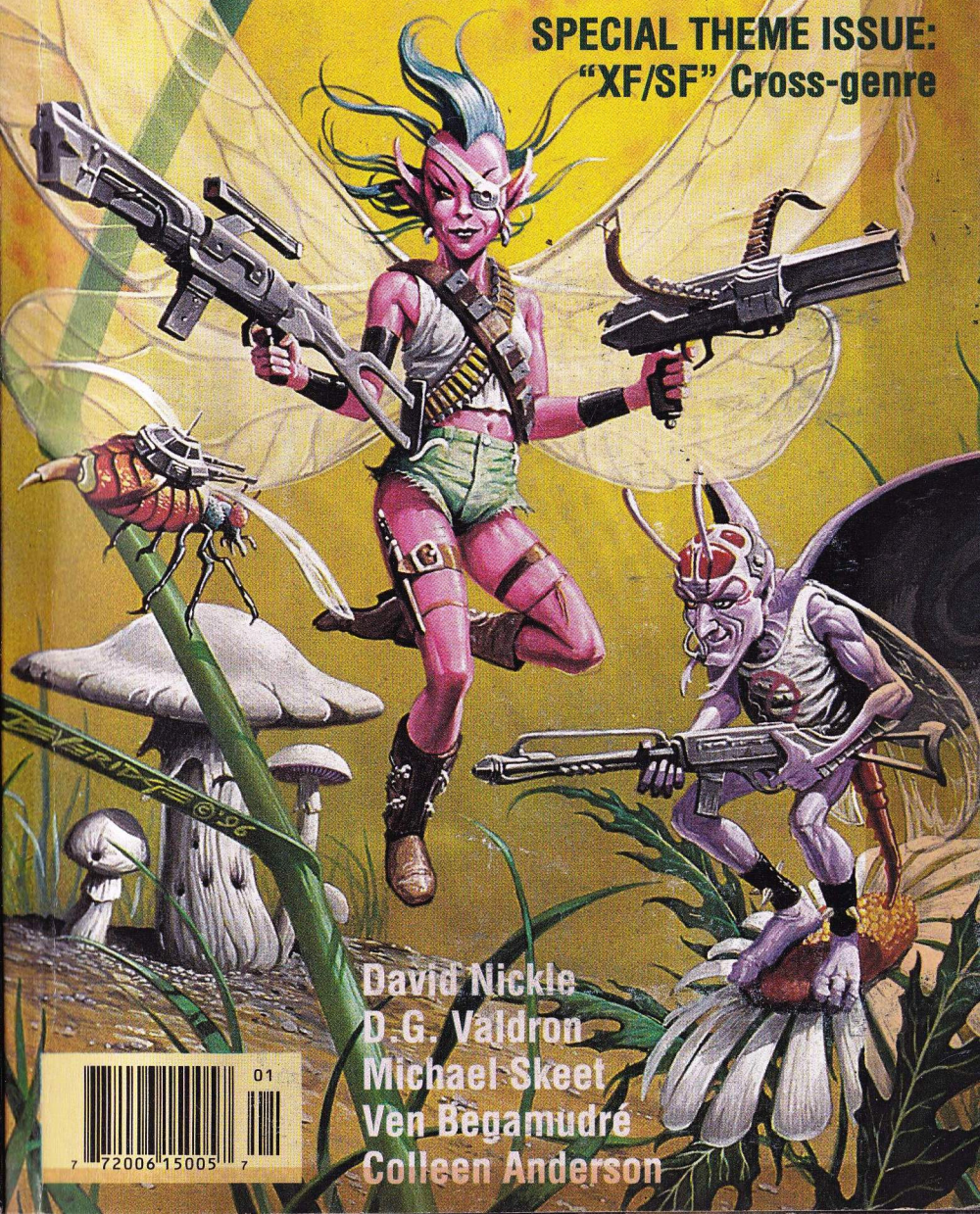


ON·SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing
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SPECIAL THEME ISSUE:
"XF/SF" Cross-genre



David Nickle
D.G. Valdrón
Michael Skeet
Ven Begamudré
Colleen Anderson



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ON·SPEC

Special Theme Issue: "XF/SF" Cross-genre fiction

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ON this Issue

Mixing it up

Barry Hammond, Editor

In British slang they call an argumentative person a mixer. I've always liked a good argument. In retrospect, I always say that's the most valuable thing I learned at university—how to argue. As I recall, I argued a lot, trying to defend my views against the barrages of well-meaning professors who were determined to educate me.

How well they succeeded can still be argued, but one discussion that's stayed with me involved the question of style in a work of art. My design professor was of the opinion that all great works had a unity—one overall consistent style. I couldn't understand why it wasn't possible to mix, juxtapose and play several styles off against each other within one work. It seemed to me that with the advent of Modernism, this was one of the basic tenets: you always took into account the form and style of a piece of art and could use that form and style to comment on the work itself.

At the time, I was too young, inexperienced, tongue-tied and lacked the confidence to argue this position with any degree of ability against someone as well-schooled as my professor.

In the ensuing years, if I've learned anything, I've learned one thing above all others: I was right.

As an adult, I'm confident enough to argue almost anything with anybody, though I'm sure this reflects sadly both on my education and my ego.

All this brings me, in an extremely round-about fashion, to the purpose of this special theme issue of *ON SPEC*—crossing genres. Specifically: taking two or more clearly defined styles of fiction and mixing them together.

For what purpose? Well, let me go back to the argument with my old design professor. She was right about one thing: mixing styles can be jarring. It knocks you out of a piece and makes you look at it more closely. This seems to go against the conventional wisdom in writing, where we're trained not to give the reader or editor a reason to stop reading. However, there are lots of exceptions to this so-called rule: surprise endings, changing character viewpoints, playing distinct time periods off against each other, finding out something we've previously believed in the story is false, etc. All of these things can be jarring but, if handled with skill and feeling, they can give us new insights into the story with the additional emotional impact caused by the jar itself. In talented hands this is powerful stuff. So is mixing styles.

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By juxtaposing two or more styles, the artist draws attention not just to their content but to what the style says about our preconceived boundaries or limitations of representation, reality, society, history, and our position in respect to them.

Let me give you several examples I was too slow-witted to mention to my design professor years ago:

- **Collage**—when Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque began cutting and pasting pieces of newspaper and colored paper into their pictures, it set off a storm of controversy about representation and abstraction. They argued representation was now the domain of photography, and abstraction was the direction they saw painting and the other visual arts moving towards. The tension between these two poles is still being felt today. In *Naked Lunch*, William Burroughs introduced “the cut up,” applying the same method to writing. In music, sampling has caused a similar controversy about copyright and intellectual property, but there are hundreds of artists working in rap and hip hop using these techniques. In a less obvious way, almost all record production makes use of “punching in” the best takes or overdubbing performances that may have taken place in completely separate times and spaces. Brian Eno has taken the concept of the studio as an instrument to its logical limits in his *Ambient* series and other solo works. The process of balancing all these pieces in multi-track recording is called mixing. The Rappers and Hip Hop artists call themselves names like DJ Such-and-Such and MixMaster So-and-So.

Interestingly, every computer today has a “cut and paste” feature which allows writers to do this easily. I’m using it myself to write this article. Despite the cutting together of disparate materials which may have different stylistic characteristics, the above artists all manage to maintain a different kind of stylistic unity by limiting the number of choices or by filtering them through their personalities so the choices reflect their personal obsessions. This concept brings to mind a couple of other examples:

- **Andy Warhol**—by introducing images from commercial art, Hollywood, advertising, comic books and fashion into the so-called high art world, Warhol made his audience reassess their preconceptions of what art is. His other brilliant stroke was to emphasize the flaws in the various processes so that the audience would look at how the art was produced as well as what it represented. No other artist in history has worked in so many media and in so many styles; yet by the force of his personality and the cohesiveness of his choices, one can easily recognize a “typical” Warhol. These kinds of upheavals seem necessary every so many years to keep the output of artists vital and exciting. Although this process has been going on since art began, this century has twice been knocked on its head, first by Marcel Duchamp, Picasso and the other modernists, and again by Warhol and his successors who’ve incorporated every sort of style, including graffiti, into their work.

- Here in Canada one of our foremost visual artists, Michael Snow, has been working with these sorts of stylistic problems his entire career. To quote him: “Directing the viewer’s attention to the nature of the material or medium in which the work is composed can make for a more ‘critical’ level of experience than the shade of hallucination involved in our belief in representation which (unless it has a ‘self-reflexive’ possibility) must refer to an elsewhere at another time, not *now*, and in my opinion such a work won’t have the strength to survive the gradual removal of the period importance of the referent.”

Put slightly differently: "In interpreting the way the cultural icons interact, the (reader) inevitably confronts actual society rather than merely (the writer's) particular confection."¹

• **Frank Zappa** has been a pioneer in the art of crossing genres in music. By mixing R&B, doowop, rock and roll, jazz, avant-garde, classical, high and low art influences all within the same piece he creates humor and undermines the "proper" reference categories, leaving us to hear music not as a style but simply as music.

Apart from all these aesthetic or artistic concerns, artistic mixing and juxtaposition creates new and dynamic forms which go forward with a life of their own. Chuck Berry and others, by mixing urban blues and country in the 1950s, created Rock and Roll, which is still mutating forty years later.

Sometimes the best way of pumping life into clichés or exhausted forms is by mixing them with something else. In writing, the spy novel was deflating without the Cold War to pump life into it when William Gibson came along with what I still think of as his Industrial Espionage novels and all of a sudden we had Cyberpunk. In sculpture I think immediately of mixed media. Theatre and poetry seem to be getting closer together in the sort of multimedia presentations that artists like Laurie Anderson have made the norm. With the increasing use of digital technology, more and more things are being sampled and mixed together. Connie Willis in her novel, *Remake*, has predicted a movie industry where past stars can be sampled and mixed with each other to create "new" films. Hollywood is already making this prediction happen in films like *Forrest Gump*. In a short introductory article like this one I can only hit these points scatter shot and use the examples that come first to mind, given my own preoccupations. I'm sure readers can come up with equally relevant examples that I've missed or forgotten.

Mixing styles may be the predominant form in Twentieth Century art. Maybe modern artists don't like to be pigeonholed or slotted into categories since once you've defined something, you can relegate it to a museum, safely tuck it away in a plastic specimen envelope and say, "I know what that is, now I don't have to pay attention to it any more."

Genres also imply social limits. "By abutting various modes of representation it (art) seeks to dramatize their shortcomings, create dissatisfaction with limits... The net result is a grating, contradictory work which mocks artists tied to single genres, those incapable of surviving without a nurturing context."²

The last ninety-six years have been a revolt against labels in races, sexes, all aspects of life. *ON SPEC* is very aware of this. When you're involved in genre writing of the type we're engaged in, we're always trying to expand definitions or escape them. We want you to keep paying attention. The more we argue, the more we understand our differences. I like differences. That's what makes the world interesting and vital. That's why I'm still arguing. I guess I'm still a mixer. So are artists. That's what they do—argue and mix it up. I'm sure my old professor would be horrified, but that's what art is about. The new horrifying the old, mixing things together, and going forward to make something new. Enjoy these stories: they were all created by MixMasters. •

1 & 2—Ben Watson from *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (St. Martin's Press, 1995).

HAPPY 8TH BIRTHDAY, *ON SPEC*! Sometimes it's hard to believe, even for those of us putting in long hours reading manuscripts, writing letters, checking artwork, maintaining the database, or doing layout, but *ON SPEC* has been in business for eight years now. In those eight years, we've expanded from two issues a year to four, grown from 84 pages to 96, put out six theme issues, been to two Worldcons, published an anthology and, most recently, put up a home page on the World Wide Web! Come visit us at: <http://www.greenwoods.com/onspec/>

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

JAMES BEVERIDGE resides in Edmonton but lives in "the aether of the imagination." A being with great love and respect for speculative fiction and art, he hopes to reach the chakra of "Creative Nirvana," no matter in which solar system it is located. Jim has moved from Co-Art Directorship to Creative Consultancy, which he finds very comfortable, thank you very much. •



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Love Means Forever

David Nickle

illustrated by Tim Hammell

Suki Shannahan felt like she was the luckiest girl in a million light years.

The starship *Gwendolyn* had a staff of more than fifteen cryosurgeons, a payload of three thousand, two hundred and twenty-four crew and colonists, and a nursing staff of thirty-four. The first person she saw when she revived could have been *anyone*.

It could have been that hateful Chief of Nursing Staff Helen Rockholme, who had broken Suki's heart back on Luna when she signed Suki on as a Candy Striper Second Class, even though Suki'd passed the exams at the top of her class and everybody *knew* that she was more qualified for the rN-5 position than that horrible *pill* of a former best friend, Betty-Anne Tilley.

For that matter, it could have been Betty-Anne Tilley that Suki'd seen first—she'd studied all the procedural manuals until it seemed like her brain was ready to burst, and Suki knew that registered nurses often monitored the routine revivifications without any supervision at all. It was part of the job.

Betty-Anne Tilley at the console of my cryo-unit. The very thought was enough to make Suki's still-frosty cheeks flush hot with anger.

But as she lay back in the recovery room on the outside rim of Torus 3, Suki couldn't stay mad long. Because when her eyelids peeled open like the paper off a popsicle, the first thing she saw wasn't the stern glare of Nursing Chief Rockholme, and it certainly wasn't the smug little face of Nurse—*Nurse!*—Betty-Anne Tilley.

It was Doctor Neil Webley. And after seventeen years of waiting in the residential arcology of Torus 2, seventeen long years spent in the dark spaces between Earth and this star that shone outside the viewport now like a glowing red beacon of their love, Doctor Webley—Neil Webley, *her* Neil—was every bit as gorgeous as the day they'd first kissed.

When they'd first met on the shuttle up from Luna, Neil had only been five years

older than Suki, and had just completed his residency on both legs of the Earth-Mars comet run. The old Russian-built ship that ran the loop between the two worlds had been constructed without a torus, so Neil had spent the entire year and a half in zero gravity. Which, he'd told her, was one of the reasons he'd signed on to the *Gwendolyn*. He'd been engaged to a girl in the Free Principality of Greater Seattle, but the eighteen months he'd spent in freefall had done such damage to the calcium in his bones that he'd never be able to return to a full-gravity environment.

"She broke off the engagement the moment I told her," Neil had explained as they sat together watching the *Gwendolyn* grow from just another star in the forward porthole to the two-mile long chain of rings and cylinders and star drives that was to become their new home. "Judith had always hated space travel—I suppose I should have known."

"That's no excuse," Suki answered, without even thinking. "I know that I'd follow the man that I was going to marry to the bottom of the ocean if that's where he wanted to go. Love is supposed to mean forever, Neil."

There had been an uneasy silence then, and Suki was sure that she'd put her foot in it.

"I'm sorry," she finally said. "I didn't mean to suggest—"

But Neil had put her at ease with one of his patented grins, and patted her arm with his still-strong surgeon's hand. "What? That Judith didn't truly love me? There's no need to apologize for being perceptive, Suki."

Neil's hand lingered for a moment on the bare skin of her arm, and Suki felt gooseflesh rising. From across the lounge, Suki was sure she could feel Betty-Anne's envious glare boring into

the backs of their seats. At another time, she might have taken a little guilty pleasure in it—but Neil Webley consumed her attention like a flame.

"It's possible to marry for other things than love," Neil had continued. "On Earth it is, anyway. You can marry for status, for wealth ... for trophies like lawyers or engineers ... Or, I suppose, for doctors." His grin turned wry, for just an instant. "In space, though—"

And then his impossibly blue eyes had met hers—their eyes had truly met—for the very first time.

"—in space, the trophies are different. And when we marry, true love may be the only thing we have that can keep us together."

And finally, as much to his amazement as hers—or so he later claimed—Doctor Neil Webley had leaned in closer, and the gooseflesh vanished in the tide of Suki's quickening pulse, and the two had kissed. It had been their first kiss—and in many ways, Suki later decided that it had been *her* first kiss. The first kiss that had mattered, in all her eighteen years.

True love, thought Suki as she lay alone in the immense recovery ward of Torus 3, waiting for the pins and needles in her arms and legs to subside. *It really is forever.*

"How's my Suki?"

Wonderful, she mouthed—it was still too soon for her to talk, even twelve hours after they'd pulled the tube from her throat. But Neil understood. He leaned over her bed and delicately brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen across her eyes.

This was only the second time she'd seen him since revivification. The first time she had been unable to even breathe unassisted, let alone speak.

There had been his face, that strong, even jawline, that wide, sensuous mouth that always seemed about to smile. The only sign of the intervening seventeen years had been a slight thinning in his luxuriant mane of brown hair, and the appearance of thin laugh-lines around those wonderful blue eyes. And then the face was gone, and she had slipped back into sleep, while her beautiful doctor went back to work.

Now, in the recovery ward, she was able to give him a more appraising look. And Suki had to admit that she liked what she saw. In spite of his weakened bones, Doctor Neil Webley had kept himself in top form. It had been seventeen years, after all—*goodness, that meant he'd be nearly forty!* Suki realized. And if anything, his shoulders were broader, his stomach flatter, his demeanor more assured than the young man that Suki had left when she went into the cold sleep vaults with the other colonists.

Neil patted her shoulder and blinked up Suki's charts. The projection hung between them, reversed to Suki's eyes so that the strings of numbers and charts were all but unreadable. But she could tell by the reassuring green of the status bars and the steady jags across the EKG window that there wasn't anything serious to worry about. As if to reassure her even further, Neil called up quick views from the nanocameras in her aorta, at the base of her cerebellum, in the cilia of her lungs. All showed healthy tissue, every sign of business as usual for a by-the-books cryogenic revivification. Neil blinked, and the air between them was clear once more.

"You're doing great, Suki. Everything's proceeding on schedule; we should have you up and around by tomorrow, Thursday at the latest."

Suki opened her mouth to try and speak. He shushed her with a finger on her lips.

"No talk. We'll have plenty of time for that later. Right now, I want you to collect your strength. We're going to have a lot of work to do in the next few weeks."

Suki found that she could nod her head, ever so slightly, so she contented herself with that. Neil nodded back, leaned forward, and Suki lifted her chin, waiting for the life-giving warmth of his kiss.

It didn't come.

"I have to go," he whispered, his eyes strangely avoiding hers in their new proximity. "I can't spend too much time here. I'll—" Neil only pulled back a few inches, but it seemed to Suki like a gulf of a million miles had arisen between them—"I'll talk to you about it later."

If Suki hadn't known better, she would have thought that the temperature in the torus dropped by ten degrees then. Neil's knees cracked as he stood up from the bedside.

"Try and get some sleep," he said. "I'll be back to see how you're doing in a few hours."

And then, with a thin smile that was a shadow of the smile that Suki knew, he was off. As Suki watched him climb the gentle slope of the torus floor, she felt her eyes brimming with slushy tears.

What had just happened here? Where was the Neil Webley that Suki Shannahan had known and loved? Wasn't love supposed to mean forever? Suki didn't know how long forever was, but she had always assumed the word meant a time span longer than seventeen years!

Suki felt a sob, the first sound she had uttered in those seventeen years, rise up in her throat. It came out as a horrible croak, the sound a frog might make—if

that frog's heart had just been sliced in two, on the cold steel dissection table of thwarted romance.

By degree over the next six hours, the recovery rooms of Torus 3 began to fill up. From the manuals that Suki had committed to memory those seventeen years ago, she knew that these ghost-white forms who nested in complicated tangles of thick tubes and wires would count few if any colonists among their number. Phase One of the revivification would include only the crew, scientific teams and medical technicians absolutely essential to the task of preparing for the colonization drops. It would only be after the *Gwendolyn* was installed in orbit; the planet below thoroughly explored and charted; the livestock embryos grown and modified for survival in the new ecosystem; and the landers assembled, fueled and tethered into their drop positions; only then that Phase Two, the truly monumental task of reviving more than three thousand colonists, would begin.

In a way, Suki envied those colonists, sleeping in the long tunnel of freezers along the *Gwendolyn's* core. They would wake up to a new world, made-up like a brand-new subdivision complete with high schools and strip malls and cineplexes, there waiting for them to begin their new lives. And in the meantime, they slept insulated from the hardships of construction, of exploration. From the simple heartbreak of waking ...

"Well, well, well," said a voice that was at once familiar and strangely unknowable. "Look who's rejoined the living."

Suki looked up from the novel she'd been trying to start for the past hour, and almost instantly found she had to sup-

press the urge to gloat.

"Betty-Anne Tilley," she said, as sweetly as she could manage. "Look at you."

After seventeen years, there was little left of the petite, strawberry blonde beauty that had taken Suki's job away and thereby sentenced her to the freezers and the lowly status of a candy striper. Years in low gravity had lengthened Betty-Anne's bones and drawn lines across her face that gave her a hard, spinsterish look. Although she was, like Suki, fully five years younger than Neil, this day standing beside Suki's bed with her pharmaceutical pallet tucked under her arm, she seemed almost elderly. Betty-Anne smiled, and Suki was struck by how similar that smile was to the one that Neil had given her before he had left her bedside—cool, professional and more than a little heartless.

"It's been longer for me than it has for you," said Betty-Anne, as though she were reading Suki's mind. "You haven't changed a bit—I guess the freezers really are the ultimate beauty sleep."

Betty-Anne laughed then, the way she always laughed after she made a joke, and in that instant the years fell away and Suki could see the girl that had been her best friend in the whole world, all through nursing academy. Suki felt a smile, a genuine smile this time, creep across her face.

"It's good to see you," said Betty-Anne as the years ebbed back into her face. "Really, it's been too long. You're going to have a lot to catch up on." The corners of her mouth turned up again in that same cruel parody of a smile as she'd shown a moment before. "Particularly, I think, with our mutual friend Doctor Webley."

Mutual? What did she mean by that?

"We've already spoken," said Suki

coolly.

"Have you?" Betty-Anne regarded Suki speculatively. "Then you already know about the Arrangement? I must say, you're taking it all rather well. You two had quite a thing going before we launched, didn't you?"

Now Suki was angry. She sat up in bed, and as she did long knitting needles of pain and jealousy pierced through her nerves. She was about to ask the obvious question—*what Arrangement? With who?* and its chillingly obvious follow-up, *How could you steal the man I loved, Betty-Anne Tilley?*—but Suki wasn't about to give Betty-Anne the satisfaction. She set her bare feet down on the warm carpeted curve of the recovery room floor and teetered to her feet.

Betty-Anne reached out to take Suki's arm. "Now, now, girl. Let's crawl before we can walk."

Suki pulled away.

"You crawl, I'll walk," she snapped, stalking off to the lockers where she knew she'd find a change of clothes. Before she stepped through the door, she turned back to see Betty-Anne standing in a shocked silence beside the empty bed.

"And one more thing, Nurse Tilley!" she shouted across the curving floor of the torus. "My name's Suki Shannahan! Don't call me *girl!*"

Arrangement? What in goodness' name was this Arrangement that Neil had gotten himself involved in? Was he married? If so, then why didn't Betty-Anne just call it that? Was he — Suki shuddered at the thought — living *common-law*? She supposed that living common-law was something of an Arrangement. But that didn't seem right either, somehow. Everything was suddenly so confusing.

No one had tried to stop her as she came out of the locker room, velcroing closed the last few tabs on her red-and-white candy-striper jump suit. Strictly speaking, there was no reason to; her revivification had been routine, and there was no medical for her to stay in bed any longer than she felt she needed to.

Right now, the thing that Suki needed most was information.

Each of the six tori along the length of the *Gwendolyn* was connected to the core via three equi-distantly-spaced tubes, and Suki rode the climbing chain up the center of the C-tube. Occasionally, she would ride past a porthole, and she would catch a glimpse of the long, gleaming core of the *Gwendolyn*. From her slowly rotating perspective, it seemed as though it were nothing more than a gigantic barbecue spit, slow-cooking over the distant flames of their new sun. The starship wasn't much different today than it was before she'd gone to sleep—if it weren't for the red star's peculiar light, they might have still been accelerating away from the Earth, barely past the beginning of their journey. At least, Suki reflected, the enormous wheels and gantries of the *Gwendolyn* remained a constant for her.

And hopefully, the operating system they'd installed on the *Gwendolyn's* holographic-memory computer net had remained a constant, too.

Suki reached the top of the C-tube just as the hatch irised open and a pair of nurses that she didn't recognize guided a stretcher into a controlled descent on the tube's opposite side. One of them, a balding man, nodded a greeting at her while his partner, a heavy-set red-haired woman still wearing her surgical mask and HUD goggles bouncing in wide loops around her neck, hooked up the

stretcher to a link in the down chain.

"Just woke up?" the balding nurse inquired politely.

"You could say that," said Suki. Before he could say anything else, she pushed past him into the core of the starship. By the time the hatch irised shut, she had already strapped herself into the interface couch outside the cryosurgery theater, and was tightening the headset.

You could say that again, in fact, she said to herself as the bright, friendly colors of her personal interface came to life in front of her.

"I'm just waking up now."

When she signed on with the company's medical corps for deep-space work, Suki Shannahan had been offered a personalized interface as part of the package. And like many of her fellow volunteers, she had chosen an interface that would remind her of home: in her case, her family and their spacious estate home in the Richmond Hill Enclave. In those days, she had thought that such reminders would be a comfort in the coldness of space—now, she realized that the decision was a mistake. The clean, white vestibule of the house on Fir-Spiralway, with the sounds of her brothers tussling upstairs and her mother on the phone in the kitchen and the TV in the living room replaying old CFL games as background noise were nearly perfect simulations, much more than reminders. But here and now, on board a strange starship orbiting a distant star, those memories were no comfort at all. Indeed, it was all that she could do to hold back the tears and assign herself to the task at hand.

