's name should **NOT** appear on manuscript). Enclose separate cover page with your name, address, **phone number**, story title and word count.

Please send SASE for complete guidelines before submitting.

Deadlines are November 30/93 (for Summer/94), February 28/94 (for Fall/94), May 31/94 (for Winter/94), and August 31/94 (Theme: "HORROR & DARK FANTASY," for Spring/95).

Art guidelines and advertising information are available. Please send SASE.

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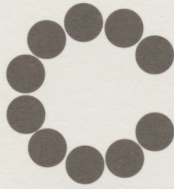
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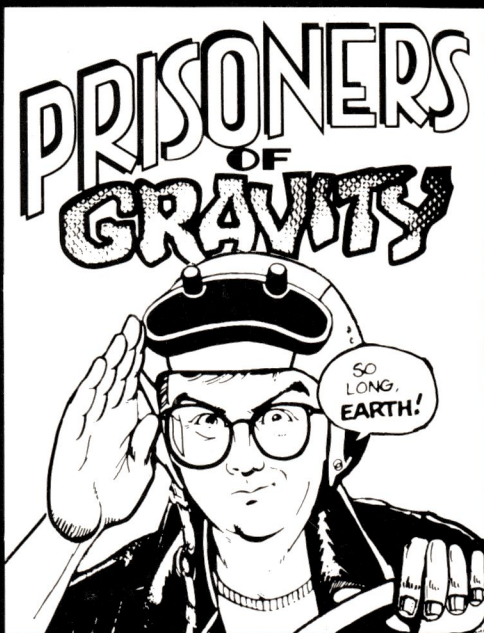
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