

On·SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing
WINTER 1996

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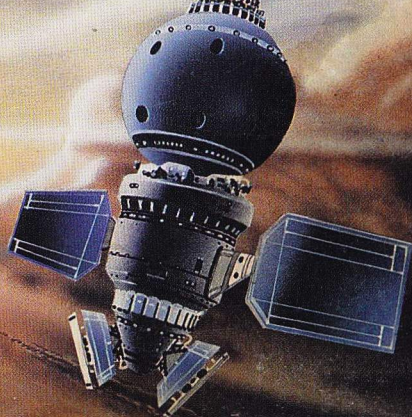
NEW FICTION:

Kate RIEDEL

Michael MIROLLA

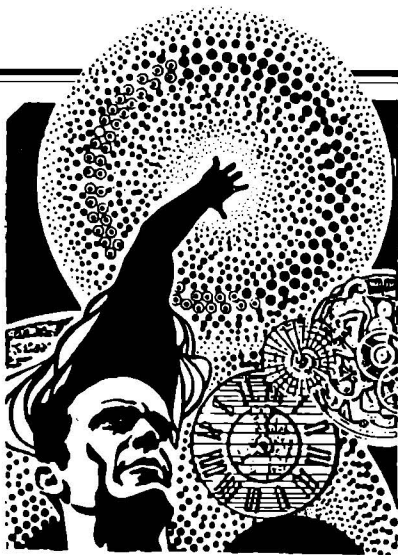
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ON·SPEC

WINTER 1996

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<http://www.greenwoods.com/onspec/>

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ON this Issue

Out of chaos ...

Hazel Sangster Editor

As a returning member of the On Spec editorial collective I asked to be able to do this issue's editorial. Why? Because I am so darned glad to be back. Back in Canada and back with On Spec.

One thing about moving around a lot is that you are often forced to look at things in your life in a new way. While I was living in the U.S. my only connection with *On Spec* was as a subscriber. The magazine arrived in my little red wagon mail box on the street, delivered by the mail lady in her funny little van with the steering wheel on the wrong side. And I rushed out and brought it in and read it from cover to cover.

Sometimes when I was reading it I imagined the *On Spec* office—receptionist with pearly finger nails, glossy blow-ups of covers and awards on peach walls, Aurora awards proudly displayed on marble plinth. It was easy to forget that this is a little magazine put together by a bunch of writers/editors/readers who, on their own time, read and respond to every single submission, design, lay out, stuff, distribute, promote, advertise, you name it. As for the grandiose *On Spec* office ... if more than two people are in the office and one needs to open a drawer, turn around, or use the photocopier, somebody has to step into the hall.

Now this isn't just an "Ain't we great?" piece. We who make up this little group know our own shortcomings all too well. Like most other folk in 1996 we are involved in a daily wrestling match with the twin demons, Not-Enough-Time and Not-Enough-Money. We are always open to new ideas, constructive criticism and help of any kind, especially the volunteer kind. We do have plans underway to increase revenue through advertising and promotions, and to increase our visibility through a marketing campaign, but for the time being, most of our income goes first to our contributors and next to printing costs. We'd love to hear from you if you have time on your hands and would like to volunteer to help out with bookkeeping, marketing, advertising sales, office work, or even with the mass mailout we do quarterly. Call the office at 413-0215, or email us at onspec@freenet.edmonton.ab.ca

But the important point of all this and of *On Spec* is that we *do it*. And personally, as a Canadian writer, I find an important message in this fact.

ON SPEC DEADLINES

Feb. 28/97, May 31/97,
Aug. 31/97, Nov. 30/97

Submissions received after a
deadline will be held for the
next deadline.

All submissions must be in
COMPETITION FORMAT: no author
name on manuscript. Enclose self-
addressed, stamped envelope with
sufficient postage to cover return of
manuscript (or mark "Disposable"
and include SASE for reply only),
and covering letter with name,
address, phone number, story title
and word count. Details, page 95.