"Mom," she said aloud, and waited dutifully while the simulacrum of her mother went through the standard excla-

mation into the telephone:

"Oh, look who's come home for a visit! Sherry, I have to call you back—Suki's here!"

And from the living room, her father hit the mute button on the CFL commentary, and called over his shoulder, "How's Daddy's little girl!" and, before she could even consider the question, flicked the volume back up to twice again as loud and turned back to the television.

It really was just like home.

"Tell me about the Arrangement, Mom," said Suki.

Her mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. Sunlight streamed in behind her through the French door to their minuscule back yard, throwing her into silhouette.

"The Arrangement," said Suki's mother. Her index finger went to her chin, as though she were contemplating how to explain something far too grown-up for her little Suki to understand. "Well, dear. The Arrangement was a plan that the medical crew of the *Gwendolyn* implemented amongst themselves on Day 689 following a 214-day review of crew family counseling records. The Arrangement has remained in force until this day."

"More," said Suki. "Text."

"Well, dear. Come into the living room. I'll have to show you the rest on television."

Suki followed her mother into the living room and sat down on the couch. Her father lifted the remote and switched the channel from the CFL to a screen that was filled, according to Suki's request, with nothing more than text. At the top was the heading,

Hormonal Suppression Therapy
and the Normalization of

Sexual Aggression Responses
in Higher Primates

and underneath that,

Helen Rockholme,
BSc MA

and below that, more than thirty-three screens of densely-packed dissertation, appended with charts, tables, and a hypertext index that Suki didn't even need.

After cramming all those cryogenics manuals back on Luna, Nursing Chief Rockholme's slim research paper was an absolute piece of cake. When she was finished, she took the remote from her father and used it to check on a few other things in the system, accessing the nano-surgery databank, before she switched the CFL game back on.

"Would you like something to eat?" asked Suki's mother.

"No thanks, Mom," said Suki, giving her mother a perfunctory hug.

"We always love you, dear," said her mother.

"Exit," said Suki. Her voice was trembling, but it was clear enough for the interface—her mother and everything she came with vanished in a flash of phosphor.

"Love me," said Suki as she took the headset off and rolled off the interface couch. "I'm glad somebody still does."

She found Neil in his apartments in the residential torus. The ship's engineers had done all they could to make the torus seem like an Earthly garden, but aside from planting shrubs and trees and vegetable plots every few meters, there was only so much they could do. It was still nice, Suki had to admit it—nicer than the recovery rooms, nicer than the

core shafts, nicer than the cryosurgery theaters.

But without someone to share it with, let's face it, Suki thought. A shrub's just something else in the path. Something else to trip over.

Neil answered his door on the second chime. To Suki's surprise, he didn't seem particularly surprised to see her.

"Come inside," he said, ushering her into the narrow space that made up a second-class cryosurgeon's living room. "You're looking well." He said it without looking at her, Suki noted bitterly.

"Why did you do it?" she asked him.

Neil just looked at her. Seeing him this third time caused her to revise her assessment of the effects of his aging once more. It wasn't as though the years had made him stronger, or more assured, or better looking. They had only emptied him, she realized, made him simple and streamlined.

"What are you talking about?" he finally said.

"You know," said Suki. "You know what I'm talking about."

Neil sat down on the sofa, shrugged his confusion. He really didn't get it, Suki saw. He really had no idea!

"The Arrangement!" Suki was shouting, and she didn't want to be shouting, but she couldn't control herself. "I know about the Arrangement!"

"Ah."

Neil folded his hands on his lap, and sat staring at them. Suki folded her arms across her chest, glaring across the tiny room at the man she had thought she had loved more than anything in the world. Finally, Neil looked up. His perfect blue eyes were rimmed with red, although his face otherwise betrayed no emotion.

"Would you have rather that I'd married?" It came out as nearly a whisper.

"That was the only other choice?"

Neil tried to smile, but perhaps seeing Suki's reaction, he abandoned the attempt.

"That was the only other choice?" she said again. "Let Nurse Rockholme inject you with her nano-machines that you knew would shut you down for good, or go off and get married...to some ... to some ..." Suki was so angry she could barely speak.

"Some bimbo?" Neil finished for her.

"Your word," said Suki. "But yes. That's the general idea."

"Oh, Suki." Neil stood up and stepped over to her. "You went to sleep so early. You have no idea how bad things got."

"I read the reports," said Suki, stepping away from him. "I know what happened."

"You did." Neil stepped back too, crossed his own arms. "Well you know what happened. But you still don't know how bad things got. Seventeen years—that's how long we all had ahead of us. We'd all signed on to spend the prime of our lives in the dark, between the stars. Nothing to do but monitor the life-signs of all those colonists. And when we had to, intervene. And I don't have to tell you, Suki—when a body's down to six degrees Celsius, there are precious few medical emergencies that can't wait a day or a week or a month."

"So you got bored."

"More than bored," said Neil. "Do you remember what I told you about space, back on the shuttle? About love?"

"Like yesterday," she answered wryly.

"Well I was wrong," he said. "Love didn't keep us together. Not when it went sour. It divided us, started feuds. Simon LeFauvre nearly died—"

"The knife fight. I read about it."

"It was scalpels—not knives. And it would have gotten a lot worse—someone *would* have died—if we hadn't nipped it all in the bud."

"With the help of Helen Rockholme's research project." Suki felt fingernails digging into her elbows. They were, she realized belatedly, her own. "What about us?" she demanded. "Didn't you ever think about us? As something other than some kind of...of sickness?"

His shoulders slumped, and Neil turned away at that.

"It made us crazy," he repeated. "You don't know. You weren't there."

Suki felt something in herself soften at that. What if she had been there, she wondered? Would she have fallen into the same morass of promiscuity, licentiousness that overtook the medical crew of the *Gwendolyn* over the first two years of its voyage? Would her love for Neil have grown pale, the way so many of the others had for one another, and finally transformed into something darker, something like hate? Would she have volunteered, like the rest of the crew, to take Nurse Rockholme's little machines into her blood stream, and shed that part of her forever?

Suki's love had been preserved, after all, a perfect flower pressed between the frozen pages of her hibernation. It had never thus far faced a true test.

Until now, that is.

"Do you love me?" she asked softly.

"They've found a habitable planet here," said Neil. "Really that's an understatement; it's quite a paradise. Lots of freestanding water, an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, average mean temperature of fifteen degrees Celsius, even some native plant life. Just like Earth. Except ..." he paused.

"I asked you a question," she said.

"Except," he continued, "it's a bit more massive. One and a half gees, I'm told. I'd never survive there."

"Do you?"

"My place," said Neil, "is going to be up here—I'm afraid for the rest of my life."

"Love me?"

"You deserve better," was all that he would say.

Suki left then. She considered his face—how it had betrayed nothing, the entire time he had spoken.

She took the hypo out of her pocket, and turned it in her fingers as she thought:

Everything is so easy, every pathway is so clear—once you remove love from the equation.

By the time they were ready for the first drop, Nurse Suki Shannahan had overseen a grand total of seven hundred and sixty-two revivifications—two-hundred and twelve of them unsupervised. That was part of the job, after all, and Suki was good at it; even Nurse Rockholme, who had overruled the recommendations of the examinations board and denied Suki entry into the *Gwendolyn's* nursing team, even she had to admit it. Nurse Rockholme had watched Suki's progress from the day of her revivification, with perhaps an unusual and some would say unwarranted degree of interest.

Suki had been such a silly girl in the early days at Luna—a Barbie Doll, that had been Nurse Rockholme's word for her. Pretty, too pretty for her own good, inside as well as out. Space, Nurse Rockholme had concluded, would kill that pretty girl if she ventured very far into it.

And yet ...

Nurse Rockholme turned in her vat in

the forward core, watching and listening and tasting as Suki Shannahan finished her seven hundred and sixty-seventh revivification. Her hands caressed the pharmaceutical pallet like an artist's—entirely confident, uncompromised by pity or anger ...

Or by love. Suki's seven hundred and sixty-seventh colonist twitched as the electric current ran through his nerves, exciting his heart into what would have to become its regular rhythm and shocking his brain-stem out of its low-frequency funk, and as Suki worked those nerves, she smiled. It was a cool smile, thin and professional and entirely heartless.

She has come along, Nurse Rockholme burred to herself. She has turned into a fine young nurse.

The night after Suki Shannahan's last revivification, she joined Doctor Neil Webley for dinner at his apartment. He opened the cover over his viewport, affording them a slowly rotating view of the landers, which floated assembled and tethered and fueled over the vast blue and white expanse of the new world below them.

"You could go," said Neil. "There's nothing more for you up here."

Suki shook her head. "I've made my choice," she said, her voice flat.

Neil said nothing more. The two seldom had words for each other these days, but that was fine with Suki. The nanotech in Nurse Rockholme's serum brought a kind of quiet to her heart, a cool passionlessness that was best served by external silences as well.

Neil put his hand on top of Suki's. She remembered how it had moved her before, when he touched her like this. It was that touch that had moved her to follow him—to *follow the man she*

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loved to the bottom of the ocean, if that was where he wanted to go.

Now, as they sat together high above the new world's ocean, where both of them would spend out their

remaining days together, she knew it was only a touch; only flesh.

He could keep his hand there forever, she knew. And it wouldn't change a thing. •

About "Love Means Forever"

On the one hand, you've got the classic three-hanky romance story of a plucky young nurse who wants nothing more than to meet the man of her dreams, marry him quick and get on with the deeply fulfilling task of raising his children. On the other, there's the cold Asimovian scientific fable in which rationalism routinely eclipses passion—there are more important things in the galaxy than love, marriage and propagation of the species, blast it, and they all involve rocketry! I find it interesting that these two completely incompatible types of story became popular in virtually the same milieu—the pulp magazines of the 1940s and 1950s. Writing "Love Means Forever" was a kind of literary cockfight—drop two genres in the pit, open the gates and place bets on which one comes out at the end. (*David Nickle*)

DAVID NICKLE has had stories published in *ON SPEC*, *Northern Frights* 1, 2, and 3, *Christmas Magic*, *Tesseract's*, *TransVersions*, *Valkyrie Magazine* and been reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (Eighth Annual Collection). He lives in Toronto, where he works as a political reporter for *The North York Mirror*.

ILLUSTRATOR: TIM HAMMELL is a Calgary-based artist who is starting to create art in Photoshop, is now on the Internet, and is trying to pay for the computer that lets him do that stuff. He is also a former Art Director of *ON SPEC*, and winner of the 1994 Aurora Award for Art Achievement.

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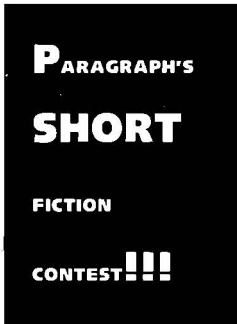
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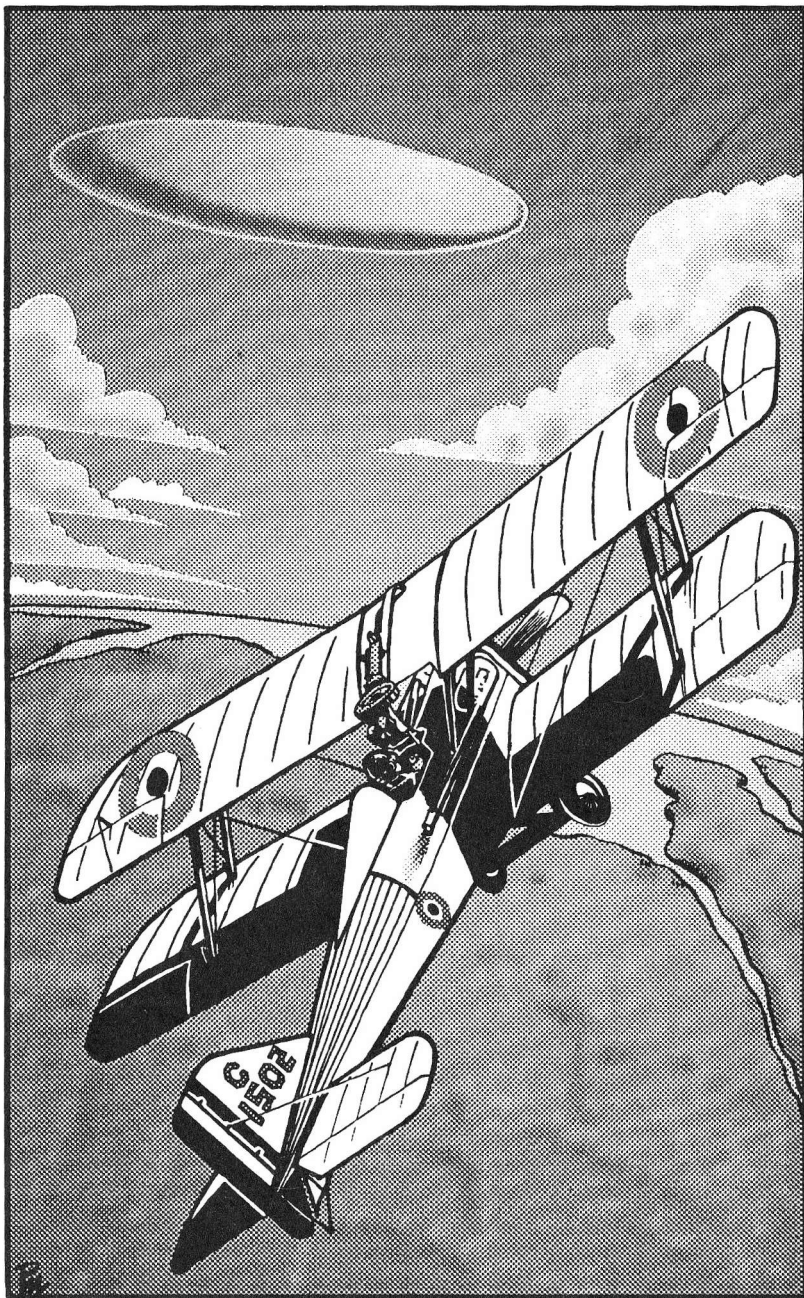
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Scout, Experimental

Michael Skeet

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

It was the smallest Zeppelin Spencer had ever seen. All that meant, he decided, was that there was less to burn. He eased the stick left and back, nudging his SE-5 into a gentle climbing turn that would allow him to intercept the long, silver shape while reserving enough power for a zoom if the airship suddenly dropped ballast and climbed. Behind him, the horizon was yellow-gray with the approach of dawn. Clouds swept beneath his wings, breaking occasionally to reveal the brown fields of Flanders and, to his right, the steel-colored curve of the North Sea.

Unlike most of his squadron-mates, Spencer secretly liked most things about Zeppelin patrol. True, it was both dangerous and a waste of effort. It meant waking from sleep at three in the morning and risking a hazardous takeoff in the dark in order to be at patrol altitude when the pre-dawn light made searching feasible. If you managed to do all of this without wrecking your kite or killing yourself, the chances of actually finding one of the German raiders on its way home from bombing an English city was so remote as to be almost beyond calculation.

On the other hand, if you survived takeoff your day was bound to get better. There was almost no chance of a hostile encounter with Hun fighters, and when you landed you could look forward to a hot breakfast and a day spent sleeping or reading or drinking or even playing tennis if that was your fetish. The others, meanwhile, had to go over the lines and face Voss and von Richthofen and their companions.

More than anything, Spencer wanted leave, a couple of weeks away from the war and the empty chairs every evening around the mess table. He was finding it harder and harder to get to sleep at night. But it had only been four weeks since his last

leave, and with eight weeks to go before his next, Zeppelin patrol was the best available substitute.

It was almost a shame that he'd actually found one this morning. Still, burning a Zep was a rare achievement; pilots had been given medals for it. A medal would mean leave, too. Spencer smiled at the thought, lifting his left hand from the throttle and reaching forward to the arming handle of his Vickers gun. The Vickers was ready; he shifted the stick from right to left hand, and reached up to pat the wing-mounted Lewis. Settling back into his seat, he ignored the small bumps as the SE-5 passed through pockets of warming air, keeping his gaze on the Zeppelin as it began to fill his windscreen. Better check altitude, he remembered; he'd have to write a combat report when he landed. He ducked his head below the rim of the cockpit, cursing the idiot who'd placed the SE-5's altimeter perpendicular to the other instruments, making it impossible to check casually. Eleven thousand feet. Good: he still had plenty of climb left should the airship try to escape upward. Spencer lifted his head back into the slipstream.

The Zeppelin was gone.

He screamed a curse into the wind, then automatically began to search the air around him, as though he were looking for an Albatros that had just rolled and split-arsed away from him. There it was: a couple of hundred feet below and behind him.

Zeppelins can't maneuver like that, he thought. Could I somehow have turned while I was checking my altitude? No; the sun was still behind him on his right.

Never mind. He could worry about what the Zeppelin had done once he'd finished with it. Spencer jogged the stick

to the left; the SE-5 obligingly rolled ninety degrees into a vertical left bank. With Flanders now over his left shoulder, Spencer pulled the stick right back. The SE-5 snapped around in a tight left-hand turn that forced Spencer down into his seat and brought the Zeppelin back into view below and ahead of him. This was good; he could build up speed in the dive and be in position to loop around after this firing pass, ready for another.

Spencer thumbed the trigger. The Vickers rattled a short burst of Buckingham incendiary bullets. Only one of them had to penetrate the Zeppelin's fabric covering to turn the hydrogen gas inside into a flying furnace. Trembling at top speed, the SE-5 darted under the Zeppelin; Spencer looked up as it passed overhead, but saw no flame. Well, you almost never lit one on the first burst.

As he pulled up in the beginning of a loop, Spencer realized that he'd seen no tail fins on the Zeppelin. It had seemed more broad, too, when seen from directly beneath—more of a disc than a cigar. Well, well: a new model Zeppelin. Maybe they'd send him on a War Bond tour, and he could have several months away from the killing.

At the top of the loop he rolled the SE-5 through an Immelmann turn—just in time to see the Zeppelin shoot past him going straight up, but in an attitude that suggested it was still moving forward. Only with an effort was he able to remember to pull the stick back before his kite nosed down into a dive. "What the hell...?" he asked the wind. Now the strange airship was darting away from him, heading east into Hunland. It was only about a hundred feet above him, though, and it had stopped climbing, so Spencer went after it. He smiled, realizing that for the first time since he'd

returned to combat, he wasn't afraid.

Airspeed was dropping as the SE-5 climbed, but he was closing on the Zep anyway. This was how it was supposed to be: Zeppelins at full throttle had a top speed of only seventy or eighty miles per hour, compared with his 120. He shifted his thumb to the trigger. Then the airship was gone again. How could that be?

The SE-5 suddenly rocked sideways, slamming Spencer into the right side of the cockpit. Pain spread outward from a single point at the top of his shoulder. The Medical Officer is going to have to look at that, he thought as he brought the wings back level before the fighter could stall. What had caused that abrupt yaw? It could have been an air pocket, he supposed, save that he'd never come across an air pocket that big before. And where had the Zeppelin gone?

It was right in front of him. In an instant, the SE-5 stopped moving and everything went a dull gray. All sound ceased—even the sound of his screaming.

If I'm dead, Spencer thought, this is a strange way of being dead. If I'd actually hit that Zeppelin, one of two things should have happened: either I'd be spinning down ten thousand feet in a wrecked aeroplane, or there'd have been the king of all explosions when my hot engine hit all that hydrogen.

Neither one of those things appeared to have happened. Not that "appeared" was really a word you could use right now, he thought, looking around. The SE-5 was suspended in a vast emptiness. Its engine was still on, though throttled right back, and its customary roar had been reduced to the sound of a man snoring under a blanket. In fact, everything seemed to be blanketed here. It was a little like being in a cloud that

went on forever; the same dull gray was all he could see beside the SE-5 itself. There were simply no visual reference points. A few more minutes of this, Spencer thought, and I shall surely go mad.

Of course, I could be mad already.

"If I'm mad," he said aloud, "then I ought to feel free to do whatever I like here." The words sounded odd, his voice flat. He had been waiting for an echo, he realized. There was no such thing here; time to find out what there was, then—if anything. He unbuckled his safety harness, wincing as his injured right shoulder shifted. That was going to bruise.

Are you damaged? a voice said. *We are sorry if damage was incurred.*

"Who said that?" As soon as he'd mouthed the words, Spencer realized that something was horribly wrong about the inquiring voice. His own voice was still flat, but the one that had called to him had echoed.

We merely wished to prevent you from damaging us, you see. With mounting horror Spencer realized why this voice echoed. He wasn't hearing it: it was inside his head, as though he were thinking this other voice's thoughts for himself.

Oh, God, Spencer thought. I'm stark, raving mad and hearing voices. What will Mother think?

Do not be alarmed, another voice said. *You will not be further damaged.* That was reassuring. With his left hand, Spencer pulled himself up until he was standing on his seat-cushion. *What is the nature of this device with which you have attempted to damage us?* the second voice asked. It occurred to him to wonder whether the voice was referring to him or his machine when it promised no further damage.

"It's an SE-5," he said. The Germans should know that; the SE-5 had been in service for months now, and the Germans had captured several examples already. Then again, why should it matter whether the voices in his head were German or not?

Eseefive? the voice asked, slurring the sounds together.

"No," Spencer said. "S. E. Five." Speaking the machine's name clearly, he realized that in fact the voice had merely been echoing his own slurred pronunciation back at him. "It stands for 'Scout, Experimental, Number Five,'" he said. He had no idea what S-E's one through four had been.

Scout, Experimental, the voice said. *We are a Scout, Experimental as well. We have not deliberately tried to damage you. Why do you try to damage us?*

Why indeed, thought Spencer. "For King and country," he said. "We are at war, and my duty is to destroy the enemies of Great Britain and the Empire. I took you for Germans. If you are not German, then you have my apologies." This is wonderful, he thought. I'm apologizing to my own madness. I know we're supposed to be a polite people, but this is really stretching things. "Are you German?" he asked. "Am I your prisoner?"

Ger-man? The voice was puzzled.

Ah. This was the first voice again. *No. We are not Ger-man. We are not anything-man. And if you will be still until we have finished scouting you and your device, we will not hold you.*

That was something to look forward to, at least. Spencer sat down on the fuselage decking behind the cockpit. Maybe that meant this bout of madness would be of short duration. Maybe he was dreaming all of this, and he'd actually slept through this morning's patrol.

Maybe I'm Kaiser Bill's batman, he thought sardonically. Don't be daft; you know the difference between a hawk and a Halberstadt. "If you're not German," he asked, "who are you?"

This is who, the second voice said, and a picture formed itself in Spencer's mind.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" he screamed, pressing his hands to his temples, ignoring the pain in his shoulder as he tried to force the image from his head.

It would not go. His mind's eye continued to see the speaker of that echoing voice: a multicolored puddle of vomit that had somehow sprouted tentacles.

We will scout you now, the first voice said, and the nightmare vision in Spencer's mind lifted a tentacle to display a long, evil needle. *Please do not be alarmed: no damage will result from this process.*

"Define 'damage!'" Spencer shouted into the void, dropping back into the seat and hooking his feet into the rudder bar. He slammed the throttle forward and felt wind blast his face as the prop responded. There was a momentary sensation of being stretched, and suddenly sunlight blinded him and the roar of the Hispano-Suiza's 150 horsepower filled his ears and drove away the awful image.

How odd, the first voice said. *That was uncooperative behavior.*

They are not ready, the second voice said. Was there regret there? *We must terminate the mission.*

Not terminate, the first voice said. *Delay. After an appropriate interval, we will return.* The voices faded away.

Sky, cloud and earth whirled around Spencer in a dizzying blur of blue, white and brown. His stomach heaved, but he

took a deep breath and willed himself not to vomit. After what he had just “seen,” he couldn’t be sure what might come out.

Closing his eyes, he centered the controls and waited for the SE-5 to come out of the violent spin into which it been thrown by its emergence from the evil gray cloud. After a few seconds the rotation slowed and the fighter’s nose dropped. Spencer pushed the stick forward, and when the machine responded he hauled back, pulling the fighter into a steep climb.

He had not been mad. The world around him was real. The SE-5 was real. The silver machine that had abducted him was real, still hovering overhead and to the east. It might not be a German airship, but whatever it was and wherever it came from, Spencer was going to destroy it. As the SE-5 began to falter at the top of its climb, he eased the stick forward and leveled off before it could stall. Once he’d built up speed, he began a more gentle climb to close the remaining distance between the SE and the silver machine, and tried not to think about what the beasts inside it had intended to do to him with that long needle.

With no real idea of the machine’s size, Spencer had to guess at the appropriate moment to open fire. He triggered a tentative burst to watch the progress of the tracers, and saw them curve down below the machine. He’d have to get closer, then.

The silver ship made no attempt to outrun him, seeming content to remain slightly above him, and Spencer wondered if its occupants hoped to lure him close enough that they could trap him again. He would not give them that opportunity. He opened fire again, even though he was sure he was at best at the

edge of his effective range.

The Vickers hammered out twenty rounds, then quit. “Damn it damn it damn it!” Spencer shouted. Of all the times to jam, why now? Keeping the silver ship in his sights, he felt with his right hand for the hammer clipped to the airframe inside the cockpit. Gripping it with gloved fingers, he began tapping the breech of the Vickers, listening for the flatter sound that would tell him the location of the jam.

There it was. With as much strength as his injured shoulder would allow him, Spencer smashed the hammer into the breech. Then he pulled back on the arming handle with his left hand. The handle came back—and stuck. At the same moment the stick tipped forward and the SE-5 slid into a shallow dive.

Spencer cursed the Vicker’s parentage, the parentage of the people who had made it, and the parentage of Sir Hiram Maxim who had invented it. He nosed the machine up again. He’d have to use the Lewis, even though its ammunition drums contained only ball and tracer ammunition.

As the silver ship began to fill his windscreen, he squeezed the Lewis’ trigger once, twice, a third time. He was rewarded with the sight of tracers flying straight at the silver machine and disappearing within it. The ship darted forward and up. Good; perhaps he’d really hurt it.

He squeezed the trigger again, but nothing happened. The ammunition drum was already empty.

Well, he hadn’t gone through all this just to let those bastards escape. He turned the fighter’s nose in the direction the silver ship had gone, eased back gently on the stick to return to a shallow climb, and pulled the cable to release the Lewis from its overwing mounting so

that he could draw it down into the cockpit and replace the drum.

When he tugged on the gun, though, it didn't move. Spencer cursed Sergeant Foster, who'd invented the gun mounting. It wasn't over yet, though. Spencer hadn't buckled himself back in when escaping from the silver ship; now he stood again in the cockpit, getting up onto the seat-cushion so that he looked down on the Lewis gun's ammunition drum. His thick gloves hampering him, he fumbled for the release catch and pulled it, cursing the parentage of Colonel Isaac Newton Lewis, who'd designed the Lewis gun, and H.P. Folland, the designer of the SE-5 itself.

The drum refused to release.

The thought of giving it up as a bad show and returning to base entered Spencer's mind, but was immediately driven out by the thought of that long needle. Cursing, he gripped the drum with both hands and pulled. The drum shifted, but then his injured shoulder spasmed and he felt the strength ebb away from his right arm. He pulled again, and nothing happened.

The SE-5 began to shudder. I forgot to level out, Spencer thought through the pain. I've been climbing, and losing speed as I've done it.

Now the fighter's forward momentum was insufficient to create enough lift to keep it airborne. The extra drag created by his standing up in the slipstream caused the machine to stall. As it did so, it slipped sideways. Spencer's booted feet slid across the seat. One of them caught the control stick and knocked it to the left.

The SE-5 lurched into a clumsy left roll. As it flopped onto its back, Spencer dropped out of the cockpit.

Oh, help, he thought. What have I done? He could see with horrifying clar-

ity what he had done; the world appeared to be moving more slowly than it had been. The SE-5 was now spinning earthward, upside down, while he dangled beneath it, facing backwards and hanging on to the empty drum that mere seconds ago he had been cursing for its refusal to break free.

It would take him perhaps three minutes to hit the ground, he thought. Either he did something quickly to save himself, or he had to face a long three minutes with nothing to think about but that damned needle and the putrescent being that had been planning to use it on him. He forced himself to look up at his hands. If he could grab the Foster mounting with his left hand, he'd have a grip on something solid enough to perhaps let him pull himself back into the cockpit. But he'd only have one chance to do it. His right arm lacked the strength to hold on for long.

Taking a deep breath, he lunged upward with his left hand. The ammunition drum shifted, and his right hand began to slip. "Oh, Jesus," he said—and then his fingers closed around the solid steel of the mounting. "Thank you, Lord," he breathed—then, "Whoops!" as the drum flipped off its peg and spiralled away. Gritting his teeth, Spencer forced his right arm up until he had as good a grip as he could on the mounting rail.

Now what? It was obvious that he lacked the strength to pull himself up. If he couldn't get back into the cockpit, how could he get the SE-5 right-side up again?

The same way he'd tipped it over.

Spencer began to swing back and forth beneath the upper wing, building momentum until he could touch the fuselage upper deck with his boots. Then he bent his knees and, on the next swing, waited until he'd gone all the

way up, then thrust his feet into the cockpit.

The right foot scuffed the outside of the fuselage, but the left made it in. This is an improvement, he thought. Using his right foot as a brace, he began feeling with his left for the stick.

He felt something, and kicked. The eight-day clock rattled around the cockpit for a second, then sailed away in the slipstream. He sighed; he was going to have to replace that from his own funds. He kicked again, and a shower of glass emerged.

Shifting to avoid the glass, Spencer lost the leverage his right foot had been providing. Scrambling to keep his left foot in the cockpit, he put his right through the windscreen. It stuck there.

"No," he whimpered. "Not like this." He thrashed his left leg back and forth, desperately trying to contact the stick. Instead, the instrument panel splintered.

You appear to be in difficulty a voice said from his mind.

"No!" he shouted into the slipstream. "Everything's fine! Go away!"

We cannot allow you to damage yourself because of our contact with you. Please be calm.

Spencer looked around. "God help me!" he screamed. One of the beasts from the silver ship was flying beside him, tentacles trailing behind it like a bloated, putrescent tail. "Get away!" he shouted. "I don't want you to help me! I don't want you to touch me!"

Oh, God. It was holding the long needle in one of its tentacles. He was helpless to prevent the beast from doing whatever it wished; if he tried to fend it off, he would fall to his death. Still, there were some things to which death was still preferable.

Please maintain a firm grip, the beast told him. It brought the needle forward.

Why me? Spencer asked God.

The beast thrust the needle into the SE-5's cockpit and shifted the control stick. The machine rolled clumsily on its axis, and Spencer slammed down onto the fuselage decking as the fighter came upright. The remnants of the windscreen exploded as his right foot kicked free, and a blizzard of glass fragments slashed his cheeks.

Struggling to regain his breath, Spencer drew his right leg back and into the cockpit. Then, sobbing with relief, he dropped back into the seat. The cushion was gone, and his cheeks were wet with what he assumed was blood, but he was back in the cockpit with the SE-5 right side up. He was going to live.

Assuming that he could recover from the spin, that is. The altimeter was no longer there, but knowing how much altitude he had left wouldn't help. He looked over the side; he could make out details on the ground below, which meant he was running out of time. He hooked his feet onto the rudder bar—and found it jammed with debris from the instrument panel. He moved to kick the wreckage away, only to realize that if he wasn't careful he'd foul the wires from the pedal to the rudder, and jam the controls completely.

Try using this, the voice in his head suggested, and Spencer looked up to see the needle hovering beside the cockpit. *Don't concern yourself with returning it,* the voice continued. *We have plenty of them.*

"Uh, thank you," Spencer whispered.

His voice should have been inaudible against the roar of the engine, but he heard the beast's voice saying *You're welcome,* and looked up to see the tentacled form flying up to where the silver disc shape waited.

Spencer freed the controls and got the

28 Scout, Experimental

SE-5 out of its spin just as the engine died. At that point, there was nothing to do but laugh. Somehow he'd drifted west, well to the rear of the trenches, and there was no shortage of level fields in which to land. As the wind whistled through the rigging wires, he chose a likely looking field, sideslipped into position, and let the machine land herself.

At the last moment, he threw the long needle over the side. He was going to have enough trouble explaining things as it was.

•
After thinking about it, Spencer decided not to try to explain his experiences. He filed a report that more or less followed the truth, save to claim that the damage inflicted on his SE-5 had occurred during pursuit of a Zeppelin. The CO put him on report for recklessness leading to the destruction of His Majesty's property, and the cost of replacing the instruments he'd destroyed trying to save himself was deducted from his pay.

Spencer didn't complain. •

About "Scout, Experimental":

"Scout, Experimental" crosses the 1920s Biggles-type boys-own-adventure-story with the more cynical, modern, Whitley-Striever-esque UFO abduction tale. The story is a sort of bent homage to Hugh A.D. Spencer's wickedly funny "Why I Hunt Flying Saucers" from *ON SPEC* a few years ago. It was also in part inspired by a marvelous ride in an old biplane at the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa. (*Michael Skeet*)

MICHAEL SKEET is a writer and broadcaster currently living in Toronto. He began writing SF in 1986, and has since been published in a number of Canadian and U.S. magazines and anthologies. He has won the Aurora Award for both short fiction and for co-editing the fourth in the *Tesseract*s anthology series, and was the founding co-president of SF Canada. "Scout, Experimental" is his fourth appearance in *ON SPEC*.

ILLUSTRATOR: PETER MacDOUGALL is a writer who has also done illustrations for *ON SPEC*, *Horizons SF*, *E-Scape*, and others. To learn more about Peter, visit his web site at http://mindlink.net/peter_macdougall/wnp.htm

VARIABLE Opera

Steve Zipp

CHARACTER SET

- 10 Bad Irving - he refuses to clean up after his horse.
- 20 Sheriff Bob - he's replacing hitching posts with parking meters.
- 30 Wilbur - he drinks from the horse trough.
- 40 The Parson - the parson.
- 50 Miss Daisy - a right purdy gal.
- 60 Diamond Lil - it's rumored her children are legitmate.
- 70 The Schoolmarm - she's got a lot to learn.
- 80 Johny Muskrat - some call him Chief.
- 90 Squeegee - they found him in the desert.
- 100 Professor Periscope - he's building a strange contraption.
- 110 Also appearing - the cardsharp, the greenhorn, the town drunk, the old prospector, the mysterious drifter, the Sheriff's horse.

DIALOGUE

- 120 Ghost Gulch ain't big enuff fer the two of us.
- 130 Looks like they figgered out my true identity.
- 140 Where am I?
- 150 I love you.
- 160 I hate you.
- 170 Which orifice shall I use?
- 180 Set your lasers to fry.
- 190 We'll head 'em off at the past.

30 VARIABLE Opera

----- SOUND EFFECTS -----

200 Blam!
210 Thud!
220 Zzzzzt!
230 Vroom!
240 Squeakedy squeakedy squeakedy...

----- PLOT DATA -----

250 Sheriff Bob asks Bad Irving to be his partner.
260 Wilbur stumbles across the Professor's contraption.
270 The parson receives a mysterious phone call.
280 Miss Daisy straps on her shootin' irons.
290 Diamond Lil gives the greenhorn a lesson in bareback riding.
300 Johnny Muskrat comes down with smallpox.
310 Squeegee falls in love with the Sheriff's horse.
320 Professor Periscope's evil twin shows up.
330 The cardsharp and the drifter visit the souvenir shop.
340 Wilbur gets an erection.
350 The Schoolmarm uses her magical powers.
360 The old prospector is possessed by a being from another dimension.
370 The town drunk wakes up in the Sheriff's dungeon.
380 Bad Irving blows up the galaxy.

----- SETTING -----

390 Ghost Gulch is a town, dude ranch, theme park, BBS, planet, game, metaphor, short story.

----- ERROR MESSAGES -----

400 Out of ammo.
410 Nonexistent device.
420 Stack overflow.
430 False statement.
440 Wrong dimension.
450 Character flaw.
460 Plot malfunction.

 TEMPORAL ARRAY

470 19th century.
 480 20th century.
 490 21st century.

 VARIABLES

500 Horse, Soap, Space.
 510 Shootin' iron, Uzi, blaster.
 520 Hitching post, parking meter, parking orbit.
 530 Bootleg still, cold fusion gimmick, time machine.
 540 Sysop, dungeonmaster, narrator.
 550 God, prime mover, programmer.
 560 Conflict, climax, resolution.

 CONSTANTS

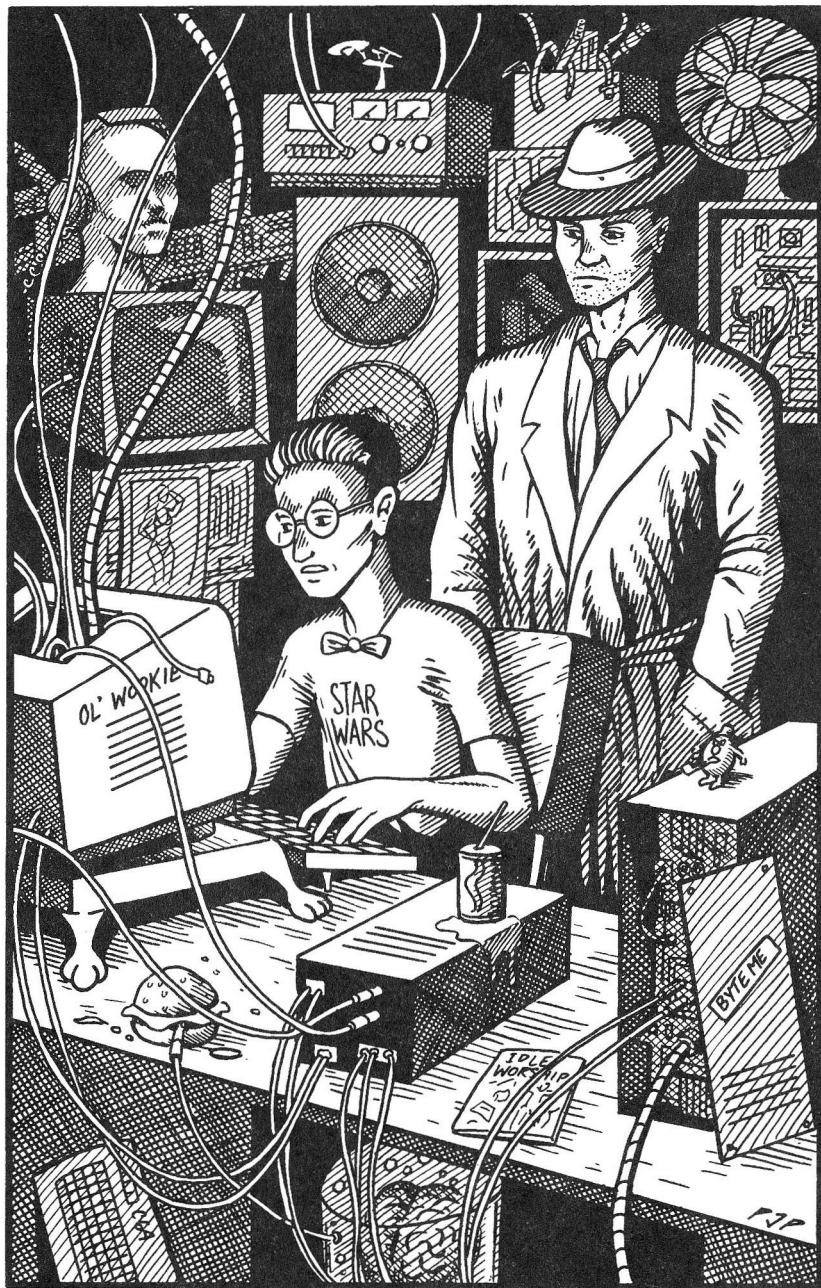
570 Death and taxes.
 580 The speed of light.
 590 Software-driven spacetime.

 MAIN LOOP

600 Someone falls in love.
 610 Someone gets shot.
 620 Someone goes away.
 630 A beautiful sunset.

STEVE ZIPP is a contributor to several obscure computer publications. He hopes future issues of *ON SPEC* will feature more type-in listings.

About "VARIABLE Opera": "VARIABLE Opera" mimics a printout of a computer program. (Steve Zipp)



Shadow Matters

Preston Hapon

illustrated by Patrick Pautler

Detective Jay Rogers elbowed through the uniforms who jammed the doorway and stumbled into a bright, airy room crowded with flowering plants, vibrant sculptures, fifteen cops and a dead woman. A photographer popped off quick shots, the flash highlighting the corpse. From across the room, Officer Carol Murdock summoned him through the crowd congregated around the 3V to join her beside the body.

As he squeezed between two red-coated detectives arguing about fibre samples, Jay recalled the controlled experiences on the Hook, its VirReal training sessions that were supposed to prepare him for chaos like this. On Hook, he had seen bodies halved by train collisions, pieces of children strewn among aircraft debris, and the disgusting work of filthy street trash taking their revenge on humanity by rending innocence from frightened victims, but never had he seen anything so eerie as Sandy Teylon's pasty white shell, naked, slumped in front of her computer.

Murdock must have seen it in his eyes. "It's LifeReal, Jay. A murder, maybe." Her bullhorn rattled against her night stick as she knelt beside the small heap of clothes Sandy Teylon had discarded a few hours before. "I bet the techies will find some clues on the hard drive. She was working on something that will give us a direction. Sure nothing useful in these." Murdock held up pink lace panties.

For three years she'd teamed with Jay. Together they'd hit the showers (the only place Murdock could be positively identified as female), partied until curfew trading dirty jokes and boasts, and nursed each other's headaches come the next morning at Hook time. They'd careened around corners in hot pursuit of a dozen VirReal bad guys, and when they caught them had killed or been killed.

"Are you a Man or a Cop?" they'd ask, then brazenly charge the most daunting VirRealities imaginable.

But today made VirReal experiences feel shallow. Dead people were supposed to look like dead *people*, but Sandy Teylon looked like a hollow doll that had never

walked, never talked, had never a thought in its head.

Jay heard Natress' perfidious New York Irish accent. Looking around he spotted the pressed blues, billed hat, and night stick. He was talking to Buchanan who wore his usual navy uniform with grotesquely large brass buttons and a tall, rounded hat with a brim front and back he called a "fore-and-after." Normally, they'd both be Hooked, but the call of duty obviously dragged them away. Near them, Jay found Sergeant Martin's distinctive meer'schaum pipe and caped macintosh. He called the sergeant over.

"We've learned nothing yet, Detective Rogers." Martin apologized as he approached. "Only that she called in sick at work."

Murdock pocketed her mirrored sunglasses and sneered at Martin. "What a surprise. How did you figure that one out?"

Martin shrugged.

Jay's heart felt like wet burlap. It was the manner of the corpse, he told himself, not that it was his first. Noise from the 3V and the boisterous crowd drowned his thoughts. In 3V and VirReality, there was always "the answer," and someone who knew it. LifeReal mysteries were not so reliable: no one would be giving points for this.

Martin didn't appear affected. "Sorry, Detective. We didn't find anything more to speak of."

Jay attacked. "What do you expect me to do? Play psychic? Pull a rabbit out of my hat?!" He tore the pristine fedora off his head and crushed any furry hopes inside.

"No, sir."

He stepped aside for one of the coroner's crew. "Keep looking. Just make sure everything is done by the

book. I don't want to hear one of these officers explaining how his lip-prints found their way onto Sandy Teylon's water glass."

Jay waved off the 3V, and a few who had been absorbed by its world were released to return to work. "Natress! Get these efforts coordinated, get half these people out of here and get me some answers."

"You sound more like me every day, Paperman." Murdock scowled. "Not good for your ticker."

Jay didn't look at Murdock—already knew what she looked like. Instead, he wished this were just a VirReal training session so he could call a time-out as one of two men in white jackets slid his hand under Sandy's flaccid buttock. With life in her, Jay saw she'd be beautiful. Now even her short red hair had dulled, the pert cut joyless.

Half aware that he lacked any good reasons, Jay touched the shoulder of the man tagged "Dave" as the two men lifted the body off her cold chair. "Leave her alone a minute."

The "Dave" opened his mouth to protest, and looked across the room to where the coroner stood watching. Dr. Angela Vasquez nodded and the "Dave" removed his hand from under Sandy's ass. "Sure. Whatever you say, Detective." He exchanged a look of impatience with the one tagged "Sam."

Two pimpled young men wearing ill-fitting pants and *Star Trek* T-shirts ripped open the cover of Sandy's computer and began probing inside. Jay jabbed a finger at the steaming computer entrails. "Did anybody try to boot this thing first?"

Both young men nodded. One pointed at the body. "We even tried to access some of the files using her implants, but the system didn't respond to having her fingers on the keyboard any

more than with my own."

"Was it switched on when you arrived?"

Martin nodded. "Sure, but maybe she wasn't actually operating the computer. Or maybe she just got something from the kitchen and collapsed here."

Jay relented to the growing impatience in the coroner's crew. "Take her."

As he watched, the woman's corpse acquired the cheap tragedy of a wrecked sports car. Her arms swung like un-hinged doors, her head like a dangling light. The "Dave" oafishly gripped her breast for better leverage while the "Sam" struggled to retrieve a dropped leg. Painted toenails waved everyone a last farewell as she was swallowed by a black bag.

Dr. Vasquez supervised the work without passion.

"Angela?" Jay approached her.

The coroner offered a nod. "Got your curiosity in gear?" The wrinkles Dr. Angela Vasquez had found on her way to ninety made her thoughts look deeper. "Well, she didn't asphyxiate, she wasn't electrocuted, there's no sign of drugs or poisons, no marks on her body, and nothing at all dangerous in the air or food or water. It's as if she simply—stopped."

"Yeah."

Two men shouldered the bag.

"You look rotten, Jay."

"Keep your opinions to yourself. I'm not one of your patients."

"Yet. Look, she was smart and pretty, and had every reason to live. Not much different from every corpse that crosses my desk, these days."

"I know." Jay scanned the ceiling and corners of the room. Almost invisible security equipment and counter-intrusion weapons observed police activity, alert for programmed threats. "You

know what I think? I think she committed suicide. Nobody could get into here."

Angela locked her small black case, closing off further conversation. "I can't help you more than that. I'll call with my report as soon as I can."

"Wait. Give me a minute?"

"Die first. Then I'll have lots of time for you." She harassed her assistants into haste as she set her case by the door. "Let's go, guys. I don't want to be butchering all afternoon! I got an early supper waiting for me at home. So long, folks, I'll see you all one way or another." Angela retrieved her case and followed the body bag out the door.

Murdock pushed the computer's displaced cover back into place, stroked nonexistent dust from its surface and held an invitational open palm toward the chair. "You want to try before they haul it away?"

Jay shook his head.

"Come on, Paperman. It won't bite." Murdock was teasing, he knew.

Under the pressure of two smirking compunerds he sat, but he didn't touch the keyboard. Instead, he casually opened a drawer. A small bundle of six disks lay at the bottom. He set them beside the keyboard.

"Why don't you do this, Murdock?"

She picked up a manual and absently began to flip through the pages. "'Cause in spite of the fact that you don't use these things anymore, you're still better at it than anyone in this room."

"Yeah." Jay took a breath and solemnly rested his fingers on the keys. Sensing the implants in his fingertips, the computer should have come to life. Instead, it let him stare at his face reflected on the bleak screen.

His face floated on the monitor's surface as if looking back from a parallel

world. He shook off an uncomfortable anxiety.

"What's wrong with this thing? Is it dead, too?"

The screen suddenly lit. Startled, he traced one technician's hand to the power switch. Of course, the technicians had shut off the power before their aborted surgery. "Oh. Thanks."

The machine whirred softly, then paused. "We need the password."

Murdock leaned closer so she could see the screen better. "Yep. That's one reason why we breed compunerds." Vaguely insulted, the nerds frowned.

"What did you guys try?"

They both shrugged. "Nothing. No point in guessing. We'll just run a break-in routine on her drive. Why waste time?"

"Hold it." Jay had been scanning the plant-filled room around him, the flowers and leaves basking in columns of sunlight, when he spotted the dish on the floor. "Where's the cat?"

"Haven't seen it. Does it matter?"

The stainless steel dishes set on the floor by the window whispered the name engraved near the rim: Matilda. "No." He knew he had the secret. After just a second of hesitation, he typed in "Matilda," and proudly struck Enter.

The program promptly rejected his choice.

"Guess she wasn't the sentimental type."

As the giggling chip-dips whispered disparaging comments, Jay quietly pocketed the floppies he'd taken from the drawer.

Murdock held out the manual she'd been perusing. On page iiv, Sandy had underlined a phrase. "For password security, enter anything you want...."

Jay saw his smile reflected in her mirrored sunglasses. "Murdock, I think you

found it." Just as he prepared to give it a try a needle of pain slipped under his left thumbnail. "Yowch!"

At first he thought the computer had given him a shock. He studied the stinging phalange for an instant before putting it into his mouth. "It bit me," he mumbled, amazed.

"Let's see." Murdock reached for Jay's wrist. "It's just blood, you crybaby. Are you a Man or a Cop?"

He pulled his hand out of range and studied the offended fingertip—a tiny bead of blood spread under the edge of his nail. Except for the coagulating blood, he could see nothing that could cause so much pain. "Maybe this is some kind of a vampire keyboard. Sucked Ms. Teylon dry, and now it wants me."

Murdock hauled the keyboard into range with her nightstick and pushed her sunglasses to her forehead. "Let me examine this 'button mine.' You clean your thumb."

"Right." He went to the kitchen sink. The cold running water didn't ease the spreading sting. Holding his thumbnail to the sunlit window for better look, he could just barely make out a tiny black dot. "Looks like that cat's spreading fleas."

Murdock came through the door to look for herself. "Fleas don't crawl under finger nails. Let me see." Murdock's eyes widened. "Shit. I think..."

The dot disappeared.

Suddenly and forcefully, Murdock twisted Jay's arm and threw him face first into the counter. With her free hand, she violated the contents of two drawers.

"Hey! I know you have a black belt—there's no need to impress me." The pain streaked along the inside of his thumb, moving toward the back of his hand.

She pulled a paring knife from a drawer and pressed him back into the

window's light.

With his face pressed against the cold counter by Murdock's steely grip, Jay only caught a glimpse of the glittering kitchen utensil. He sought reassurance from a nervous smile. "Are you qualified for this kind of operation?"

"Hold still!" Murdock then increased his pain to excruciating. Jay couldn't keep a brave front as Murdock peeled away finger nail like skin from a potato.

"Aww! You bitch! What the hell are you doing?!" He lifted a fist, trying to strike her any way he could.

"Jay, I think you got a BioBot."

His heart turned to pudding and his head whirled. "Cut it off! Cut the whole thumb off!" Frantic, he drove for a cleaver hanging on a hook near the cutting board. His arm bent the wrong way, refusing to slip from Murdock's grip.

She shouted at his struggles. "Hold still, I can get it!"

His panicked fingers only brushed the cleaver which clattered onto the counter. He tried to turn and look, but she had him prisoner. "Do it! Christ, hurry or I'll lose my whole hand! The pain is passing my knuckle!"

She reached across him and took the cleaver from the counter. Pumping air through his clenched teeth he spread his hand wide and braced. "Now!"

The cleaver cast a shadow across the red tiled floor. It hovered high above her head, poised to splinter bone.

"Wait! It's in my hand now. Take off my hand." The cleaver rose higher and Murdock shifted his hand further onto the board. "No wait! I think it's still in my thumb!"

Murdock cursed. "Shit." He felt her grip relax.

Desperate, he pushed her aside and pried the cleaver free of her wavering hand. He rolled his hand into a fist with

the infected thumb protruding and raised the heavy blade over his head. Modern medicine could give him a fairly good finger in place of this one. But the pain was fading. He pressed his palm against the board imagining the biobug's seed already spreading painlessly past his wrist. Past his elbow. Where to cut? How much must he lose? He felt his blood racing through his shoulder and into his heart.

And all that hesitation had been too long; a field amputation was pointless, and he knew it. The cleaver clattered as he dropped it onto the counter. He cradled his wounded digit.

Murdock slumped. "I'm sorry. When you couldn't tell where it was... Maybe they can deactivate it."

"Yeah. Maybe it hasn't been reprogrammed. Maybe it's one of Angela's. Maybe Sandy was on some harmless therapy. Maybe."

He examined the damage. Half his nail had been sliced off and the soft flesh beneath it julienned. He tried to squeeze the pain out the tip, held it as far away from the rest of himself as he could, but nothing eased the throbbing.

"Quarantine this house. Have everyone who is or was in here hospitalized and interviewed immediately." He grabbed the phone and punched-in Angela's number with an intact finger. "I'll call to have that body secured."

Murdock was out of the room before he finished—she knew what to do.

After two rings, Angela's voice answered. Wagner played in the background.

"Angela, it's Detective Jay Rogers. I'm still at the house and we've had a possible rogue medical microbot." He closed his eyes against reality and hoped as hard as he could. "Your medical personnel are not known for screwing up

like this. Can't they keep their pets on a leash?"

"My team wouldn't bring any micro-bots with them! You should know that!"

"Yep." He opened his eyes.

"I'll have the body secured immediately. Did you capture a Bot? Jay?"

"It invaded." Every heartbeat throbbed in his mangled thumb. He leaned back to see into the sink. A triangular piece of bloody fingernail lay at the bottom.

"Who's the victim?"

He hated being a victim.

External decontamination took Jay about three hours and left every pore red, raw, and smelling of foul chemicals. Angela barged into the cold, chrome-edged room, Jay's chart in one hand a gold, fountain pen in the other. She smiled a brief hello and winked at him, like an angel with a secret, then pulled up a chair, sighed out the last of her good humor, took off her glasses and leaned back. "I've finished with Miss Teylon."

"And?"

"Your biobug killed this woman. It's not a prescription bot, so our attempts to establish any standard command links with the ones reproducing in you have failed." She slipped the pen into the grey curls over her ear.

There never had been reason to doubt it was a reprogrammed rogue which, the instant it found blood, began burrowing and producing billions of nanoscopic minions designed to attack some important organ. Jay had a good guess. "A heart attack."

Angela took his hand under the pretense of examining his bandaged thumb. "No. A brain attack."

Jay winced. Is that how her body had looked? The aftermath of a "brain attack"? "That's stupid. There is no such

thing."

She returned his hand angry and mocking. "Come to my lab and I'll let you find a diagnosis for liquefied brain. We found fine, organic and metallic nano-thin webs filling her skull. Every nerve in her body has some of this nano-webbing riding piggyback. Except her brain which has experienced a bizarre sort of melt down. Aside from a little grey puddle, all that remains in her skull is a model her neurological network made of a trillion superfine structures."

Conversation died as he contemplated microscopic biobugs building a jungle-gym in his cerebral cortex. A sudden rage overtook him. All he'd ever wanted was to be a LifeReal cop and solve LifeReal crimes. He finally gets one and it kills him. He threw his arms out in empty frustration. "I don't deserve this! I swore off VirReality, I abandoned the Online, I led a clean pencil-and-paper life, and this is my reward? I may as well have died online years ago!"

"Jay, listen."

"No! This city doesn't even need cops! There's no crime! Look at who we are! Nobody knows anymore what a cop is supposed to be! We take training but we don't know how to act, or even who we are. Look at me." Angela tucked the end of her glasses between her lips and obliged him. "Look at my clothes! Trench coat and stupid hat, straight out of the old 3V films. We had a theft at Alberta BioTech Laboratories over six months ago. It's the only case we've had all year and we don't even know what was stolen!"

"Calm down."

Realization suddenly sobered him. "They stole medibots."

"Who did?"

He snorted derisively. "We'll never know. Not if it's up to the cops to find

out. Do you know the one thing a cop should do, above everything else?"

"What's that?" she asked patiently.

"Set a good example. That's all. You see trouble, you do the right thing. You fix it. We don't do that." He had a sudden flash from grade four: Caroline, a girl with a plate in her damaged skull and a stunned smile that was oblivious to the taunts rippling across the playground. He remembered the pity he felt, but also the loathing that made him want to vomit up his heart.

He blinked the memory away. The 'Bots were packaging up his past. Was he doomed to be like Caroline?

Angela eyed him suspiciously. "Are you feeling any symptoms? Memory loss, maybe, or difficulty thinking..."

He shook his head. Anyone can have a sudden memory.

"Jay, don't you hide this from me." Angela pressed his arm gently. "I don't know anything about this process, but I want to help you any way I can."

He had nothing to say.

With a weary sigh, Angela put her glasses back on and rose to her feet. "We can talk later. Invite me home and I'll cook you a dinner that'll put you on your back."

"I don't know. You always want to play 'doctor.' "

"Invite me, anyway."

The idea of discharge from the hospital made him feel untethered. "Don't you need to call in some specialists or do surgery or something?"

"There's no point. We can't do a thing without the bots' access codes."

Jay knew finding those codes was virtually impossible.

"Go home. Stay where we can reach you on a moment's notice. We'll run random sequences on infected blood samples. Depending on how much time

we have, well, something could turn up. If you want, I'll readmit you tomorrow."

"Is this professional interest? Watching my brain become soup?"

"No. And it's cruel of you to ask. Quit trying to piss everybody off and go home, okay?" She offered a stern smile, then left him alone.

Dreams filled his night with vivid, sometimes bizarre reminiscence, but he awoke well-rested. Then he saw why; it was nearly noon. He'd lost half of what could be his last day. He made certain he lost not a single nonrenewable minute getting out the door, six computer disks carefully guarded in his pocket.

Traffic was light, and the lobby was empty. He pressed the up button for the elevator. Below it was the button which would carry him to the basement level, down to the VirReal training studios. He hadn't been there for three years. Choices were endless, there. He had been the best—could Hook longer, live more intensely and believe more strongly than anyone else. Absolute control was his; he could choose to live, or he could choose to die. Jay used to think that made VirReality a better world, until they pulled him free of the equipment half dead and half elsewhere.

The elevator arrived and Jay stepped in. He pretended he didn't miss the Hook, and pressed the button which would carry him up to his office.

Buchanan's pristine terminal was unattended. With a mouthful of painted water and cherry donut, Jay commandeered it. Buchanan wouldn't show. He was probably training in strip joint raids. Sandy's first floppy disk went in with a snap and whir.

The computer ground to a halt, waiting for a code. First he tried "anything

you want." It was rejected. He tried "anything i want."

The system immediately gained access to her disk. "Thank you, Murdock," Jay mumbled as he pulled the first file.

Miss Teylon had kept her best secrets on these few floppies. The poems were interesting, but depressing. The stories were very short, and very sad. Then he found the log files of her visits to DATAServe. The first few were ordinary. She was likeable, witty, sensitive, and warm. She seemed lonely.

Over next four hours Jay struggled to work in spite of sudden lapses into the dreams and memories rooted wherever the 'bots were rewiring his brain. He managed to scan through several megabytes of e-mail and files looking for clues, and made note of correspondents to have them checked out, but nowhere was there the suggestion anyone would want to kill Sandy, nor that she might consider suicide. Jay pulled a disk from the drive, rubbed his eyes, and tried another.

DATAServ's ONLINE Information Services

11:13 MDT Wednesday 8-Aug-21

Last access: 14:18 7-Aug-21

For a while, this file looked no different. Then, suddenly, the format changed from e-mail to online chat. Quickly he stabbed at the keys and backed up.

(Sandy) Hello? Is there anybody out there?

Intellectually, he knew it was just a recording, that his computer was playing back what she had typed almost two months before, but it was eerie—like hearing her voice for the first time. Sandy's soft question, like an invitation, pressed against the glass screen as if she

were still alive at a terminal far away. He wished she was. He'd say, "Hi, Sandy. Why are you dead?"

(C) Hi, yourself.

(Sandy) Hey! You really can talk on this thing.

(C) Yes.

(Sandy) So, how do you do? My nam

(C) I see your name is Sandy. Are you female?

(Sandy) e is

(Sandy) Do I have to start

(C) Are you female?

(Sandy) all over?

(Sandy) Wait! Don't go so

(C) What do you look like?

(Sandy) fast.

(C) No.

(Sandy) No, what?

(C) Am I typing too fast for you?

(Sandy) Yes. Just a minute while I

(C) I'll slow down. I'm a very fast typist.

A fast typist and an asshole, Jay thought, but couldn't enlighten the jerk. The detective knew how she felt, first time on-line, first time trying to keep up. Jay had seen five simultaneous conversations among thirteen people and knew it could be much worse. The experienced ones, like this guy "C," could handle it. Sandy could too, if he'd give her the chance.

"Hey, Paperman! Look at you! I thought you'd never touch a computer again after yesterday." Officers in the next room were watching 3V—a screen victim screamed as Murdock shut the door.

"My life depends on it, today. I guess I fell off the wagon. And thanks for the tip. We have access."

Armed with a tepid cuppacaff from Buchanan's machine, Murdock pulled

up a chair and joined him. "Find anything?"

"Maybe. It's possible Sandy pissed off a psycho. Look at this. Mr. "C" doesn't exactly stand for Clark Kent."

Murdock whistled softly. "You may have something here."

(Sandy) Yes, you are fast. I'll skip some of my errors and keep up.

(C) Check your typing before you send it. You're making too many errors, Sandy.

(Sandy) Yes.

(C) Who are you?

(Sandy) What do you mean?

(C) Just a minute. I'm preparing some files for downloading.

(Sandy) n?

Okay.

"He's got her down to one syllable words faster than a Crystal Plains Spritzer," Jay mumbled. "No way to tell how long he kept her waiting."

"Pretty manipulative." Murdock folded her arms and leaned back.

(C) Are you still there, Sandy?

(Sandy) Yes.

(C) I was marking files for downloading. What are you doing here, tonight?

(Sandy) I was just visiting out of curiosity.

(C) You realize this costs money.

(Sandy) I know. But in order to learn

(C) Think of it as twenty-one cents a minute.

(Sandy) arn.

I have to learn sometime and it doesn't matter if

(C) That's twelve fifty an hour.

(Sandy) f l

Do you get my messages all

broken up if

(C) What?

(Sandy) Do you get my messages

(C) That didn't make sense.

(Sandy) What do I do when your messages come in the middle

(C) You're not checking before you send.

(Sandy) e of mine?

(C) That's better. It doesn't matter—just type and send.

(Sandy) OK

(C) You didn't answer my question.

(Sandy) Which one?

(C) Either would be nice.

(Sandy) ^%?@^g>^&*^

Personal experience had taught him the meaning of that griffonage; Sandy was trying to find questions which had scrolled off the top of her screen.

Murdock snorted. "Cute. I love the way Mr. C casually abandons Sandy, then lectures her about the cost."

Another person joined the recorded conversation and instantly, Mr. C disappeared. The rest of the conversation was ordinary show and tell stuff.

Jay loaded the next log and found Mr. C and Sandy had shifted to a private conversation. Sandy became very intimate with Mr. C. His aggressive manner seemed to have won her heart. They were two lovers whispering through the electronic hole they'd made in an ethereal wall.

Two files remained, one of which covered nearly all of the last disk.

(Sandy) If I thought you could end my loneliness, I would.

(C) No you wouldn't. Women are cowards.

(Sandy) You don't know many of us, do you.

(C) I know you.

- (Sandy) You think.
 (C) You're afraid of me.
 (Sandy) I don't really know you.
 (C) Yes or no - You're afraid of me.
 (Sandy) Yes. Because I don't know you.
 (C) You're afraid of men. Period.
 (Sandy) No.
 (C) You're probably still a virgin.
 (Sandy) Don't be ridiculous.
 (C) Say it isn't so.
 (Sandy) What I mean is that it's completely unimportant whether or not I am.
 (C) Afraid.
 (Sandy) So, what if I am.
 (C) If you're afraid, you won't ever meet with me. You are Shadow Matter.
 (Sandy) What the hell is that supposed to mean?
 (C) You aren't real. You lack substance. You are a shadow made of matter. Shadow matter.
 (Sandy) That's cruel.
 (C) The truth can hurt. Is your existence a costume party? Is your job pointless? Are you afraid? Leave these matters behind! Your Shadow Matters!

"Shadow Matter." Murdock shook her head. "That *is* cruel."

But Jay, stung by the words as though they were meant for him, said nothing.

- (Sandy) How? I don't know what you mean.
 (C) Strip off your shadows. Abandon your pretence. Join me. Come naked of all your lies and live with me.

There it was! Jay sat up abruptly and leaned into the screen. "We got him, Murdock."

- (Sandy) Where do you live? How do I find you?
 (C) I no longer live in your shadow world. Here. This will show you.

"Damn. He's nuts! He's probably Hooked to his own personal paradise or some other sick thing." Gibberish suddenly scrolled across his screen. Afraid the file had been damaged, Jay halted the scrolling display, then was quiet for a long time.

"What the hell happened? They were just getting to the juicy parts."

"I don't know." He struck a key and let the strange data continue. He couldn't read the code, but it might be a recipe for the healing elixir he needed. "We need to find out."

In mock horror, Murdock slapped her hands to her face. "Oh, no! Not them!"

"Yep. Time to visit the Floppy Drivers!"

Four flights below his office, Jay arrived at the Computerized Analysis and Research Department door. Loath to challenge her own temperament, Murdock sent him alone and retired to her office. He couldn't blame her as pushed open the door and a herd of nerds offered disinterested, bovine looks, then returned to their work. No one approached him.

Jay held up the disk. "I want to know what's on this disk."

A *Star Wars: Dynasty 7* T-shirt ambled among the shelves of gutted monitors, chipped motherboards, shucked keyboards and violated floppy drives. Jay was pleased to spot a pair of large speakers. At least he recognized something in this mess.

The T-shirt halted, close enough for Jay to smell stale gum on his breath. The police compunerd sucked on a diet pop and offered a scrawny hand. "Hi. I'm

Reg." Jay studied the Reg's face, white-heads and cocaine powdering his nostrils.

Instead of shaking hands, Jay slapped the disk onto Reg's palm. "I want help with this."

Reg shrugged, then led him through a swamp of blinking diodes and humming fans to what appeared to be more of a twisted wreck than a computer system.

"We'll just plug this into Ol' Wookie, here." Ol' Wookie's lid spilled wires and bits of circuit board like guts from a squashed bug. "Let him swallow this and see what he spits up."

Jay grabbed Reg's paisley bow tie and gave it sharp half turn to the left. "I don't want anything 'spit' out. Harm this disk and I'll kill you."

Then he let Reg breathe.

"Sorry, man. I'll be more careful. What am I looking for?"

Jay pointed to the directory listing on the screen. "This one."

While Reg flipped through screens crammed with data, Detective Rogers surveyed his surroundings with suspicion. "Well," Reg started, "this part's BioBot software. Looks like somebody gave you the programming and hardware specifications for some kind of biological data transfer device."

Certain the bastard Mr. C had talked the poor woman into some sick suicide, Jay shuddered. "How does it work?"

"Well, I'm not sure of all the details... The components are organic compounds. The self-replicating routine is here on pages two-sixteen to three twenty-three."

Jay's mouth dropped in sudden respect for the pimply kid.

"...Inclusive."

He leaned closer. This was the poison inside him. "How do we turn it off?"

Anxiety over his physical well-being had the compunerd thinking fast. "Ultimately, we have here an extremely complicated communication program with a single available protocol."

"What are you telling me? This is some kind of internal modem?!"

"That's what I said." Reg decided it was pretty funny. "Kind of a Mega-Baud tumour." He snorted loosely.

Inbreeding worked, but radiation from VDTs, Jay decided, was the ultimate source of "Goofy" genes. "So, those four hundred pages of gibbering is so you can....?" Jay's mouth tried to keep going after his brain ran out of words.

"Transfer loads of complicated data."

A direct link to every dendrite, every cell, and every neurotransmitter.

"Parallel interface...."

The biobugs infected the brain and turned dopamine into silicon filaments. But why melt down the grey matter?

Realization hit Jay like a planet. "This is made only for *uploading* a person."

The little guy got all wrinkly when he thought hard. "Gee. That would probably kill you."

"What happens if a person didn't upload with this thing?"

"I..." He wasn't sure. Frowning, the simpleton scrolled through data. Jay couldn't make out any characters at this speed, but the skinny kid beside him stopped the listing and pointed at the screen. "Here's the module."

Jay held his breath.

"Yep, there's the destructive shut-down sequence and..."

He pondered a moment probing a chin pimple with his fingernail. "It's weird."

Jay had seen better insights in comic books. Come to think of it, he'd seen that one in comic books, too. "Would it still execute?"

"Just a minute. It's..." Reg scrolled through a few pages, then backed up. "Unconditional. They can be triggered with a short command, but no matter what, they all go pop after thirty hours."

Jay straightened his hat on his suddenly very tired head. Twenty-six of those hours were gone. He'd known all along he had little time, only now it was made real by measure.

Jay spoke slowly. "This has been very helpful. Now, I want you to make it stop."

"Detective?"

"Shut down the program. Turn it off. Break. Scroll lock. Terminate the fucking batchfile!"

Reg's eyes crossed the faces of a gathering group of nerd observers. One of the hardware cowboys commented. "No way we can cut power to the terminal and re-boot."

Another adjusted his Jordy visor and joined in. "Anybody know interrupt codes for consciousness?"

Reg blew a raspberry. "Hell, we don't have to do any of that. Those guys are just joking with you."

Jay wasn't amused.

With waning smile, Reg valiantly continued. "With the access codes I can reprogram the BioBots through your finger implants and bypass the destruct sequence. They wrote this so you could still change your mind. The usual way, I mean."

The access codes. Who in their right mind would even hope they'd be found? Deadly scribbles covered Ol' Wookie's screen. The mysterious numbers and terms that were killing him. And, he hadn't forgotten, had already killed Sandy Teylon.

"Heck. Me and Wookie can hack those codes!" General agreement found its way among the rabble. "We have all

these computers. All these brains. We can find 'em."

Oddly, Jay wasn't happy with the offer. When he imagined success, when he imagined finally shutting down his biobugs, Jay felt empty. Worse, the emptiness felt normal. Something had been slowly filling him with purpose since Sandy Teylon's rights to protection under the law had been violated. "Who is protecting her rights, now?" he wondered.

"Could you program a batch of Medibots with that?" Jay waved a hand at Wookie's screen.

"With these instructions and the program on this disk? Sure. Get a few blank Medibots and any fool can!" Reg grinned stupidly around the room as his fellows nodded agreement.

The confident grin sealed Jay's decision. Smoothly, he reached past Reg, pulled the disk out of the drive, then switched off Ol' Wookie.

"Hey! It takes me forty-three minutes to reboot!"

The speakers he'd spotted before were lying face down with their powerful magnets in easy reach.

Then Reg saw what Jay was about to do. "Detective, wait. I have an idea. If we use that disk to program a new batch of 'Bots, but alter the instructions slightly..."

Jay's decisiveness wavered a moment. "No. My mind is already, well, changed." Then he laid Sandy's disk on top of a speaker magnet and left it there. RAM-rats could always use another blank disk.

Jay walked to the door.

Reg remembered something. "Hey, Detective. Don't you want to know the trigger command?"

Of course, he did. Hat in hand, he paused to listen.

"Just get any terminal to echo 'Waltzing Matilda.'"

"Waltzing Matilda?"

Reg shrugged, but a piggish NetHead looked up from her terminal long enough to say, "It means setting out on your own. Matilda is a bag on a stick full of all you got in the world."

Jay studied his rumpled, shapeless fedora a long moment, then jammed it roughly onto his head. Eyes on the floor, Jay smiled. "Sounds like it's still too much to carry, if you ask me."

"Hey!" Jay yelled as he burst into Murdock's office. "Looks like we finally solved the Alberta BioTech Laboratory theft." Jay explained.

She swung her feet off her desk and slammed a fist in the space they left. "Shit. That's where she got the Medibots!" With the grace of a tank, she headed for the door. "I'll go gloat about it and see who I can piss off!"

"Don't. Not now."

"Sure. I'll wait 'till tomorrow morning so I can have all day to rub it in!" Jay slipped past her and sat at her terminal. "You know, you could get one of your own. Dr. Vasquez has left three messages for you on my system—urgent messages." Murdock's nightstick rattled against the desk as she pushed the phone closer to him. "I think they found a way to help you."

"Just a minute."

Murdock was impatient, but willing to accept a very short delay. "By the way: we found Matilda!"

Jay was confused. "Who?"

"The cat..."

"Oh. I thought..."

"...Absolutely covered with 'bots. Ms. Teylon obviously didn't know much about..."

"Quarantine. No, she wouldn't."

"It's miraculous no one else was infected." Murdock absently flipped channels on the 3V. "Here's what I don't get. She could have had any VirReal life she wanted. Every school kid watching 3V knows that's true!"

"She was talked into somewhere better. Murdock, listen: I'm going to see if she found it." He touched his finger implants to the keys. The system recognized him and illuminated the monitor.

Murdock turned away from the 3V. "What? How?"

"I'm not sure. First, I'm going in to find her. After that, what I can do? Can I talk to her? Can I arrest Mr. C somehow?"

"Jay, the 'bots are making you crazy!" She lifted the phone off the hook. "Call the hospital."

"No."

"She's not in my computer!" Murdock began dialing.

"Of course she isn't. She's somewhere else. Maybe everywhere else. Maybe she's basking in energy inside a power station generator, or maybe she's studying military tactics in a supersecret military installation, or maybe she and Mr. C are playing electron baseball. I don't know. They're not living LifeReal. Maybe it's VirReal. Or maybe it's a different reality than we know."

"Or she's dead, Jay!"

He heard a faint voice from the receiver Murdock waved in his face. "Besides, this is the job; set an example."

"Take the phone, Jay."

"No."

"Your brain is affected."

Of course, she was right. Thoughts were clearer, faster, more sure. Like when he was Hooked. "We need a cop on this guy's case, and I'm made for it."

"Dr. Vasquez. I'm returning your call..."

Jay didn't listen. He logged onto DATAServ and called up Sandy's script file. He could do nothing from this reality save hold his badge in front of the monitor and demand everyone be questioned. Her password was sent into the system and accepted.

In moments, he had a conference cursor on his screen. Jay's guts itched as he typed:

(jay) Sandy Teylon?

He let the screen become his universe for a time he could not measure. Other conversations were almost audible in the background as he waited, just in case she replied.

"Jesus, Doctor, he's trying to talk to a dead woman."

"She might be watching. She might answer."

After a silence, Murdock swore softly. "Jay..."

Denial and anger rushed to his throat as his glare dared her to say a single word more. A moment of hesitation hovered between them before Murdock quietly hung up.

And then an alien thought came to him. It was not his own. Intangible, it felt like "readiness." He barely heard Murdock speak.

"Don't you even want to know what Dr. Vasquez said?"

"Why? Am I a Man or a Cop?"

"Or shadow matter, like C said."

Jay agreed. "Not any more."

Murdock, to Jay's amazement, actually started to cry. "Not anymore? We're not shadow matter; we're real."

He collected his words a moment. "Murdock, why do you carry a bullhorn and wear those stupid sunglasses?"

Offended, her voice rose in volume. "I'm a cop! This is what cops do."

"Really." Detective Jay Rogers stood. "Or is it a fedora and trench coat? Or that stupid deer-stalker Martin wears?"

"He's a twit."

Jay sighed, but didn't answer. Instead, he began to undress. Murdock watched unmoved for a moment, then quietly went to the door and locked it. "Isn't this the kind of private moment you want to experience in your own home?"

"No." He kicked his clothes into a pile near the wall. "I want them to know who I am." Stripped naked, he proudly spread his arms wide. "Now, at last, I am a Cop."

No dignity was lost under her thoughtful gaze. "Yes. You are. But dead men make lousy cops."

"Death is not VirReal. But law enforcement should be." Once again, he sat at the terminal.

"Cold on the butt?"

A quick smile crossed his lips before he closed his eyes for a long, deep sigh. Then, impatiently, he cancelled his unanswered call for Sandy and initiated an interactive routine. He requested an echo. He typed "Waltzing Matilda" and then, keeping his fingers in contact, touched the return key.

Instantly, his right eye became unlit. His left hand became palsied. Terror gripped his heart, and his reflexes yanked his fingers off the board, but he wasn't going to run away. His enemy had always been reality, not its shadows.

"Jay?"

"I'm okay."

"Get him, Jay. If he's hurt her, you get that bastard and find a way to ship him to me."

Jay nodded placed his Bio-implants back onto the keyboard. Data flowed through his veins, memories coursed his nerves. For a time he was in two realities. In LifeReal he could still see

Murdock's troubled stare, but couldn't move or speak. In VirReal, though, whole worlds swelled from forgotten dreams, bloomed from childhood nightmares, and boyish fantasies loomed suddenly corporeal out of nothingness, then faded. Here, Jay was not helpless. He willed a shabby apartment into existence, complete with a solid door, clean bed and fire escape. A neon sign flashed "Mote" outside one window.

On Murdock's screen, he willed a

message.

(jay) I'm inside, Murdock. I'll be okay.
Goodbye.

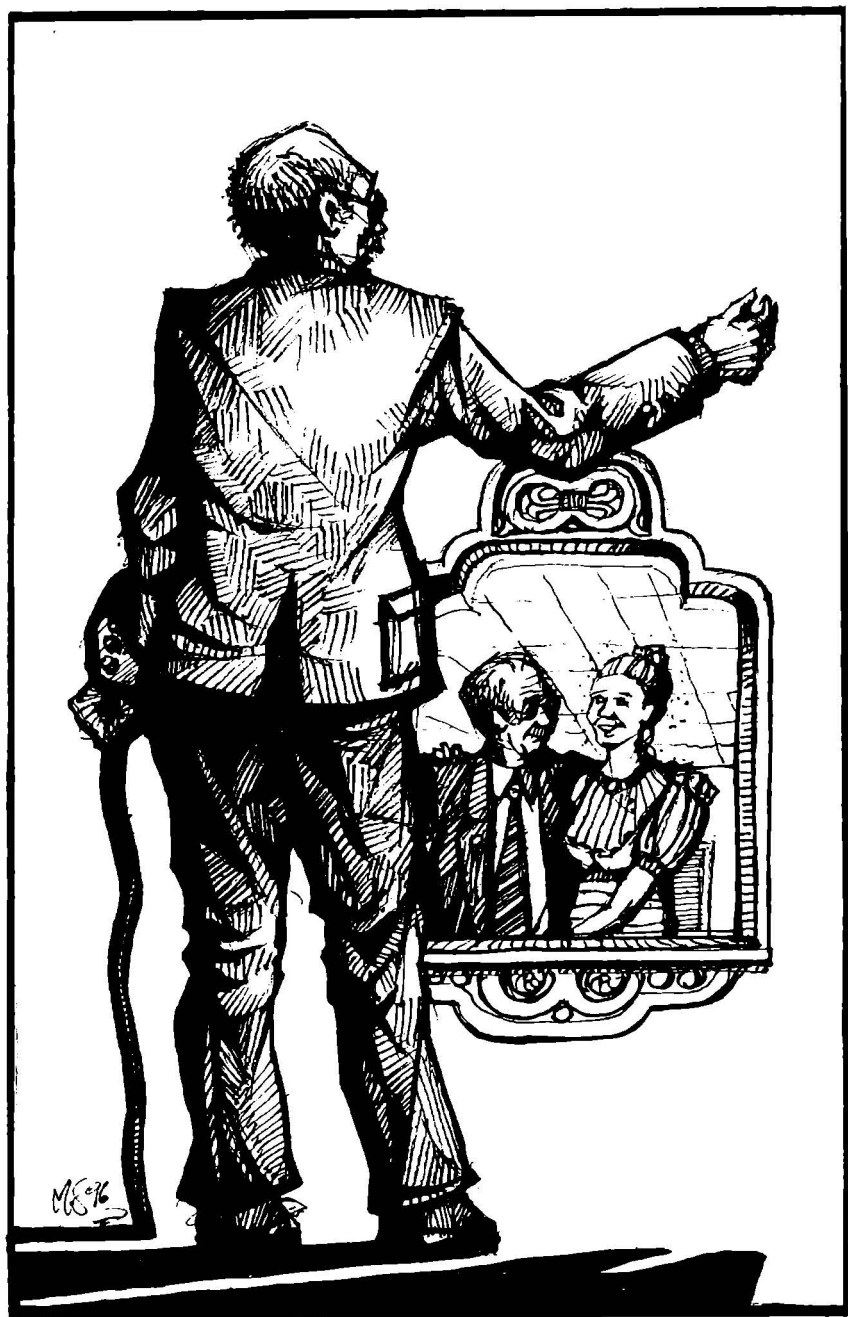
Blinded, sickened by a sensation of falling, his last LifeReal sensation was that of Murdock pressing his head against her breast. From the next room, he could still hear fading 3V gunshots and sirens. Distant laughter rushed him on—to police his new VirReality. •

About "Shadow Matters": This cross between detective fiction and science fiction began some years ago, when I was exploring an on-line service late one night. Some guy in Texas lectured me on the costs, left me waiting, then asked if I was female. I have no idea what he thought he could do across that cybergap were I to say yes. Offended, I saw his attitude as yet another example of appearances being more important than substance. No doubt if I had said I was female, his next questions would have sought to determine if I was blonde, brunette, or redhead. Or virgin.

Growing concerns in society about policing activity on the Net certainly helped motivate this story's completion, but there will be much bigger issues surrounding virtual reality when the technology matures. (Preston Hapon)

PRESTON HAPON: This is Preston's third story in *ON SPEC*, and his fourth publication.

ILLUSTRATOR: PATRICK PAUTLER is a Toronto artist whose work can be seen regularly in the comic book anthology *Idle Worship*. When he isn't drawing, he likes to spend his time reading bad poetry and writing manifestos for the clandestine propaganda network known only as "Visual Utopia Incorporated."



Alice in the Mirror

D.G. Valdron

illustrated by Mitchell Stuart

I had not seen my dear friend, Sir James Fitz-Sterling, since the horrific affair of the Lancashire Mummy, over a year ago in the closing months of 1994; so I was quite startled and pleased to receive his invitation.

As I drove to his country estate, I reflected on what a threat to the world had been posed by that unholy union of Celtic Druidism and ancient Egyptian sorcery. Sir James had, for crucial moments, been a solitary ramrod, singlehandedly preserving our world from a host of newborn and nameless gods until we could contain them.

Since then great changes had come into his life; he had retired, married, and, quite startlingly, gone blind. Oddly, none of his associates could really agree on the order of things. Sir James, though consulting on occasions, and offering timely and welcome advice, seemed to have become a bit of a recluse.

I must confess, I myself had engaged in speculation as to his circumstances from time to time.

It was mid-afternoon that I arrived and, parking in the usual spot, I jaunted up the marble steps of Stormway, Sir James's estate.

I rapped three times sharply with the intricately sculpted brass knocker, and waited. The door opened.

Sir James was standing there grinning jovially. Time had been kind to this great man, a father figure to all of us in the trade. Only his jet black glasses suggested that he was not at the peak of physical condition in every possible respect.

His wife I did not see at first. Then I caught sight of her in the huge hallway mirror. She was standing just inside the doorway, almost behind the door. No wonder I hadn't spotted her, especially with such an imposing physical presence as Fitz-Sterling bearing down on me.

"Welcome, Charles, my boy, it is good to have you around," he said, unerringly seizing my hand and pumping it vigorously.

"It's good to be here, Sir James," I said quite sincerely, shrugging out of my greatcoat. In the mirror I caught the reflection of his wife assisting me, taking up the coat as it slid off my shoulders.

"I'll just put that away for you," she was saying, as I turned to look at her.

She wasn't there.

The coat fell to the ground in a heap.

I looked straight away to the mirror. There the three of us were, reflected. But though her reflection was present, she was not.

A cold sweat broke out over me. My fingers immediately and subtly wove through the Carnarvon Sigils, guaranteed to provide a painful, if temporary, defence against anything short of a twelfth level Sumerian Deity/Demon. My knuckles immediately began to ache, for it is well known the sigils were crafted for the use of dextrous tentacles.

Sir James frowned briefly, and then stooped to gather up my coat himself.

"I see you've just met my wife, Alice, and encountered her condition. Let us repair to the sitting room and all shall be explained."

"I think that would be appreciated," I answered him slowly, my gaze darting back and forth from her reflection in the mirror, to the place where she should be, but inexplicably was not.

"I must admonish you," he said sternly, "in the strongest terms, to abide by certain rules of my house, for reasons which shall become clear to you."

Saying that, he turned and swept down the hallway. I had no choice but to follow him. The reflection of Alice followed us in the mirror.

Wisely, unlike Orpheus of Greek myth, I did not turn around. I did not fear danger, of course, certainly not in the home of my friend. But a breach of etiquette: there was a risk even I feared.

We arrived in the opulent sitting room, tastefully furnished in Victorian style with just the slightest traces of oriental influence. The biggest shock was that the whole of the east wall, facing away from the fireplace, had been covered with a huge mirror. I moved to examine the glasswork. It was exquisite; I could not find a single seam. The mirror made the sitting room, already large, positively cavernous.

"Sit," he waved to one of three overstuffed lounging chairs which faced the mirror with nothing but a small coffee table and a tea server between them.

"Face the mirror at all times. On no account look directly at anyone or anything in the room," he instructed me as he settled into the chair nearest mine.

His wife Alice was standing at the tea server, pouring a cup. She passed it to Sir James, who accepted it with thanks. She smiled at me in the mirror.

"Mister Smith?" she asked.

"Charles, please," I told her, "and black with one lump of sugar."

She passed me a cup, and just as I reached for it, I glanced away from the mirror towards the cup in time to see it suddenly fall to the floor, inches from my fingers.

"Oh bother," she said with some consternation, looking at the spilled tea and shattered cup. "James, I am sorry, this is just not working out well."

"Nonsense," he said. He performed a mystic gesture.

Instantly I held the steaming cup of tea.

"A simple time displacement spell, elementary and useful for parlor tasks like this," Sir James explained graciously.

"Sit my dear, and it shall all be sorted out." Dutifully, she took her seat on his opposite side.

He sipped his tea, and turned to regard me.

"By now, I am sure that you have divined my wife's condition. Quite opposite to Vampires, who cast no reflection, she can only be seen in mirrors. She can move about and affect things in what we so humorously call the 'real' world, only so long as no observer looks directly at an object, rather than a reflection. Thus my instructions."

"An Alice through a looking glass," I expostulated. "Surely not the girl from the Lewis Carroll story?"

"Quite right, my boy, this is a decidedly different Alice. Though you are right to wonder about the correspondence of the names. We both know there is no such thing as coincidence."

"But this is so remarkable," I went on, "I hardly know where to start."

"Then, best we start elsewhere," he said with perfect grace, "rushing blindly into a subject is often the fastest path to ruin. How have you been?"

Alice echoed his comment, her voice coming sweetly. "Yes, James has told me so much about you. We would dearly love to hear more from you. The last report placed you in the center of the Iswitch Church matter."

I watched my face fall. It was the dashed oddest sensation to be watching ourselves in the mirror as we chatted. I felt almost disembodied.

"I'm afraid that ended quite badly. We lost several people to the thing in the pit and could not banish it at all."

Sir James reached over to put a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

"Don't blame yourself, son. In cases such as these, it is all anyone can do to contain the horror. Certainly if not for you and Renfrew the loss of life would have been intolerable."

"How is Renfrew?" Alice asked

sweetly. "James has spoken so highly of you two. I feel almost as if I know each of you."

"I thank you, Ma'am," I told her. "But I fear after Iswitch, Renfrew and I may no longer be considered associates."

An ineffable sadness washed over me. I tried to shake it off.

"But what of you, Sir James? So much has happened to you these past few months. How are you dealing with this lack of sight?"

Sir James, with characteristic wisdom and compassion, allowed the conversation to turn to his blindness.

"It is a surprisingly small handicap. Most people fail to appreciate how acute the remaining five physical senses ... and the seven metaphysical ones can be, if applied. Most times, I hardly notice it."

"But still, there are qualities peculiar to sight," I said. "How do you read?"

"I read for him," Alice said, reaching forth to put her hand on his knee. He turned towards her.

"With the voice of an angel," he said. In the mirror I watched them gaze at each other with the most honest love I had ever seen.

I thought of Renfrew; a lump rose in my throat. I washed it away with a swallow of tea.

Sir James must have sensed my mood.

"Of course such a condition would be a rather critical handicap in our profession, so my retirement became rather a matter of necessity."

He turned back to me, sipping his tea.

"Not that I minded. Once I had found my Alice, I discovered I could not bear to leave her side."

"He is not completely inactive," Alice said.

"I do some small consulting," Sir James chuckled. "After all, the approach to the millennium is a dangerous time."

"His advice was quite instrumental in the Japanese case," she said proudly.

"I heard of it," I recalled. "At the time, Renfrew and I were involved in an exorcism on a member of the Royal Family, otherwise we would have lent our aid."

"That was a close one. The tendency for events to repeat is a powerful one," Sir James murmured. "May the good people of Hiroshima never realize how close they came to another holocaust."

"Robeson and Savage sent us the kindest letter," she told me.

I found myself with a powerful urge to look directly at them.

"Confound it, Sir James, I can stand no more. Your wife's condition is singular. How did it come about?"

Fitz-Sterling settled back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at the mirror.

"Well, it seems to me that all cultures have understood, in some fashion or other, the power of images. Even the barbaric Americans, with their Hollywood and Madison Avenue, grasp this," he spoke thoughtfully.

"Why, in supposedly primitive cultures it is believed a camera can steal your soul into a photograph, or a mirror can trap your spirit. I've often wondered at the truth in this.

"I quite suspect that in our own culture we are exposed to cameras and mirrors on such a continuous basis that we have grown immune to certain of their effects, almost like developing caluses from physical exertion. I think they could have quite dramatic effects on those peoples who had never developed a resistance.

"I suspect that somewhere in the English character there was a certain affinity, perhaps merely a lack of immunity, to image magic. That we would throw up people from time to time, who were

like hemophiliacs in a way, in that they lacked a certain element that isolated them from their images.

"There are stories, after all. Consider the famous Lewis Carroll 'Alice' and her adventures in the looking glass. Or look at Peter Pan and his difficulties keeping his shadow attached: there's a suspicious case if ever there was one. Or consider the tragic case of Dorian Gray. All situations of images taking on a life of their own."

"A life of their own," I broke in. "Then where is the real Alice?"

"Oh, this is the real Alice," Sir James chuckled. "She's definitely real enough, I can attest to that."

Alice giggled demurely.

"I have confirmed that she was born, quite happily, on this side of the mirror, and spent her first few years in schools as a physical girl. Somehow, as she got older, she slipped across the mirror's face, and found herself unable to get back."

"It sounds quite silly to say so," Alice said, pouring herself another cup of tea, "but it happened so gradually that I never really noticed until it was far too late. James speculates that I was actually slipping in and out of mirrors from a very early age, so that it was done without the particular self-consciousness that comes with growing up. In some ways, there really is so little difference between here and there."

She paused to think.

"I suppose the problem should have become apparent in my teenage years, but aren't all teenagers eccentric or rebellious in some manner? I was a sheltered girl, and my dear mother simply chalked my increasingly odd requirements up to adolescent vaporings and fashion."

She stood to attend at the tea server,

reaching beneath it. "But now I think it is time for some refreshments." She handed a bowl of biscuits to Sir James, who set them on the table. Then she produced a flat, exquisitely wrought wooden box, handing it again to Sir James.

"Works?" he inquired, passing it to me.

I laid the box on my lap. Eighteenth century French mahogany, I judged, a case for duelling pistols. I opened it. Inside, laid out on red velvet was a polished antique syringe, fitted out with a gleaming modern needle. I noted the fresh surgical tubing, the clamps and, of course, the three rubber sealed vials.

"The mixture of the solution is heroin eighty percent and mescaline twenty percent, as per your preference. Should you prefer to do your own dilutions I have included the pure solutions," Sir James told me.

I could barely trust my voice.

"Really, Sir James, you are the perfect host. Alas, I would prefer to wait until later in the evening."

"Of course," Fitz-Sterling replied as I closed the case and placed it on the coffee table.

"I must say, this calls Renfrew to my mind. He could not abide this little pleasure, you know."

"I can hardly say I am surprised," rumbled Sir James, "much as I like Renfrew, I'd always felt that his choice of dress and hormones, coupled with his refusal to pursue surgery, spoke of a person unwilling to commit fully to life. I'm sure it must have been a barrier in your relationship."

"Actually," I said reflectively, "I found the androgyny of his physical aspect quite exciting. It was actually my limitations that came between us. I could not abide certain of his tastes."

Sir James and Alice nodded sympathetically.

I pulled my handkerchief from my vest pocket and wrung it in my hands, staring at it.

"When we admitted to our feelings for each other, we both agreed that to be together, we would each refrain from what the other could not bear to tolerate."

I looked fondly at the case on the coffee table.

"I put my friends away. Renfrew could not tolerate the thought of needles. He gave up certain...pleasures as well.

"We were quite happy together. If our home was unusually free of vermin, well, Renfrew was a meticulous housekeeper. If I smelled the occasional roach on his breath, I simply chose not to think about it.

"It was Iswitch that ruined it for us. I feel certain of that now. It was such a drain on the both of us. Poor Renfrew was a wreck.

"I had taken to long solitary walks to get my bearings. On one of these walks, Renfrew, left alone, could stand it no more.

"He must have gone out to a pet store and purchased a box of kittens."

I dabbed at a tear that had sprung unaccountably at the corner of my left eye.

"When I returned early, he was half way through them. I still remember him looking up in surprise at me. His face smeared with red like a child caught at the jam. I simply could not bear it, not after Iswitch."

Sir James reached out a hand, resting it on my shoulder as if to steady me. Alice left her seat, crossing behind me to lay her hand on my other shoulder.

"There now, it will work out," she assured me.

"The greatest trial of love," Sir James whispered sincerely, "is learning to abide with that which is intolerable in your companion. It is something we must all face. We cannot be what we want each other to be; we must be who we are, and we must love that. We must transform at least that part of our selves that cannot accept the whole."

"Yes," I whispered, almost not trusting myself to speak, "of course you are right. It's just so hard."

"But you have it in you," he urged, "you and Renfrew both. If you wish to, you can transcend this, as Alice and I have done."

I gathered myself up. I did not want to seem unmanly in their home.

"You seem so happy together. Tell me, how did you meet?"

In the mirror I watched them exchange fond glances.

"Actually," said Sir James, "it was her mother who brought me into it."

"Mother was getting on in years, you see," Alice told me, "and she had finally decided that something should be done about my condition. For years we had simply made allowances and accommodations, purchased mirrors and positioned them cleverly."

"Indeed," Fitz-Sterling said, "the principal handicap was her inability to affect the material world when someone was gazing upon it. Her mother had grown quite skilful at where and how to look at things, to allow her daughter freedom. Why, I remember when I first arrived, Alice's bedroom was off limits, but mirrors were arranged so cunningly in the hallway that you could see the whole of the bedroom without ever actually looking directly into it."

"Just so," she agreed, "but finally, she determined something more substantive would have to be done. How would I

make my way when she was no longer around? There are not a lot of career prospects available for a girl in a mirror."

"As you can imagine," Sir James continued, "I found the whole thing quite without precedent, and completely beyond my experience. It was a major effort even to understand her condition."

He looked directly at me for a moment.

"I found the works of Bohr and Heisenberg on quantum mechanics of invaluable assistance. The paradox of Schrödinger's Cat helped greatly in grasping this phenomena."

"But he could do nothing for me," she said, crossing over to stand behind him, and running her fingers through his hair.

"Her condition was too far advanced. Too much time had passed. Perhaps in the early stages..." He shook his head.

"Mother was reluctant. She was afraid that they might try to exorcise me. She wanted me brought closer, not sent away. That was why she waited."

"Still, I gave it the old college try, and spent quite a bit of time thereabouts. Alice and I became quite familiar. You must admit, Charles," he seemed to glance directly at me, "that it is a most fascinating case."

"I kept returning to it again and again," he said. "Until one day, I realized that I was drawn back as much by Alice, as by her condition. More so. For I had determined there was nothing I could do, and yet, I kept returning."

"I still remember that joyous day he proposed," I heard her voice behind us, glowing with happiness, "only a year ago. He completely swept me off my feet."

Sir John chuckled with pleasure and she answered with her own happy giggle. I watched the two of them in the mirror.

"I am happy for the both of you. If what they say is true: that for every loss there is a compensation, then your blindness has been more than recompensed, Sir John," I told them.

"Love isn't all roses my boy," Sir John said, "Like you and Renfrew, we had our tribulations.

"The source of our own trials lay in Alice's unique condition," he explained, "though you must not think her disabled. Through the affinity of images, Alice can touch and affect anything in the material world that whose image she can reach inside the mirror. Provided, of course, that there is no observer of the material world; thus alone, or with us gazing straight into the mirror, she is quite competent."

"Anyone, with just a glance, however, can render me impotent and helpless," Alice stated. "It is the most wretched thing. Worse by far, I think, than being a quadriplegic in a hospital bed or wheelchair. At least then you cannot feel and touch only to have it stolen away in an instant."

"Yes, it was hard on us at first.

Especially on poor Alice. I cannot tell you of the cups and glasses which were shattered, the moments ruined, when I would look away from the mirrors. Her mother had had a lifetime of practice, and had never been so intimate as we were.

"I had a mirror installed over our bed, so that we could share our nights. I cannot bear to speak of the times passion would draw back my eyelids, and suddenly her touch would vanish."

"I found," Alice said softly, in the mirror she was leaning down over the chair, behind him, their arms entwined, "that I was of a passionate nature. The frustration became unbearable."

"I took to wearing veils over my eyes to block my sight, but these proved to be inadequate," Sir John said.

"I realized," she said, "I could not live with a sighted man."

"Dear Lord God in Heaven," I gasped, as Sir John slipped off his dark glasses and I looked into his empty sockets, "you don't mean that she..."

"Of course not," Sir John told me, "I did it myself." •

About "Alice in the Mirror": Victorian England and Victorian literature, within the confines of its stultifying normality, had a penchant for generating truly weird personalities and literary characters, but not always recognizing them as such (I mean ... take a really good look at Sherlock Holmes, for instance). There's something appealing to me about Victorian formality married to wacked-out terminal weirdness. (D.G. Valdron)

D. G. VALDRON is an award-winning writer with stories previously published in *The Bardic Runes* (Ottawa), *Terminal Fright* (New York),

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The theme of the next *ON SPEC* Special Issue is "Canadian Geographic": every story must include a Canadian place name or region. Stories do not have to be set in Canada, present day or otherwise. Examples: an alternate history of the Hudson's Bay Company; the launch pad for the Canadian Mars mission is in Medicine Hat; a woman from Flin Flon beomes the UN representative to an alien race... Deadline is May 31, 1996, to appear in March 1997. All submissions must be in competition format, maximum 6000 words, accompanied by SASE for reply (see p. 95 for details):

ON SPEC "Canadian Geographic," Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

In the Beginning, There Was Memory

Ven Begamudré

illustrated by Yvonne M. Whelan

1 Tonight's performance is of Chopin. It is not really night. I have willed the space around me a flat, midnight black. Random constellations rise in what would be the east if directions still mattered. So little matters now.

Chopin plays behind me in a hallway. He plays among a smattering of Hindu sculptures: a mother goddess, a four-faced Shiva, and a goddess of destruction. Their faces are inexact. As for the music, the composer himself is at the piano. He plays his first Ballade, the one in G minor with its complementary themes. I did not know, when I listened to his Ballades during my student days, that he both invented and perfected the form. Later I learned. Some have suggested ballades tell stories and pointed as proof to the musical logic of the form. Others disagreed. They claimed ballades are stories without plot or character; that the only dialogue is an unspoken one between performer and listener. Or, in this case, between the composer and himself since he plays as though I were not even here.

This was my favorite room in what was once the Royal Ontario Museum: the Bishop White Gallery with its Buddhist paintings and sculptures. The largest painting—the entire, far wall—depicts the future Buddha with disciples and celestial attendants. They appear identical although, in the original, they were not identical. Two smaller paintings—each a flanking wall—are of Daoist deities moving through an ethereal world. They, too, seem identical. The wooden sculptures are of Bodhisattvas, images of compassion. My favorite is Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. This was where I sat as a widower each afternoon. Since the gallery no longer exists, I have re-created it for myself here. Wherever *here* is.

I confess: it is not really Chopin at the piano. It is a re-creation of him just as the piano is a re-creation of a piano. He plays like the real Chopin, though; of this I am sure: his almost tight control of volume, his unconventional fingering. The first Ballade



ends. The second begins. This is the one in F, the one he dedicated to Schumann, who preferred the tranquil opening section to what followed. So did the composer. So do I. Like the real Chopin, my re-creation plays an extended version of that tranquil opening. Perfect for midnight, perfect for solitude. How often I dreamt of being the only person in an audience, in some open-air salon, while Chopin played Ballades for me. How often I dreamt of being the only one, and now I am.

2 This evening's performance is of Cesar Franck. Again, it is not really evening. I have willed a rosy glow in what I have decided, from now on, will be west. I suppose I should be amazed by it all. Perhaps I am still in shock: taking notes for no other reason than to formulate a record. But for whom?

Franck composed this sonata, for violin and piano, as a wedding present. It begins reflectively, with only the violin exploring that undulating first theme. The piano joins, intruding as a murmur, then keeps the second theme to itself—the one more emotional than the first. This is a piece meant to be heard when a person is alone. I listened to it every evening for a year after my wife died. Once the grief passed—and it did, though I did not want it to pass—I put the recording away. Now I need the sonata once more. I may need it for longer than a year this time: to help me grieve not for one soul but for billions; for those who passed before them; for those who will never again pass.

This is what surprises me about my new life. I feel no different than I did as a widower: just as powerless, just as indifferent to the future. Those days I felt as though, if the world should end, it might not matter. How could I know it

really would end?

It happened unexpectedly on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The triviality of it all: the absurdity of the mundane. I was sitting on the deck behind my house and reading the weekend *Globe and Mail*. I was dropping the first section at my feet. They always annoyed me: those full-page advertisements for the *Globe* itself. This one posed a Canadian prime minister in the shadow of an American president. Such a typical pose. Underneath was the caption which appeared on all these ads whether they depicted chancellors or kings. "Sooner or later," the *Globe* claimed, "all news is business news." Often I said aloud, as I did just then, "Is this what we've come to? God save us." Then the sun grew bright—too bright—and the sky began to glow. I needed no one to tell me what was happening. I sat there and watched a dusty cloud swell; watched the afternoon sky ignite.

I knew every good Hindu should say, "Hé Ram," when he dies. This means, "Oh God," but in that moment I forgot I was Hindu. Even as my bifocals melted before my eyes, I felt grateful my wife had not lived to see this. "Fools," I shouted. "Fools!" This is all I remember. I do not remember leaving my body or travelling toward a source of comforting, white light. I do not remember my wife or even my mother welcoming me like angels. When I finally grew conscious of my surroundings, the first thing I asked was, "Why did you save me?" I had not meant to scream; only to ask. This was before I realized I was not floating on a burn bed; that those who had saved me were not doctors; that an ocean of tears would be too small.

Even now, when I listen to this sonata, I weep, though without tears. I catch myself muttering, "Fools." In a single afternoon

they erased the work of centuries; made the joys and sorrows of so many souls count as nothing. Think of Van Gogh, distracted by that ringing in his ear; of Nijinsky in his straightjacket; of Robert Schumann. Yes, think of Schumann, whose wedded bliss lasted only four years before his mind betrayed him. Not even Clara could save him from madness. Not even she. If my wife were here she would say, "Don't forget Dianne Arbus or Sylvia Plath. And what about Virginia Woolf, contemplating each stone she sewed into her sweater before she waded into that stream?" Think of them all.

The sonata ends briskly, with more energy than it allowed itself at first, though with no less regret. Only in the last section do the violin and piano play in unison, in a canon some have described as pedantic. I disagree, and there is no one here to debate the point. There are advantages to solitude, after all.

The performers look neither delighted nor humble when I applaud. I have not mastered faces but the pianist is a re-creation of Glenn Gould, the violinist a re-creation of Niccolò Paganini. They could not have performed together—not two such dilettantes—but this is not real life. It is entertainment: my way of passing time when time, like directions, no longer matters. Gould hums while remaining hunched over the keyboard. Paganini taps his foot. I cannot think of another sonata for them and so they wait. If I let them, each would gladly perform separately, but I am weary of solos.

3 Devi appears impressed with my latest creation, a copy of the children's park at Brindavan Gardens near Mysore in South India. My wife and I spent our honeymoon there. A purple-flowering

bougainvillea grows next to the deck on which I sit. Its branches braid through those of one flowering pink. Beyond them a stylized mother giraffe nuzzles the snout of her young. They're only statues: fiberglass. I seem to have mastered synthetics—my deck chair is made of polymer strips resembling wicker—but I haven't mastered plants. The pink and purple petals look almost real but from close up they're identical, just as my re-creation of the painted disciples, attendants and deities were identical. The petals lack the minute flaws that should differentiate one from another. The rest of the garden is a blur of greenery. It's not so much a garden as the idea of a garden.

Still, Devi is so impressed she fails to notice the boy until he runs toward us on his three-year-old legs. He wears a sailor suit. He stops to admire a bird of paradise, then plucks it. When she smiles at him, I explain he's my grandson. "Dr. Ramachandra," she says, "you never had a grandson." She means I never had children.

"I do now. I made this park for him." I pick my crystal off the table and gaze at him through the glass.

The crystal is, perhaps predictably, a dodecahedron—the shape most favored by the Devas—but it's a milky white, not multicolored like their own. I gaze at the boy through my crystal and he grows into a five-year-old girl. She wears a party dress, lemon yellow. She tries to reattach the bird of paradise to its stem. When she can't, she puckers her soft lips. I decide I like her better as a boy and change her back. "Never mind," I call. "You go play at the pond. See how many fish you can count."

He drops the flower and runs off.

Devi asks, "And are there fish in the pond?"

"They're not real," I say. "Nor is any of this," meaning the flowers. "Nor is the boy." He's already headed back toward us. When I roll the crystal between my fingertips, he evaporates. The energy released by his molecules flashes. I squeeze the crystal lightly, a mere flexing of my fingertips, and the energy forms a bishop's candle tree. Its flowers are a waxy yellow.

"At the rate you're progressing," Devi says, "you won't need that much longer." She gave me the crystal to focus my thoughts when I grew bored with simple things like museum pieces; to focus my thoughts when I want to create an object—whether animate or inanimate—or to change its matter back to energy. But I can't help feeling something is missing. Something she either can't or won't give me: a secret she expects me to discover without knowing what to look for. "Soon you can simply point," she says. "Then, not even that."

"I'll keep the crystal," I tell her. "Pointing would make me feel too much like a magician." I don't bother admitting the crystal gives me comfort. It's the one thing I can touch which I haven't created: real in a way nothing I've created is real. "It's all an illusion anyway," I say. "Isn't it?"

"It's real enough for now," she says. "I assume the boy would bleed if you cut him?"

"I don't know. I haven't found any need to cut him." My tone is less dry—almost annoyed—when I add, "You know very well he and the fish aren't real. They can move, but they're incapable of growing by themselves or even reproducing."

"These are the criteria for life?" she asks. "Movement, growth, and reproduction?"

I nod, though it seems to me there

must be other criteria, especially for human life. Even as I squeeze the crystal again, everything vanishes except the house I created last year. That is, I think of it as last year. I no longer need to sleep but I did take a nap after creating the house. It seemed an appropriate thing to do. Besides, I like to sleep. It stops me from thinking. I grow tired of thinking because I don't really think. I remember, and I've always remembered too much. But then, if I'd been good at forgetting, perhaps I wouldn't have been saved. Sometimes I think the Devas need my memories more than they need me. Then again, what's a man without his memory? Can a man who never remembers, or a man with amnesia, create?

I think of the Devas as being more than one though I've met only Devi. It may be she's only part of a whole, one facet of a huge dodecahedron which makes up a single, powerful being. But I doubt it. She sometimes refers to other beings—even calls them "the Others"—as if she isn't as powerful as I would like to believe. Perhaps she's modest.

Speaking of which, there is one conversation we have never had; one I have often imagined; one I suppose we will have sooner or later. It is this:

"Tell me something," I will say. "Who created the Devas?"

She will say, "A force even more powerful than us."

"God?"

"If you want to call it that."

"Then if Devas are religious enough to believe in a God," I will ask, "who does God believe in? Who created Him?"

"Good question," she will reply. "Assuming some force did create God, let us hope He—or She—is not an atheist."

Devi will laugh first. Then I will laugh, but neither with her nor at her. I

will laugh in this imagined conversation because I already see there were many laws of the universe we humans never completely grasped. Here's one: that beings who create—gods if you will, though I would rather not think of myself as a god-in-training—must have a sense of humor. So many laws we never grasped, even those among us who called ourselves scientists.

I was never a scientist. I was a generalist, an administrator of the old school. I studied science but, unlike my wife, I never mastered it. She was a biomathematician, an expert on the application of what are called L-systems to life forms; on using computers to amplify cells. She was one of the best. This didn't matter when her own cells betrayed her; when they gnawed at her bones till there wasn't enough substance left to sustain life. To think we carry the seeds of life and death within us. How often we forget.

4 For once I receive more than a millisecond of warning before Devi appears. She has begun to realize I need my privacy. A light flashes briefly in midair to tell me she awaits an audience.

This afternoon's performance is of Glick. I've willed the space above me a rippling, afternoon blue with no sun to cast shadows. Srul Irving Glick was one of the many contemporaries I left behind. I am listening to my re-creation of the Orford Quartet perform his first string quartet. How much this piece disturbed me once; how much I need it now. The concert at which it premiered was the last concert I attended with my wife. I remember so much. Too much: the lemon yellow sari she wore; the glint of glass in the lobby; even the velour seats, which she insisted were velvet. And I remember, though not word for word,

what Glick said while he introduced the work.

The first movement includes a song of resignation, a kind of funeral march, originally composed—he said—for the Martyrology of the Yom Kippur service. The second movement, in a free rondo-sonata, includes a beautiful theme of love and even attempts at humor and lightness. Throughout it, though, there are references to that first, funereal movement. The piece drives to an exhilarating conclusion.

I thought it presumptuous of him to say this last, but the piece does end as he said. More: at some point the music itself becomes a form of pure creative energy. It elevates, it transforms, it transcends. And best of all, I remember the silence which followed, the players with their fingers curled, each bow stilled while the music whirled in our minds, all of our minds, all of them suddenly as one. Then came the applause, the gratitude for a mortal who could create such beauty; the realization that two violinists, a violist and a cellist—themselves also mortals—could make mere people feel like gods. And I remember walking home, the two of us not daring to speak in case we disturbed the snow falling lightly about us. I remember the wavering of the streetlights; the memories of silk and glass and of velour. Which may have been velvet, after all.

The light flashes again to remind me Devi awaits. When I nod, my re-creation of the Orford Quartet vanishes. The energy it releases lingers, then dissipates.

Devi appears. "Another group of young ones will arrive soon," she says. "Are you ready for them?"

I nod once more and take the form of an old woman: a crone complete with flowing, white hair and a gnarled staff. When Devi asked why I always take this

form for leading tours, I said, "It feels appropriate, just as your form feels appropriate."

It does and it doesn't. Soon after we met, I grew tired of conversing with a double helix of multicolored light. It offered to take a more human form. I imagined a four-armed goddess, none in particular. Devi, whom I named for the Indian word for goddess, copied my image perfectly. For a while her features remained faint, like a face in an underdeveloped photograph. Then I decided she should look not old but past her prime: as the French would say, "*du certain age*." Now she rests two of her arms on the arms of a chair and holds her other two arms raised behind her. If she resents masquerading as a Hindu deity, she has never said so. She has also never objected to masquerading as a goddess or to being considered a *she*. I think she understands I can't think of her as an *it*. Any more than I can think of myself in this way.

Sometimes I change my form to look older or younger, tall or thin, but most times I take the form I had when I was truly alive. I look like Dr. S.N. Ramachandra complete with his dark skin and his paunch and his myopia. The shortsightedness above all. S.N. stood for Satya Narayana but no one called me this. Except for my wife, everyone called me S.N. She called me Dear.

My house vanishes and I hover between the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. This is where the young ones find me when they appear for their tour. Waving one of her arms, Devi abandons me to my duties.

"Welcome to the Wonders of the World," I say.

The young ones bob in a ragged formation of single, multicolored helices. A double helix, their teacher, dwarfs

them.

"What's the world?" a young one asks.

"I told you," the teacher says. "It means the planet called Earth."

The young one sniffs, "Oh that."

It's true my charges have trouble appreciating what I show them but, aside from groups of them led by their teachers and aside from Devi, I have no visitors. I need no visitors. I have my solitude. It allows me to create, to re-create. Sometimes, though, I wonder whether Devi minds looking after someone as primitive as me; someone who long ago amused himself with a children's park; someone who still takes naps.

After the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort, I move on to the buildings of Qut'b Minar. As usual, as soon as I turn from the tower of victory, one of the young ones causes it to lean. The rest giggle while I tilt my head patiently. "Put it back," the teacher says, and the young one does. Now the five-story tower, all sandstone and marble, leans too far the other way. I'll have to remind Devi to straighten it. I can create a house and a garden, even a grandson, but none of them are real. Not to me. The victory tower of Qut'b Minar, like the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort, is real, though. Thanks to the Devas, these and a few other artifacts are all that's left of Earth. Though I can't move so much as a stone, they still have power to move me. And this is when—admiring the multicolored inlay of the Taj Mahal, which looks milky white from a distance—I discover what I've been missing: the secret Devi expected me to uncover for myself.

5 This morning's performance is of Schubert. Again it's not really morning but I've willed it so, just as I've willed my re-creation of the Bishop White Gal-

lery. Here once more are the Buddhist paintings and sculptures—among them the Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin. The Guarneri Quartet plays in the hallway where Chopin once played. Violin, viola, cello and double bass are joined by piano for the Quintet in A, called the “Trout.” Despite the presence of a double bass where one might expect a second violin, the quintet has a translucence bordering on transparency. The lumbering double bass remains in the background, sonorous, and allows the cello to reach for its own upper registers. The cello was the instrument most like the human voice itself. Had I played music, I would have played the cello.

Devi appears on the bench beside me. “I am impressed,” she says. “The garden, that was nice. So were the boy and the fish. But this is different. Why?”

She knows why, but I feel the need to explain. I rise and walk about the statues. There’s no railing to keep me back, not as there was at the ROM. “It’s not an idea of paintings and sculpture,” I say. “Not in the way it was when I first re-created it. Not in the way the garden was an idea of a garden. All of this is real. You see this statue?” I point one out to her. “The fall of drapery is more smooth, more like the catenary of a chain, than the fall of drapery on that figure.” She nods at the second statue. “And the pigment here is more weathered. As for these paintings—” I pivot to face the largest one, the future Buddha with disciples and attendants. “—the faces may seem alike but each one is slightly different. I re-created each face separately, each part of the painting stroke by stroke. That’s why they seem so real. How long it took to discover the secret!”

“Which is?” she asks.

“The ability to hold an entire work in

the mind while devoting all the energy of a moment to a single detail. And, as important, the ability to understand what each detail contributes to the whole.”

Devi nods again and smiles. “You’re ready,” she says. “If your wife were here—”

“But how!” I demand.

“Forgive me,” Devi says. “I did not mean to raise your hopes like that. It was all we could do to save you and a handful of—”

“It’s all right,” I say. “Really. I finished mourning for her long ago.”

“Just as you’ve finished mourning for the others. Also why you’re ready. But if your wife were here, how would she have re-created the garden?”

It’s such a simple question, I wonder why Devi bothers to ask. “Using biomathematics,” I say. “L-systems. Computers to amplify cells, though we no longer need computers, since we have so much time.”

“And could you apply what you recall of her work? Not simply to re-create that garden with its bougainvillea but to create a new garden? A real garden?”

“Of course. I may not consciously know it, but everything I’ve heard or seen or sensed of the world is still in here.” I tap my temple. “Every formula, every bar of music, every brushstroke.” I leave the gallery, pass the performers, and leap the steps to the deck behind my house.

Devi follows.

Perhaps I’ll create a garden full of plants devoted to the hour of day: the morning glory, daylily, evening primrose, nightshade. Or a garden devoted to the seasons: summer cypress, summer lilac, winter jasmine. Or to holy days: the Lenten rose, Christmas rose, Christmas fern, Easter lily. Or perhaps even a garden devoted to the beauty of time,

one full of varieties of thyme itself: caraway, creeping, lemon, woolly. Thyme heals all, they say. No, that would be too clever. "I'll need to begin with something simple," I say.

"Will these do?" A dodecahedron appears in the palm of Devi's hand—one of her four hands. Floating in the center are three blue-green spots, three cells of algae. Barely a handful. "And now," she says, "if you would be good enough to begin applying your wife's knowledge?"

Glick. I need the Glick. The quintet turns into the quartet, the Orford, and the Glick begins: the pure creative energy of his first string quartet. Soon I'll have a garden, each petal different from the last. And one day... No, best not to

think of that. One step at a time. One cell at a time. One petal, one flower at a time.

"We need to make a record of this," I tell Devi. "A record for the future because now there will be one, won't there?"

She sits and begins to write. She writes without paper or pen, but I can see the record form between us even as I begin my life's work. My wife's work. "What shall I write first?" Devi asks. "How about, 'In the beginning...'"

We both laugh. Then it doesn't take me long, not long at all, to compose the first line of this, our record for the future:

"In the beginning, there was memory." •

About "In the Beginning...": This story began as two exercises. First, I wanted to write a fictional essay. Second, I wanted to experiment with tonal control for a realistic novel about a widower on holiday in Europe. Before I knew it, the story took on a life of its own—as SF. Still, it needed many drafts to stop the essay from smothering the fiction. As for the novel, it's largely unwritten. Ironically, seven travel poems I also wrote as exercises have appeared in a magazine (*Grain*). Perhaps I'm more interested in the process of writing than in the product? Or perhaps some novels are best left "largely unwritten." (*Ven Begamudré*)

VEN BEGAMUDRÉ is the author of *Van de Graaff Days* (a novel) and *A Planet of Eccentrics* (short stories). "In the Beginning, There Was Memory" is from an upcoming collection of realistic and speculative fiction, *Laterna Magika*. Other stories from this collection can be found in *Tesseract*⁴ and the upcoming anthology *Hearts Wild*, and in periodicals like *Rungh* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. He is spending 1995-96 in Edinburgh as the Canada-Scotland Exchange Writer-in-Residence.

ILLUSTRATOR: YVONNE M. WHELAN is a painter and illustrator living in Toronto.



Lover's Triangle

Colleen Anderson

illustrated by Peter Francis

It was so cold I expected the ozone grids that waffled the sky to hiss from the rain. They continued to glow a false green. Their reliability didn't matter much; rad couldn't get through with the weather so shitty. The rain wouldn't matter anyway, once inside Fundamental Glue.

I saw the garish orange even in the deluge, and ran to the door. Wiping water out of my eyes, I palmed the door and entered Fundamental Glue. Warm ecstasy. It was dark inside, and my eyes gradually adjusted to the diffused wraithlights that bobbed above each table. Inside was nearly as garish as the front with long diagonal stripes of green, blue and red that covered the kylar plastiplate walls. Keg had taken no chances and had made Glue impervious to almost all types of razing, except for old world bombs, which no one was fool enough to use. No one in their right minds, but we had long ago lost that perspective.

I walked into the din and pushed through the crowd, close as maggots, to the bar. The place would soon writhe in gyrations of bliss when Bore Hunter started playing. I searched through the mix of humans and Wireheads for Sharman and Claxon but couldn't see them. Turning back to the bar, I yelled at Keg. "Hey, Keg, brosia please. How's biz?"

Keg, lean, angular and with a hooked nose, glowered under bushy eyebrows as he filled glasses with coolants. "Not bad, Agate. You gonna read futures tonight?" He plunked the can in front of me.

I patted my coat's pockets. "I've got the decks. Wasn't planning to but maybe I will for a while."

"Please do." He turned away to the far side of the bar and yelled back, "Quiet spot's at the back."

I squeezed by three Wireheads whose eyes sheened with a silvery metal. Probably housed special optics—unnerving to look at them. I bit back an old curse at

such unnatural use of flesh. At least it was their bodies, not mine. I sat at a table scarred with initials and faced the stage.

I rooted into one pocket and felt the reassuring presence of stiletto and wand. The decks lay wrapped in silk in the opposite pocket and I pulled one out. The Romany Wanderer. I shuffled through the Gypsy *patteran*—symbols—and decided to use the Mythic deck instead, with its strong traditional images for the Emperor, the Fool, Death, etc.

I laid a piece of red silk patterned with black sickles and roses upon the table, and began shuffling the cards. Eyes closed, I concentrated, centering myself to the earth, letting the sounds of the Glue drift away. Once inner calmness blanketed me, I opened my eyes, feeling connected to the symbolism of the cards. The portents and messages swirled within me, waiting to be released into sequence. I let out a long breath and sipped the brosia.

As I shuffled the cards, a shadow fell across the table and I looked up. The wraithlight obscured the features, but by the white skin color it had to be a Wirehead.

"Do you tell futures?"

I looked up into the shadowed face and answered, "Only if you ask."

"Then I ask." He pulled out the chair and sat. Classically handsome, with a strong brow and deep brown eyes. A Roman nose and a narrow chin were framed by auburn hair that just brushed his shoulders. He looked at me, waiting.

I held out my hand. "I'm Agate."

"Gamaliel." He shook mine and I passed the cards to him. I noticed the carbon steel nails and guessed cyber-sonics or lasers lay beneath them. He set his drink at the corner of the table and said, "What do I do? I've never had a

reading before."

"Never?"

"I thought my future was fairly evident." He smiled. Pointed teeth. White skin. One of the undead. I tried to hide my unease.

"Oh, well ... shuffle them, keeping the, uh, question you have in mind. When you feel ready, cut them into three piles on the silk and I'll take over from there."

I shivered slightly with dread, but was still fascinated at this man's nonchalance. From the moment I was old enough to understand, my parents and uncles, aunts and cousins, all the Rom had instilled in me the fear of death and the dead. Because my people feared death so much, we worshipped it—no—gave obeisance to keep the dead away. It had always been so: treat the dead with respect and they won't come back to haunt you. It was all I could do to keep myself from chanting a warding spell before this man.

It was difficult, but I recentered myself as Gamaliel cut the cards into three piles. I picked them up, then turned over one after the other until there were twelve in the sunwheel spread, with a thirteenth card in the middle. I pointed to the middle card, the Emperor; an assured man sitting upon the throne.

"This represents you and shows you are strong, a leader. Um, that is beyond your, uh, natural attributes. You're in control." And I wasn't. Undead so close, I was unnerved and feeling foolish. I took a deep breath and tried to get through the reading.

I had forgotten to ask him what his question was. No matter, the cards would still reveal an answer. The past and present cards showed several swords cards, the Moon, the eight and three of wands, and the king of coins.

I sipped my brosia and said, "Your past shows there was a time of confusion and strife, partly caused by your view of magic. You were shaped by it and dealt with a great hardship.

"But it shows here," I pointed to the wands, "that you have worked hard and become comfortable. You do not want for anything in the world of material gain, and have attained what you tried for."

I looked up and saw he watched me, not the cards. Looking down, I pointed to the next three cards; the knight of wands, the Fool and the queen of cups. "Your future shows that you search for something more and that it will lead you on the Fool's journey. You must be careful, for you might be so blinded by what you seek that you will fall to someone who is charming, yet potentially harmful. You must remember reason, but don't over-analyze the situation."

He picked up his drink and sipped it, still watching me. He hadn't said a word and I wondered about the undead drinking normal drinks.

I licked my lips and continued. "These last three cards show the outcome of what you seek." The cards were strong: the Lovers, the Lightning Struck Tower and the five of cups. I was surprised that the Death card hadn't figured in a spread for the undead. But then, I knew better; that card hardly ever meant the literal interpretation. "Your search will lead you into a relationship, possibly a partnership. This card signifies that you must make a choice and that there is the possibility of rivalry. The Tower indicates sudden change and a collapse of old structures. I don't think this relationship of the Lovers will last through it, but in the end there will be something left to build on. You will find that choices for the future will have changed,

and the old beliefs will have broken down."

Gamaliel leaned back in his chair and smiled. "An apt reading, and an interesting one. I should do this more often. Thank you."

I finished my drink and couldn't help saying, "You're not like the others." I had, of course, "encountered" my fair share of roving undead or gangs in this chaotic world.

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, while I avoided his eyes and wrapped the cards in the silk to put them away. I didn't feel like doing any more readings. Too hyped.

"Do you mean, like other Wireheads, or vampyrs?"

"Vampyrs. They're usually not so public, or so I thought, unless..."

He smiled widely, enjoying my discomfort. "I'm not on the hunt, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh." But how did I know he told the truth? I fiddled with objects in my pockets and tried to maintain the cool facade.

He stood and I realized he was very tall, over six feet. "If you don't mind, I'll buy you a drink. Partial payment for the reading."

I just nodded, hoping I wouldn't make a bigger fool of myself. I watched him walk to the bar, calm, barely parting the crowd.

Gamaliel returned and set the brosias down. He took off his long, green lacquer plast coat and tossed it on the back of the chair. Its hard scales clattered and caught the wraithlight hovering above. His muscled arms were bare and he wore an insul T-shirt that said "Go with the flow, it's here to stay."

He moved his chair to the side, so he half-faced me, and so that he could watch Bore Hunter, a band of stocky men and women with strobing gem-

stones adorning their heads. One guitarist had silver tusks that protruded from her lower lip. A singular beauty.

Gamaliel leaned over and whispered, his breath hot and sultry in my ear, "I promise not to drink you if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh." I tried to laugh. "No ... well, yes I was. Sorry, but I don't know many ... of your type and well, my people have always had a great fear of the dead returning to haunt us."

"And do you think I'm haunting you?"

"No. But you do have to eat sometime."

After watching the band for several minutes, Gamaliel turned to me just when I thought he hadn't heard. "Yes, I do have to eat, but I choose carefully and usually those who deserve it."

That didn't ease my nerves. I'd met enough crazed Wireheads who arbitrarily decided what someone deserved.

"How do you decide? And wh-what do I deserve?"

Amusement sparked his eyes. "To be paid, for one." He tossed some creds on the table. "Don't worry, I won't touch you."

"That's what you say." I gulped my drink. "How do I know it's the truth?"

"Well," he leaned close. "You just have to trust me. Besides, I know that Gypsies have charms against the undead. I'd have to wait until you didn't suspect me."

I smiled, feeling that I could trust him. My intuition was rarely wrong. I finally relaxed enough to talk with Gamaliel about the city packs, and the music of Bore Hunter, and the other new band, Acid Reign, that was hitting the scenes.

I realized as we talked that my perceptions, and old legends of the undead had clouded my view to the person beneath the vampyr image. Gamaliel

talked warmly. I was fascinated by this friendly vampyr. This man could literally give me the kiss of death and yet he seemed at ease, lighthearted. But then, he could be. It wasn't he that had to worry about having his life stolen.

The evening passed and Gamaliel and I danced, sucked into the desperate ambiance of people trying to forget the world. We were still talking when Keg came over and said, "Time to run, folks. I need my beauty rest." I found myself attracted to this man, this dead ... thing. He seemed so alive, and yet, again I found preconceived warnings that my people had given coloring my views.

I pulled on my voluminous, many-pocketed coat and patted it to make sure everything was there. Gamaliel stood and pulled on his shiny coat. "Look, Agate, I'll walk you to your place. Too many packs out lately."

"I live at Stanley's Green. That's almost an hour from here."

He raised one eyebrow and motioned with his arm toward the door. "I have nothing but time."

It was a tomb outside. The rain had stopped. The only sound was the ever-present hum of the grids overhead. We walked down the quiet crumbling roadway, well away from the cryptlike depths of abandoned buildings. Neither of us talked, our bootheels the only living sound.

Suddenly I whirled, the sense of someone watching too strong to ignore. Behind us, emerging from a doorway, were two Gorgon pack members. Their fibril hair writhed about their shoulders. They smiled carbon steel smiles and razor nails glinted in the streelight. I looked around as Gamaliel turned to face them.

Quickly, I pulled the stiletto and wand from my coat. I waved the wand

through the air in a pattern of pentacles and chanted a warding against the Gorgons' hypno-sonic stares. I thumbed the safety on the laser stiletto. The blade hummed and the edge of white light lit my hand.

Gamaliel calmly fished a leather band from his pocket and tied back his hair. "I suggest you hunt somewhere else."

The female Gorgon, her hair ending in arrow-like points, laughed. "Hey, the man's walking his meat."

The other one moved a step forward. "Don't be greedy. There's plenty to share."

And then they were upon us. It happened as fast as lightning, and I managed one stab at the male before Gamaliel kicked him flat, then slashed through the throat of the woman. He bent over the man whose chest he'd crushed. The Gorgon wheezed and moaned. The smell of charred flesh and metallic blood tainted the air.

Gamaliel turned back to me, his lips drawn back from his fangs. He growled, "Turn away. You won't want to watch."

"But, what—"

"Turn away," he snapped, and I did. But I wanted to watch, like a moth drawn to the deadly flame. Saliva filled my mouth; I felt like vomiting at the thought of him sucking up the warm life-blood. There was a part of me that said, *this is taboo*, and another part that said, *you can watch; you're not doing it*. I resisted the urge to look.

I jumped when Gamaliel touched my shoulder. He urged me on, saying nothing.

Just before we entered the green I turned to Gamaliel and said, "Did you have to—"

"Look, you knew what I was. They would have killed us. How do you suppose I feed?" He was angry, but I was scared.

"I saw you drink brosia."

The anger left him and he sighed. "Yes, I can drink and eat regular food but my nutrition must be from blood. Oh." He stopped. "I see. Agate," he touched my face softly. "I swear I will never harm you. I only take from those who would do others harm; the evil ones, the flesh packs. Please, trust me."

"Yes, I do," and realized I meant it.

We stopped in front of the door to my cube. Trying to hide the lingering dread of the Gorgon encounter, I bravely invited him in. He declined, saying, "No, it is late and I would rather that you're totally comfortable with my presence. But I would like to talk to you again, if I may."

We agreed to meet at the quieter Schrödinger's Box the following night. I slept deep, and dreamt of walking through tombs, searching, searching, and always behind me someone wailing, "Come back, come back."

It wasn't until our third time together that Gamaliel revealed the extent of his sense of humor. We were sitting on the steps of the old gallery, talking.

"Oh, I brought something for you that I got last night." He dug through his pockets and pulled something out and dropped it in my lap. A red tongue and an eyeball lay shinily on my coat.

I squeaked and jumped up, realizing at the same moment that they were very obvious rubber toys. Gamaliel laughed so hard he nearly rolled down the steps. I slapped him. "Idiot," and had to laugh too. It dispelled my last visions of contemptuous vampyrs.

"You're a very undignified vampyr, you know that?"

He just smirked. I touched his shoulder. "Gama? Would you show me where you live?"

He tilted his head, thought for a moment, and said, "All right."

We walked along crumbling streets, and Gamaliel clasped my hand. I didn't say anything but looked up at him. He looked straight ahead, his head tilted as if listening. I bit my lip but continued to hold his hand. It was warm, not as warm as a living person's, but not the cold of the crypt that I had been expecting.

"What..."

"Shh." He continued to listen.

I looked at the stunted, gnarled trees that lined these streets. Their leaves were few, warped like heated plastic. There had to be strong magic going down to keep them even this alive. I realized we were in Shaughnessy; large houses sprawled across crisp brown grass. Some homes were of stone and others, weather-stripped wood. The ritz used to live here in the twentieth century and it made sense that any ritz left would still live in the spacious homes.

We walked up the cobblestone steps to a house with a turret. The windows were still intact and the door was reinforced with embellished steel. Gamaliel opened the door and let me enter first. If I was expecting tomblike colors and velvet drapes, I was completely surprised. The place was furnished with soft couches, paintings and very little else. Everything numbed my eyes with bright shades of green and yellow.

"Ugh, it's bright in here."

Gamaliel smiled and bolted the door. "It's too depressing otherwise. But the whole place isn't done in these colors. Here, I'll show you." He led me up a dark wooden staircase. The second floor was more subdued but not somber; the colors ranged through red, green and brown, like a twentieth century forest in fall.

Flustered, imagining Gamaliel dragging me into his home and keeping

them chained in the basement. There was no evidence, but still I quivered, mortal jelly, at what he may have done here. "Very impressive," I said.

He stared down the hall and said, "I am not very old but I was able to find this place before the collapse destroyed too many homes. Except for fortifying, I've had little to repair." Then he turned suddenly and kissed me, holding my shoulders.

Surprised, I looked at him and he stopped, confused.

He dropped his hands. "I'm sorry, Agate. I thought ... I hoped. I'm sorry. I wanted you to like me."

"Wait, Gama, I do." I touched his face and dropped my hand. "I do. Why do you think I've spent this time with you?" Why indeed? The lies we tell ourselves. My heart pounded—fear moved like a moist worm into my throat. I swallowed and said, "I do care, very much." Then I kissed him back. The kiss blossomed, grew to many more and then into gentle caresses. He picked me up and carried me to his bedroom. My body responded to his and I clung to him.

We lay, heated by dozens and dozens of candles in his room, but the heat we gave off dimmed them in comparison. Light glittered back from mirrors and windows like thousands of knowing eyes. Tears of sweat flecked our skin.

Gamaliel's flesh shone like a bank of snow against my brown flank. He licked warmly at my neck, my arms, my breasts. I vibrated from his caresses, expecting at any moment to feel the thin sharp bite of his teeth. It made my passion hotter, stronger, thinking that this might be my last act. And I wanted it, I didn't care, to be pulled down and taken at the height of intimacy. What more could I want, taken body and soul?

It was a feeling, not a conscious thought, and it wasn't until years later that I understood what I had wanted.

Later, much later, we lay curled into one another. Gamaliel murmured into my hair. "It is the worst part of this sort of life; the loneliness. So many people fear to be near me and can never relax. There are so many old world legends, and everyone has preconceived ideas that mold all their views. And my own kind," he laughed bitterly. "They are the worst; egotistical, competitive, jealous. They're happy to perpetrate the image of fear; they love the power, but I don't. I want to love a person."

I turned and looked at him. "Oh, Gama, I don't fear you." I feared myself, my lack of control, and his temptation.

We continued to see each other. Something was happening to me inside that I didn't like; a distorted pearl growing bigger, malignant. Something weighed me down, fought me, changed me. I brooded and provoked fights with Gamaliel, daring him to strike me, to lash out and drain my life. But he wouldn't. He looked at me, hurt.

"Why are you doing this, Agate? Why do you want to fight?"

I snarled, "Do you think it just takes one to fight?"

"No," he said calmly. "No, I don't." And he had turned away.

One night at his place we made love and I finally lay subdued beside him. My mind still roiled and I had grown temperamental over the weeks, afraid of what I wanted and didn't want. The big problem; I didn't know what I wanted, nor why I was angry.

I lay thinking of Gamaliel's long life and my relatively short one. I was more than a universe away from him. He murmured something, kissed my eyes,

my mouth and nipped lightly at the flesh of my neck.

I gasped and returned to myself. Trembling, I felt a yearning to bare my neck—abandon soul and flesh to his caresses. In that moment, quicker than light, I murmured a Rom incantation against vampyrs. He yelped as light arced from my skin to his. An acrid smell filled my nostrils.

Pulling back, Gamaliel hissed, fangs flashing deadly. "How dare you! Have you no trust?" he bellowed. He turned and slashed the stuffed chair beside the bed and kicked it across the floor. It crashed into the wall and glass tinkled from the broken window.

I sat up trembling, afraid that I would die now.

Anguish cracked his voice. "I love you, I would never, never drain your blood! Don't you know that by now?"

Shaken, I knelt where I was, knocking a candle over as I reached for him in haste. "I know, I'm sorry. I w-wasn't thinking. Gama." I tried to reach beneath the red-rimming of his eyes. "I'm sorry. I was scared of my own reactions. I wanted to die. I—I wanted you to take me."

I heard him mumble something about mortals and I flashed resentment. He reached, hesitated, then grabbed my arm. I had eliminated the warding.

"Agate, I could make you vampyr. I can give you the kiss of eternal life. Won't you take it; be eternal with me? You need never fear again and we could be together."

"No, I can't, I can't." I shook my head, trying to escape the black pit that threatened to swallow and mold me into something dark, too powerful. "I—I—my people, we had strong taboos against the undead. Now I know why. I'm sorry. I'm too afraid. I don't think I would be like

you, so noble. There is so much power. The Rom knew this, knew it could get out of hand and I never understood it, until now. I don't think I want eternal life."

"Why? Isn't it just a lesser of two evils? We would be eternally together. And there are ways to kill us. You can end it when you want."

I clasped my arms, cold in spite of the candle flames. I wanted it so badly. To live forever, to wield such power. I shook my head, crying, "I—I can't, Gama." I realized then, right to my frozen marrow, that I could never love him properly, for there was another to love.

There were tears in his eyes. He sensed that it was more than his offer that I denied. "Don't you see?" I whispered. "It is death I court, that I am infatuated with. I've used you to get close to death.

To be kissed by you, to be loved by you was like loving death—embracing it. I'm so sorry—so sorry." I hugged him tightly now. "I do care for you, Gama, but every time I'd be with you I would see my death and be tempted by it. But the power, the power is too much."

"No!" He tore himself away from me and fled into the night. I didn't wait for his return. I dressed and left. I had gone for the darker lover while Gamaliel had tried to lead the life of the living, not the undead.

We remained friends, albeit distantly. I could not stand to be around Gamaliel and see the hurt in his eyes. *Respect the dead and they won't come back to haunt you.* He walked as if wounded, and I knew I had dealt the most deadly blow to a dead man trying to live. •

About "Lover's Triangle": A world of cybernetically enhanced gangs and vampires, and superstitious Gypsies. Magic rubbing shoulders with science—an uneasy alliance. A Gypsy and a vampire—an unlikely love. This is the world "Lover's Triangle," originally part of my novel (currently undergoing an overhaul). I removed the story, but used it to explore a love that crosses boundaries in a way that's unexpected—and it looks at what strange fruit is born from superstition and thinking of people as stereotypes.

COLLEEN ANDERSON is a member of SFWA, a graduate of the Clarion Writers workshop, and was awarded the Shari Meakin scholarship for writing. Her writing has appeared in such publications as *ON SPEC*, *The Round Table*, *Starline*, *Amazing Tales*, and *Tesseract*³. New work is forthcoming in *Into the Midnight Sun* (a Canadian anthology). Colleen writes in all genres: some SF, fantasy, dark fantasy, magic realism, and horror. As well, she has been doing copyediting for Byron Preiss in New York. At present, she is working on a novel, short fiction, poetry, and is still finding time to sleep.

ILLUSTRATOR: Peter Francis lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with wife Luisa and an insane cat. He has been exhibiting his work at conventions for over ten years, and has contributed to several magazines.

ASK MR. SCIENCE

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your questions to Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

Ms. SS, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q I hear the sun is cooling. Should I stock up on sleeping bags?

A You should indeed stock up on sleeping bags, but not for the reason given. As you state in another portion of your letter, you are a science fiction fan, and there are no rich science fiction fans. You will soon be unable to afford to live in the Vancouver area.

Ms. BW, of Napean, ON, asks:

Q Why are so many very intelligent men bald?

A The brain, of course, enlarges as it absorbs knowledge. This in turn causes pressure on the inside of the skull which is transmitted to the underside of the scalp through special vessicles, present only in the skulls of males. Female skulls are able to contain this pressure without damage to the brain. The result, in men, is loss of hair in proportion to the amount of knowledge possessed by the owner of the brain. This is why Mr. Science has created, for those of limited knowledge coupled with a large amount of money, the Mr. Science Hair Removal System For Men, for that intellectual appearance.

Ms. DM, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q Does Mr. Science believe that it will be possible to clone dinosaurs from fossil DNA?

A Yes. At the current rate of increase of the knowledge and practice of genetics, dinosaurs will live, once again, by 2023. The problems related to cloning large, carnivorous dinosaurs were adequately dealt with in the movie *Jurassic Park*. Not described were the problems associated with raising large, herbivorous dinosaurs.

What would be required if apatasours (brontosaurus) are successfully cloned and sold in pet stores? First, a potential owner must have either a VERY large and strong house, or a more ordinary house with a very large back yard, surrounded by a twenty meter tall, steel reinforced concrete fence. Second, it is questionable at this time as to whether a brontosaurus can be house-broken. If such an attempt is successful the owner must be prepared to obtain Bronto Litter, made of shredded shag rugs and ground up tires, in truly prodigious quantities. There may be another danger in this process: not even the most placid herbivorous dinosaur is likely to take kindly to being hit across the snout with a rolled up newspaper. And finally, when the pet has lived out his fifty or so years, what does one do with the body?



The Last Run of the *Donovan's Folly*

Leah Silverman

illustrated by Mark A. Savona

Br'ushana was licking her hands again.

Leo could hear it easily outside the small bridge of *Donovan's Folly*. It sounded like cloth tearing. He steeled himself before he floated in.

"Good morning," he said dryly. She snorted in reply, barely glancing at him over her long fingers. Between licks she was checking their progress against a map of the stars.

Trying to ignore her, Leo settled into the pilot's chair and strapped himself in. He sighed and activated his console. "Any adjustments?" Br'ushana's fur rippled slightly. "No?" Leo asked. "Good." He turned away and began to check the ship's functions, starting with the proximity sensors in the hull. Most of them were working for once, and he smiled slightly. Then his eyes drifted over to the B'vanshu. Listening to her licking was like chewing on metal. Bits of her dried skin were floating away with each rasp, and Leo eased sideways to avoid any getting trapped in his hair. He watched their slow progress up to the air vent; the entire filtration system was probably clogged with dried skin by now. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

"I saw the ghost again," he said.

The B'vanshu's huge eyes rolled towards him. "When the dead are taken they do not come back. They cannot fight the winds in the second world. I have told you this." She began using her teeth to nibble off strips of old skin between her fingers.

"On Earth they *can* come back," Leo said. "I've told you *that*, too." He looked back down at the console. All four air-locks were secure, including the one they had been forced to close off with an emergency seal. No new trouble there. He leaned back and turned towards her. "This is something like the fourth time I've seen it now. I just wish I knew what it was doing here."

Br'ushana's console beeped as she shut it off. She continued her hand-cleaning,

taking great swipes with her long tongue. "I think your head wound has put dust in your eyes."

Which meant she thought he'd gone crazy. "I'm not insane, Br'ushana. I know what I saw." She didn't answer him; the silence stretched out and he turned his attention back to the systems check. Engine one had continuously failed all firing tests, despite Br'ushana's repeated attempts to fix it. That meant that he would have to adjust the output of two and three for when they arrived at Lighthouse, to keep the ship from colliding with the space station.

"Almost everyone on Earth believes in ghosts," he said suddenly. "You think we all have 'dust in our eyes,' then?"

"I have not met everyone on Earth."

Leo clenched his teeth. "Yeah, well, I've met one too many bloody B'vanshus," he muttered, too low-pitched for Br'ushana to hear. The console sounded under his palm and he switched it over to the internal systems. They were still functioning at near normal levels, except that Br'ushana had been forced to navigate manually and such luxuries as hot water were temperamental at best. The console beeped again to signal that the check had finished, and Leo made the necessary adjustments to the engines before he shut it off. Nothing to do now for the next twelve hours; meanwhile the ShipBrain would alert them if anything serious happened. He smiled tiredly and stretched in his chair.

Br'ushana eyed his inert console then looked at him. "Did you check the shelter?"

Leo's smile dropped. He rolled his eyes as he began unbuckling the chair-straps. "Only for the twentieth time, Br'ushana. It's *fine*. No leaks, no cracks, no weak spots, nothing. Just the same as

it was twelve hours ago."

Br'ushana tilted her head slightly, and gave him a slow blink of her eyes, the clear membrane sliding up from the lower lid. "I did not see you check it."

Leo just looked at her for a long moment, then gave a small grunt of disgust and strapped himself back into his chair. He keyed the console back on, just hard enough to make the old machine beep in protest.

"Okay," he sighed, "you want to see me check it again, I'll check it again." He pulled up a specified systems check, and ran through a thorough examination of the shelter. "You watching, Br'ushana? Look: Like I said, no leaks, no cracks, nothing. All right?"

Br'ushana nodded, a gesture she only accomplished with difficulty. "We will enter a solar flare storm within nearly three of your days, L'eoh, two of mine. I do not wish to die from radiation because you are preoccupied with things that do not exist."

Leo twisted his chair around until he was facing her again. "I told you. I know what I saw."

When it was obvious she was not going to answer, Leo switched the console off, snapped apart his buckle and shot up to the ceiling. He snatched at the drag-bars to pull himself out of the bridge. "I cannot *believe*," he said to himself, crawling hand over hand to his quarters, "that I thought we might actually be starting to get along."

The metal bulkhead was cold against his palms, and Leo thought about going back to the bridge and adjusting the internal temperatures again. Then he remembered that Br'ushana would still be in there, trying to fix the navigation controls. He decided it wasn't worth it.

The door to his quarters registered his

hand print, but he had to bang it twice to get it to slide open. Once inside, Leo grabbed his jacket from where he'd left it against the ceiling, and with a bit of twisting got it on. Then he pulled himself down the bulkhead until he was able to buckle himself into his narrow cot. He lay back and thought of all the reasons why he should have refused this job. He didn't need the money, that was one thing. He'd just come off a go-and-back run as a surrogate pilot aboard the flagship of a major freighter line. Eight months to Lighthouse, a week's leave orbiting Newhome, eight months back to Outstation; the pay had been excellent. He should have caught a skyboat down to Earth and stayed there for a while. Instead, he'd only stayed on Outstation a week and signed up for the next freighter out without even seeing his home planet. Just another cramp-crazy pilot, of course, but what a winning freighter he'd picked this run! That was another reason he shouldn't have taken this job, but then that's what he got for piloting a fifty year-old dog-class troop transport. From what he had gleaned on Outstation, this ship, originally called the *Bulldog*, was bought on its way to be junked about thirty years ago. The new owner made the transport over into a freighter and renamed it *Solar Wind*. *Solar Wind* had managed some thirty runs between Earth and Newhome over the next twenty years, then was sold again to a cruise line, who converted it into an emergency supply ship then sold it five years later to a J.F. Donovan. By then its internal and external systems had been upgraded, converted, and repaired at least a hundred times and the poor transport, now called *Donovan's Folly*, wasn't much more than steerable scrap. So J.F. Donovan sent it on one last voy-

age: Newhome and its scrapyards. A pretty normal lifeline for a ship, overall, except that along the way *Donovan's Folly* had acquired a ghost.

The first time Leo had seen it, he was in his quarters. He had woken suddenly out of a deep sleep, convinced that someone was watching him. All he saw was a white form, hovering almost perfectly between the deck and ceiling, human in shape. His first thought was that it had been some kind of malfunction of the internal sensors: they were somehow reflecting back his own image instead of just registering it in the Ship-Brain. Later, he had run specific systems checks for an hour, but surprisingly couldn't find anything wrong. That had been about six days out of the solar flare storm.

The second time Leo had seen the ghost was in the engine room, but just for a second. He had been trying to help Br'ushana fix the faulty engine, holding tools for her. She was on her back half-swallowed by one of the larger sections, making small hissing sounds as she worked. Her feet, with long, lightly-furred toes, were holding fast to a handful of wires and tubing. One of her translucent wings was unfurled, resting against the machine like a veined blanket. Leo would hand her the tools when she held out her hand for them, and make sure the rest didn't float away. He was bored and irritated; the ghost came when he turned to look at the other end of the room.

It had been white, like a faraway star, and now he could see that it was a slight figure: narrow in the shoulders with vague outlines of long arms clasped in front. The rest he couldn't make out clearly, but it was obvious that he was looking at a woman. Her hair was

brown and very short like most stellars wore it, so that even in non-grav it wouldn't get in their eyes. She was just looking at him, her head tilted slightly as if studying. Her eyes, Leo would remember for days after, had been terribly, terribly sad.

Then Leo had grabbed for an engine part, to pull himself back away from her, and had accidentally put his hand on Br'ushana's wing.

The B'vanshu gave a shriek that sounded like grating metal, a noise that would have cut through even the winds on her home world. She hit him and he spun around like a top, full circle in his harness. His legs shot up towards the ceiling and he smacked the back of his head hard on some part of the machine. He had been knocked out immediately, and came to hours later, strapped to the cot in his cabin. Br'ushana was holding ice to the back of his head, clinging to the sides of his cot with both feet. The first thing he saw were her eyes, the membrane pulled completely up over them.

"The ShipBrain said you will have a bump," she said, "a swelling under the skin."

Leo blinked, trying to focus. "Ow," he said.

Br'ushana whipped the ice pack away as if she had been burning him. It spiraled into the wall. "I did not intend ... to hit you so hard, L'eoh." She said. "But I have told you not to touch my wings."

Leo tried, but he couldn't tell if she was apologizing or not. "My head is killing me." He felt the back of his head; there was already an ugly hard lump there, and his fingers came away with a smear of blood. "Is my skull broken?"

Br'ushana's eyelids slid down then

back up quickly. "I do not know if your head is killing you, but it is not broken: the sensors told me you would be all right."

Leo's mouth twitched. "Yeah, but are the sensors working right?"

"I do not know," Br'ushana said. "It is your job to fix them."

"I know," Leo rolled his eyes and was instantly so dizzy he thought he might pass out. He gripped hard to the side of his cot until the spell passed, wondering if Br'ushana had actually killed him and he just didn't know it yet. "But ... I still think something may be wrong with them. I saw something strange down there."

"Before you pulled my wing?"

"Yeah... It was a woman... A human..." Leo looked up into the B'vanshu's eyes again, wondering how organs so large could be so expressionless. "I think I saw a ghost."

Br'ushana snorted, and Leo's forehead was pattered with skin particles before they gently floated away. "You did not see that."

Leo wiped his forehead, trying to move slowly. He winced. "Did you see something, then? You saw it too?"

"No, L'eoh. I saw a *Shr'ethx* grabbing at my most-needed limb. There was nothing else to see."

Leo remembered in time not to shake his head. "No. There was a woman there. Dressed in white. Her hair was brown like mine... I think it's a ghost, 'Sha. I swear I saw her."

Br'ushana's fur rippled. "You say that a ghost is the energy life back in the first world without the body life, yes? This I know cannot be: when the dead are taken, they are swept whole into the second world. They never come back; the winds are too strong against them."

Leo's head was hurting almost too much to talk now. "But Earth winds ... aren't the same." With his eyes closed, he could hear Br'ushana moving back away from him, preparing to leave.

"When they are dead, the winds are the same," she said. Leo imagined her floating up to the ceiling, still trying instinctively to glide where there were no winds to glide on. "You must rest. I will come back later to see to you. You may die, perhaps, if you take pills for any pain. Do not do it."

It occurred to him, later, that those words were the most concern she had ever expressed for him.

Hours later, when the ship's clock was registering night according to Earth time, Leo saw the ghost again. By now he was almost looking for it, waiting for her. She was clearer than before, almost solid down to her feet, but her expression hadn't changed. And she was still watching him, as if she had just asked him a question and expected an answer.

"What is it?" Leo asked. "What do you want?" But she said nothing, hovering exactly in the center of his cabin; apparently weightlessness could not affect the dead.

Leo licked his lips, wondering why he wasn't afraid. He thought about snapping off his harness, floating out to touch her, but couldn't bring himself to do it. "What do you want?" he asked again. He was wondering if he even existed for her, if she was even something that could be communicated with.

"Do you need help?" he asked. But all the ghost did was smile at him, before she disappeared. Leo wiped a sudden rime of sweat from his upper lip, though his head was clear and free of pain. It was four days before they would hit the storm.

Three days later, in time for the next systems check, Leo pulled his way into the bridge, strapped himself in quickly and turned on the console. He didn't bother to see if Br'ushana had noticed him.

"How is the shelter?" she asked.

"Fine," Leo answered, not looking up. "I'm just checking it now. Everything's working."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely." He ran through the other ship's systems, verified that everything but engine one was working adequately, then switched databases instead of shutting the machine off.

"You know, 'Sha," he said, half to himself, "I've been thinking. The ghost is wearing a white uniform, right—?"

"There is none."

"—Well, it occurred to me that maybe I can use it to find out who she was." He typed hurriedly, calling up a localized database of the complete ship's logs. "Do emergency supply ship crews wear white?"

"I do not know." Br'ushana was staring at him now, turned completely away from her console to face him. "This is not healthy, L'eoh. Your head injury has damaged your brain, perhaps."

Leo shook his head, barely listening. "You said I was fine."

"I am not an expert."

"It doesn't even hurt that much," he said, "and I don't have dust in my eyes, either... Wait," he held up his hand. "Hang on a sec..." He had scrolled back through the logs to when *Donovan's Folly* had been the *Bulldog*. "Wow... did you know this ship was in the Xanthori wars?"

"I was aware of that."

"Yeah...it was built right after the war started, to bring soldiers over to New-

home." He looked up and at Br'ushana. "They were kept in coldsleep. It took two years to get there from Earth back then." He began reading again, excited, but a few lines later the screen went blank. He tried calling up the logs again, but so much of the data space had been requisitioned for the newer systems, there was nothing left to find. "Damn," he said, "all right..." He shut the console off and turned to the B'vanshu. "At least we know she wasn't on the *Solar Wind*, because private freighter crews don't wear uniforms. So which ship was she on ... ?"

"I must go," Br'ushana said. She unstrapped herself and pushed away from him. "I cannot listen to this." A soft trail of dried skin followed her, like a comet's tail.

Leo ignored her, thinking. He worried at his lower lip. "All right," he said to himself, "so where do they wear white uniforms?" Then his eyes widened and he sat up. "She was the medic," he said softly. She would have been on the *Bulldog*, sent along to look after the soldiers in coldsleep. The navy medics wore white. They were the only ones who did.

He was going to tell Br'ushana when he heard a long, terrible scream like metal grating metal. Immediately he snapped off his harness and started scrambling across the bridge's ceiling. *She's caught her wing in the door*, he thought as he clambered along the bulkhead towards her quarters, but when he got there her door was completely shut tight. He punched in his emergency security code, then wrenched the door open when it wasn't sliding aside fast enough. He shot inside and nearly collided with Br'ushana. She was wailing like a raid siren, eyes wild behind their

lids. The instant she saw Leo she grabbed on to him, wrapping her arms and legs around his waist and chest. Her grip was so tight he thought his ribs might crack.

"What happened?!" he asked her. "Sha, what's wrong?!" He could barely hear himself with the noise she was making. Br'ushana was too upset to answer, so he just let her hold on to him until she calmed down enough to speak.

"*Shrakah*," she choked out finally. She could barely pronounce the word.

"I don't understand," Leo said, "what does that mean?" Then he realized what it meant. "Did you see her? The woman in white?"

"Yes!" Br'ushana made a small whine of terror and tried to press herself closer to him. Her fur was getting up his nose.

"It's just a ghost, 'Sha," Leo said, stroking the fur down her back. "Just like I said. It can't hurt you."

"No!" The sound almost broke his eardrum. "Not ghost. No ghost. They are not ..."

"But that's what you saw," Leo insisted. "It's nothing to be afraid of—"

"Not a ghost!" Br'ushana grabbed him so hard he lost air from his lungs. "Ghosts cannot fight the winds," she said, gasping the words out. "*Shrakah* can. It is *Shrakah*. Demon."

That night, with one Earth day to go before they were in the solar flare storm, Br'ushana insisted that she could not sleep alone. She had been following Leo around the entire day, refusing to go into any part of the ship unless he was with her. All she had been able to tell him about the *Shrakah* was that they did not breathe and that they caused unimaginable misery, mostly by tearing people apart and eating them, wings first. Unlike the living and the dead, no winds

could stop them.

Leo had managed to convince her not to share his own cot, at least, but she had only been nestled in the cot above his a few minutes and already there was a cloud of skin particles floating around her. She had started licking her hands again after Leo had pried her off him in her cabin; it reminded him of how some nervous humans bite their nails.

"Do you have to do that?" Leo asked.

Br'ushana nibbled off a swath of skin before answering. "Do humans not like to be clean?"

Leo rolled his eyes. "Of course we do. It's just that noise is driving me crazy."

"You are already crazy," she said. "You did not even know it was *Shrakah* on the ship. You thought it was a ghost." Leo could practically hear her shudder as she spoke the word.

"It is a ghost," he said. "There's no such thing as demons."

"You saw it," she said. "How can you say there is no such thing if you saw it?"

"Because..." Leo sighed. "Never mind." He rolled over so that he was facing the bulkhead. "Good night, Br'ushana. Let me know if you need anything."

"I hope I will not, L'eoh. Good night." Leo blinked in the darkness; He hadn't expected her to answer him.

During the morning's shift, Leo checked the shelter's shielding several times, knowing that the same evening they would have to be using it. It would have been easier without Br'ushana, but the B'vanshu refused to leave him. More than once he had to ask her to move away, at least a short distance, so he could work. She even followed him to the other end of the ship, when he went to check the shelter from the inside. She

held onto the grab bars on the low ceiling, shedding bits of skin every time her fur rippled.

"Is it needed to stay here so long, L'eoh?" Br'ushana asked.

"I have to make sure nothing's wrong," Leo said. "We're going to have to be here all night."

Br'ushana glanced behind her at a badly-lit corner, then moved closer to him. "Why have you not checked here earlier?"

"I did—" Leo said, "—before we left Outstation. It was fine. It still is." He shook his head. "Honestly, 'Sha, it's like you think I've never been on a starship before."

"You have never been on a starship with a *Shrakah* before," she said.

"You know, you're really starting to get annoying with that," Leo said. He pushed himself away from the ceiling and gracefully snagged a grab bar on the floor, hooking his foot through it so he could stand and face Br'ushana above him. "You never believed me when I said it was a ghost before, and now that you've actually seen it, you still don't believe me. It's just a ghost, okay? Some Earth person died here and their energy's still floating around, that's all. I mean, it's not even the ghost of a B'vanshu, so how could it be a demon?" He waited for her response, watching flecks of her skin float up into the air vent.

She licked the back of her hand before she spoke. "*Shrakah* can change their form, that is how they lure their victims." She paused. "I am sorry I am annoying to you." She hesitated, then began pulling herself out of the shelter. "I will not annoy you more."

Leo blinked. He had actually hurt her feelings. "You don't annoy me that much, Br'ushana..." he said, but she

was already gone. "Hey!" Leo called after her, "didn't I annoy you before? C'mon...!" He groaned in irritation. "Goddamned oversensitive superstitious bag of dandruff..." He launched himself back to the ceiling, following her out of the shelter. As he switched from the ceiling grab bars to the ones on the bulkhead he was still trying to decide if he should go after her and try to apologize. He paused outside her quarters before he went on to his own, wondering if she would be frightened all by herself. He went to knock, then shook his head and pulled himself away. It was only a ghost, after all, and he'd barely even seen it since he'd whacked his head. If Br'ushana was scared, she knew where to find him. He pulled himself a few bars away, then stopped, turned and went back, using his emergency code again to open her door. A few flakes of skin drifted out, along with the sounds of a B'vanshu snoring.

"Sweet dreams, furbag," he said quietly. He keyed the door shut.

Half an hour before the ship entered the solar flare storm, Br'ushana and Leo went into the shelter and sealed themselves in. Leo was sitting cross-legged on the deck, harnessed to the grab bars and leaning against the bulkhead. He had brought a sleeping bag and attached it to the wall for later that night, so at least he would be warm if not truly comfortable. Br'ushana was at the other end of the shelter, hanging down with her thin legs hooked through the grab bars. Leo knew that B'vanshus normally slept like that, with their wings curled up and their backs to the wind; he wondered if she wanted to sleep so soon, then decided she was probably sulking. She hadn't said anything to him at all that afternoon, not even to chastise him. Leo sighed and

picked up one of the bookscreens he'd brought to kill time with, expecting a long night ahead. Although he was certainly used to spending huge tracts of time by himself by now, somehow, with the B'vanshu's large eyes fixed on him, he felt lonelier than any time he could remember since they had left Outstation.

He put the screen down. "Do you want something?"

Br'ushana blinked. "I do not wish to annoy you."

"C'mon, 'Sha," Leo said, "you're not annoying me, all right? What is it?"

Her eyes blinked slowly twice, as if she were mulling over his words. "I am concerned," she said finally. "I do not like this place."

Leo looked around them, at the small storage lockers, the low ceiling and the B'vanshu in the otherwise empty shelter. "Me neither," he admitted. "At least we're only here one night."

Br'ushana nodded, then glanced around her. "There is no place to hide," she said, "what if the *Shrakah* comes?"

Leo sighed in resignation. "Then I'll protect you," he said seriously. "I won't let it get you."

Br'ushana's fur rippled, signifying disagreement. "You cannot do that, L'eoh," she said. "I cannot ask so much of you."

Leo shrugged, smiling. "I won't let a demon eat my navigator. Besides, it's not—"

The alarm sounded, ripping like a scream from one end of the ship to the other. They had entered the storm. Leo looked up at the blank ceiling; all the hundreds of system checks came down to this. "Okay, shelter," he whispered, "do your stuff."

The alarm shut off, and the ship was filled with a sudden, intense silence.

Br'ushana screamed.

Her shriek of terror was so loud Leo thought it could crack the hull. Before he could react she had scrambled along the grab bars and had climbed onto him from above, knocking him sideways and wrapping him completely in her arms and legs. She pressed so close against him it was as if she was trying to bury herself in his body for protection, gripping so hard he gasped in pain. She was crying in terror, sobbing in her native language. All Leo could make out was the word *Shrakah*, repeated over and over again.

He tried to disentangle himself from her—it was difficult to breathe—but only managed to push her enough so that she crawled around to his back. She pressed her face painfully into the back of his neck, and he could feel her shuddering. But at least now he could see. He was looking right at the ghost.

She looked as solid as anyone. There were crosses of red patched on her shoulders.

"It's okay, Br'ushana," Leo said. "It's all right, it won't hurt you." He reached behind his head to the soft fur of her neck and stroked it gently, though his eyes never left the apparition. Br'ushana just whimpered and tightened her grip across his chest. He was beginning to feel as if she would crush his ribs.

The ghost hadn't moved. She was still staring fixedly at Leo, as if waiting for him to do something. "What is it?" he asked, grimacing as Br'ushana pressed deeper into his back.

Deliberately, the ghost looked up at the ceiling, as if she could see through them to the solar flares beyond, the waves of radiation beating at the hull. Her gaze lowered and locked on Leo again. "What?" Leo asked again. She said nothing, her eyes never left his.

"What?" Behind him, Br'ushana whined and shifted around on his back, as if trying to make herself as small as possible. "Please, Br'ushana!" he said to her. "I have to find out..." He paled. "The shelter's not secure," he said softly. The ghost nodded, once.

"Oh God." He could practically feel the radiation leaking into the shelter, like black snakes oozing down the bulkheads and up through the deck. There were emergency suits, he knew, in the lockers on the other side of the cabin. He could have them out in seconds, except that Br'ushana was clinging to him so hard he was trapped, all but unable to move. He had managed to undo his harness, but that was all. "Come on, Br'ushana!" he said. "Let go of me! Get off!" He tried to break her grip, but she only clutched harder, like an uncomprehending child. She looped her slender fingers through his hair and pulled. "All right, that's it." Leo gritted his teeth, reached under one of her arms and took a handful of wing.

The next thing he was aware of was his upper body gently bumping against the ceiling at the other end of the cabin. Br'ushana was shaking him, her eyes huge and very frightened.

"L'eoh!" she shouted, almost deafening him. "Thank the winds I did not kill you!"

He felt he had only been out for seconds, but how much time did they have left? "Br'ushana!" he gasped. "Listen to me! The shelter's leaking! We've got to get into the suits or we'll die!"

She drew back, blinking. "There is radiation here?"

"Yes! Yes, we don't have time—!"

She blinked again, then her body twisted, bringing her feet up and planting them on the ceiling beside him. She

kicked off and pulled him towards the lockers. He grabbed a bar on the bulkhead beside her, almost too drained to do anything but pant and watch. Blood from the back of his head drifted to the air vent in tiny red globes.

Br'ushana pulled out the two emergency suits, thrusting the larger one into his hands.

"Wear this," she said. She watched him fumble for a second with the suit and his weightlessness, then grabbed it from him and put it on him as if he were a young child. She thrust his legs in, pulling it up and helping him slip in his arms. She made sure his suit was sealed and then started putting on her own. Leo had never seen the B'vanshu make such efficient, graceful movements before, not even when she was repairing the engines.

Br'ushana secured her helmet then turned to face him. Her eyes, so large behind the curved plastic, reminded Leo of goldfish he had seen on Outstation. "Are we safe now?" she asked. Her voice sounded tinny and distant, strangely quiet through his helmet-com.

Leo nodded, feeling he might collapse with relief; just let go and float away. "Yeah... We're safe." His words sounded blurred and alien to him. He tapped the plastic of his faceplate. "These suits're brand new—Donovan bought them himself. We're fine."

"That is good," Br'ushana said, then gently took his arm and pulled him back to the bulkhead where his harness was. He let her strap him in. He just wanted to sleep, to escape the newly-awakened pain in his head. The blood from his wound was dripping up his scalp to pool under his helmet; it was starting to itch. He watched numbly as Br'ushana hooked her booted feet through the grab

bars on the deck so she could sit cross-legged beside him. "So we wait, then," she said.

"Yeah," Leo agreed. He glanced over at where his bookscreens were floating, but couldn't summon the energy to retrieve them. He leaned his head back gently until he could feel the helmet bump against the bulkhead, even though it made the blood pool move towards his crown. They rested silently for a while, as if listening for the radiation. Br'ushana was so quiet he thought she had fallen asleep, but then he felt her move in closer next to him. He angled his head down towards her.

"Was it from...the ghost that you knew of the shelter's leaking?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." Leo looked back to where the ghost had been, half-expecting the woman to still be there. He couldn't remember when she had disappeared. "I think it's what killed her," he said. "Medics didn't go into coldsleep, like the soldiers did. There must've been another flare cycle here during one of the *Bulldog's* runs; she would've gone to the shelter for protection, like we did. And died there."

Br'ushana was silent, thinking. "There is no wind here, in space," she said at length. "Perhaps that is why she could leave the second world to warn us."

"Sure," Leo said, smiling slightly. "That's probably it."

Br'ushana gently tilted his head until she was looking into his eyes. "I have hurt you again," she said. "I am sorry for that. But my wing—"

"It's all right," Leo said quickly, trying not to wince. "I knew what was going to happen."

"No," Br'ushana's fur rippled around her forehead. "I am sorry. I have hurt

you, twice, and you have saved my life.”

Leo shrugged, slowly. “You saved mine.”

Br’ushana blinked. “Yes,” she said. “So it is fair, perhaps.”

Leo closed his eyes. His head was throbbing, possibly more painfully than the first time. He could practically feel the second bump forming.

“Sure,” he said. “Fair.”

Br’ushana moved in closer to him, wrapping one of her arms around his waist, but gently. “Good *Shr’ethx*,” she said, and leaned into him, so that her helmet bumped against his side.

“Strong B’vanshu,” Leo smiled. “Sweet dreams.” Slowly, the ship passed through the storm. They slept. •

(To my family, with thanks.)

About “The Last Run of the *Donovan’s Folly*”: I had no idea the ship was haunted when I started this story; my entire inspiration came from the image of a fuzzy alien licking dead skin off her hands. I’m not sure where the ghost came from, but once she was there, the idea was too intriguing to let go. Old houses have ghosts, after all, so why not old starships? And how would an alien react to a ghost? (*Leah Silverman*)

LEAH SILVERMAN is still a student at the University of Toronto, though she is close to making good her escape. This is her fourth Canadian publication.

ILLUSTRATOR: MARK A. SAVONA lives in Toronto. He attended the Etobicoke School for the Arts, and is presently enrolled at Sheridan College. The illustration for “The Last Run of the *Donovan’s Folly*” for *ON SPEC* is his first paid art assignment.

ON Writing:

Heinlein's Rules

Robert J. Sawyer

There are countless rules for writing success, but the most famous ones, at least in the speculative-fiction field, are the five coined by the late, great Robert A. Heinlein.

Heinlein used to say he had no qualms about giving away these rules, even though they explained how you could become his direct competitor, because he knew that almost no one would follow their advice.

In my experience, that's true: if you start off with a hundred people who say they want to be writers, you lose half of the remaining total after each rule—fully half the people who hear each rule will fail to follow it.

I'm going to share Heinlein's five rules with you, plus add a sixth of my own.

Rule One: You Must Write

It sounds ridiculously obvious, doesn't it? But it is a very difficult rule to apply. You can't just talk about wanting to be a writer. You can't simply take courses, or read up on the process of writing, or daydream about someday getting around to it. The *only* way to become a writer is to plant yourself in front of your keyboard and go to work.

And don't you *dare* complain that you don't have the time to write. Real writers *buy* the time, if they can't get it any other way. Take Toronto's Terence M. Green, a high-school English teacher. His third novel, *Shadow of Ashland*, just came out from Tor. Terry takes every fifth year off from teaching without pay so that he can write; most writers I know have made similar sacrifices for their art.

(Out of our hundred original aspirant writers, half will never get around to writing anything. That leaves us with fifty...)

Rule Two: Finish What You Start

You cannot learn how to write without seeing a piece through to its conclusion. Yes, the first few pages you churn out might be weak, and you may be tempted to toss them out. Don't. Press on until you're done. Once you have an overall draft, with a beginning, middle, and end, you'll be surprised at how easy it is to see what works and what doesn't. And you'll never master such things as plot, suspense, or character growth unless you actually construct an entire piece.

On a related point: if you belong to a writers' workshop, don't let people critique your novel a chapter at a time. No one can properly judge a book by a piece lifted out of it at random, and you'll end up with all sorts of pointless advice: "This part seems irrelevant." "Well, no, actually, it's very important a hundred pages from now..."

(Of our fifty remaining potential writers, half will never finish anything—leaving just twenty-five still in the running...)

Rule Three: You Must Refrain From Rewriting, Except to Editorial Order

This is the one that got Heinlein in trouble with creative-writing teachers. Perhaps a more appropriate wording would have been, "Don't tinker endlessly with your story." You can spend forever modifying, revising, and polishing. There's an old saying that stories are never finished, only abandoned—learn to abandon yours.

If you find your current revisions amount to restoring the work to the way it was at an earlier stage, then it's time to push the baby out of the nest.

And although many beginners don't

believe it, Heinlein *is* right: if your story is close to publishable, editors *will* tell you what you have to do to make it salable. *ON SPEC* does this at length, and you'll also get advice from *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Omni*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

(Of our remaining twenty-five writers, twelve will fiddle endlessly, and so are now out of the game. Twelve more will finally declare a piece complete. The twenty-fifth writer, the one who got chopped in half, is now desperately looking for his legs...)

Rule Four: You Must Put Your Story on the Market

This is the hardest rule of all for beginners. You can't simply declare yourself to be a professional writer. Rather, it's a title that must be conferred upon you by those willing to pay money for your words. Until you actually show your work to an editor, you can live the fantasy that you're every bit as good as Guy Gavriel Kay or William Gibson. But having to see if that fantasy has any grounding in reality is a very hard thing for most people to do.

I know one Canadian aspirant writer who managed to delay for two years sending out his story because, he said, he didn't have any American stamps for the self-addressed stamped envelope. This, despite the fact that he'd known dozens of people who went regularly to the States and could have gotten stamps for him, despite the fact that he could have driven across the border himself and picked up stamps, despite the fact that you don't even really need US stamps—you can use International Postal Reply Coupons instead, available at any large post office.

No, it wasn't stamps he was lacking—it was backbone. He was afraid

to find out whether his prose was salable. Don't be a coward: send your story out.

(Of our twelve writers left, half of them won't work up the nerve to make a submission, leaving just six...)

Rule Five: You Must Keep it on the Market Until it Has Sold

It's a fact: work gets rejected all the time. Almost certainly your first submission will be rejected. Don't let that stop you. I've currently got 142 rejection slips in my files; every professional writer I know has stacks of them (the prolific Canadian horror writer Edo van Belkom does a great talk at SF conventions called "Thriving on Rejection" in which he reads samples from the many he's acquired over the years).

If the rejection note contains advice you think is good, revise the story and send it out again. If not, then simply turn the story around: pop it in the mail, sending it to another market. *Keep at it.* My own record for the maximum number of submissions before selling a story is eighteen—but the story did eventually find a good home. (And within days, I'd sold it again to a reprint-only anthology; getting a story in print the first time opens up

whole new markets.)

If your story is rejected, send it out *that very same day* to another market.

(Still, of our six remaining writers, three will be so discouraged by that first rejection that they'll give up writing for good. But three more will keep at it...)

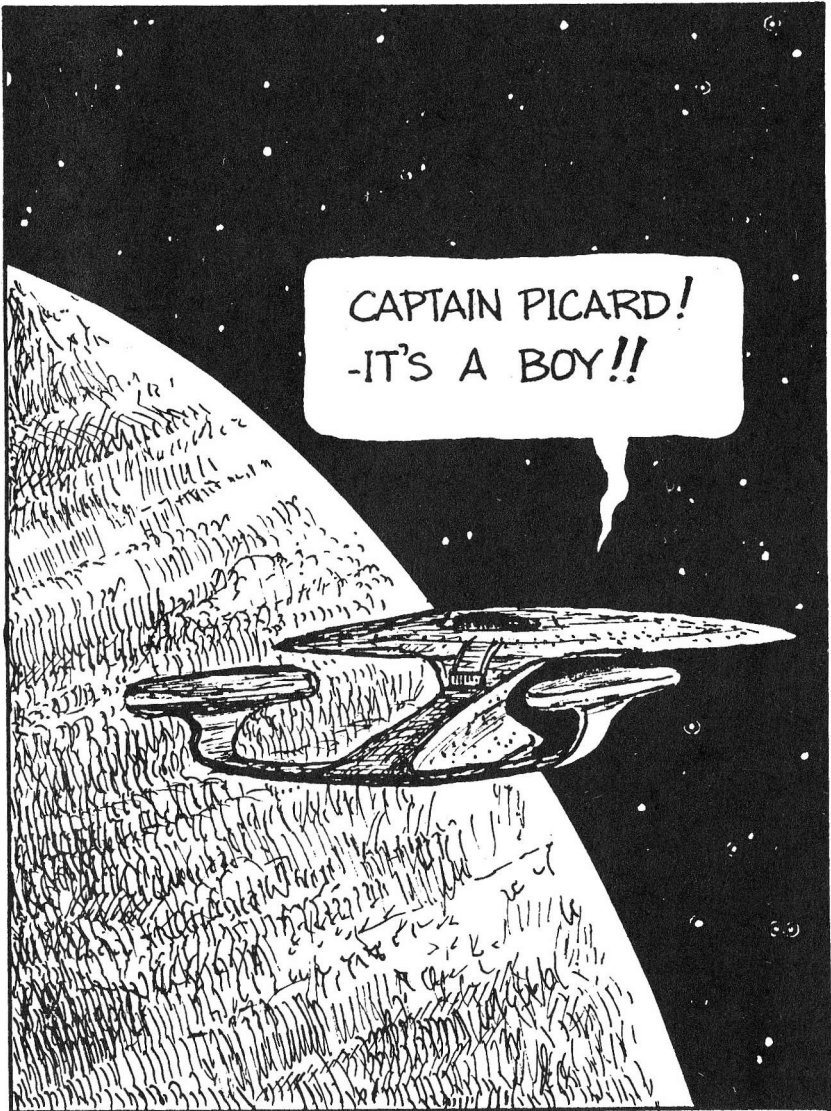
Rule Six: Start Working on Something Else

That's my own rule. I've seen too many beginning writers labour for years over a single story or novel. As soon as you've finished one piece, start on another. Don't wait for the first story to come back from the editor you've submitted it to; get to work on your next project. (And if you find you're experiencing writer's block on your current project, begin writing something new—a real writer can always write *something*.) You must produce a body of work to count yourself as a real working pro.

Of our original hundred wannabe writers, only one or two will follow all six rules. The question is: will you be one of them? I hope so, because if you have at least a modicum of talent and if you live by these six rules, you *will* make it. •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's seventh novel, *Starplex*, will be published in October 1996 by Ace. Rob's earlier novels include *Far-Seer*, *End of an Era*, *The Terminal Experiment*, and the Aurora Award winning *Golden Fleece*. Visit his World Wide Web home page at:

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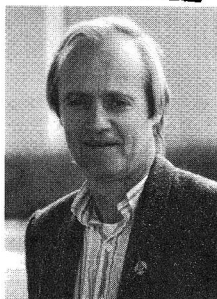
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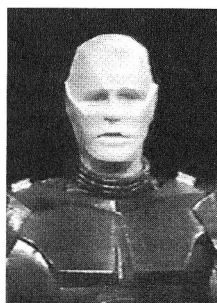
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Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spigel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaike, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
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Theme: Hard SF. Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
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Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakober, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. Art Feature: Peter Francis. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
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