ON SPEC Ad Deadlines:

Nov. 15 SPRING issue
Feb. 15 SUMMER issue
May 15 FALL issue
Aug 15 WINTER issue

ON SPEC Ad Rates:

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1/4 pg./bus. card \$75
1/2 pg. \$125
Full pg. \$175
Inside front or back
cover (b & w) \$225
Back cover (4-color) \$500

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THE ON SPEC

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We are currently enjoying an explosion in writing, publishing and reading. More and more people use reading and writing on a daily basis to define, to shape their world. Part of *On Spec's* mandate is to encourage new ideas, new styles, new writers, and that, of itself, invites chaos. Or to quote Jena's latest email signature line,

*"Before the beginning of great brilliance there must be chaos.
Before a brilliant person begins to do something great, they must
look foolish in the crowd."*

— from the I Ching

So come share the chaos. Keep sending your subscriptions, stories, poetry, art, suggestions, ideas, large donations of money... Speaking of which, huge thanks to **BILLIE AND KEITH SCOTT** for their much-appreciated donation. Bless you both for your generosity, and Keith, keep those stories coming, too!

•

Readership Survey results

Thanks also to the incredible number of people who have responded to our Readership Survey. Publisher's Assistant **KAREN DESGAGNES** has been compiling the data, and we should have final results soon.

•

ON our next issue:

Our Spring 1997 issue features stories on the theme of "Canadian Geographic." We have some real treats in store for you: a naturalist studies beavers (or are the beavers studying the naturalist?); a young man is drafted to the Nelson Eddy Division of the True North Corps of the RCMP; what to serve the aliens when they show up on your back step in Newfoundland; how a criminologist's interpretation of alien behavior solves a murder; two really oogy and gooshy stories set in Toronto, one about rats, the other about cockroaches; wannabe-hippies meet a very strange stranger when they attempt to set up a commune in Ontario; and a canoe trip in Saskatchewan goes terribly, tragically and hilariously wrong. Join us for a cross-Canada tour of great fiction and artwork in Spring 1997!

•

Late-breaking news:

Past Art Director **TIM HAMMELL** has a great full-color "Harley motorcycles & babes" calendar for sale for \$18.50 (plus GST and shipping). He's

airbrushed some interesting additions on to the babes: wings, in one case. This is a got-to-see item! He also reports: "I was awarded two more trophies again at the Professional Photographers of Canada national convention. Came "this close" to winning the big trophy but did receive my citation for CPA - Craftsman of Photographic Arts. This involved wearing a tux, will send a pic if they turned out. Been doing murals in bathrooms in BC and out doors or in pool (swimming) rooms locally."

Also Past Art Director **LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK** and the "lovely and talented" **STEVE FAHNESTALK** recently made the big move to Lotus Land, and are now living in Coquitlam, BC.

•

Who IS she???

We had so many requests from readers (not to mention being curious ourselves) that we had to ask Fall 1996 cover artist **KENNETH SCOTT**, "Who is the girl in your cover painting?" Kenneth says: "She's just a friend of mine, her name is Regina Garcia and she posed for the painting about 4 years ago. Last I heard she was enrolled in Photography at ACA in Calgary. I'm trying to get hold of her to let her know it's published, but I don't where she is right now."

•

Call for Submissions for our 1998 Theme Issue: MUSIC

After a hot debate, we decided not to go with the theme "New Mythologies," if any of you were wondering, and chose the theme of "Music" instead. Stories, as always, should push the envelope, doing more than just mentioning music as a background or a by-the-way: we want to see music as an integral part of the story, something the story absolutely and utterly cannot do without. We want to see different senses involved, not just hearing: What does a blues bar full of bikers smell like? What does an ice-cold beer taste like in an outdoor disco on top of a hill in Mykonos when you've been dancing nonstop for an hour? How does the person in your arms feel when you're slow-dancing? Are the Blues really blue, or do they look some other color?

Deadline for submissions for the theme issue, due out in Spring 1998, is August 31, 1996, but you can send your stories—competition format only, remember—any time before the deadline. •

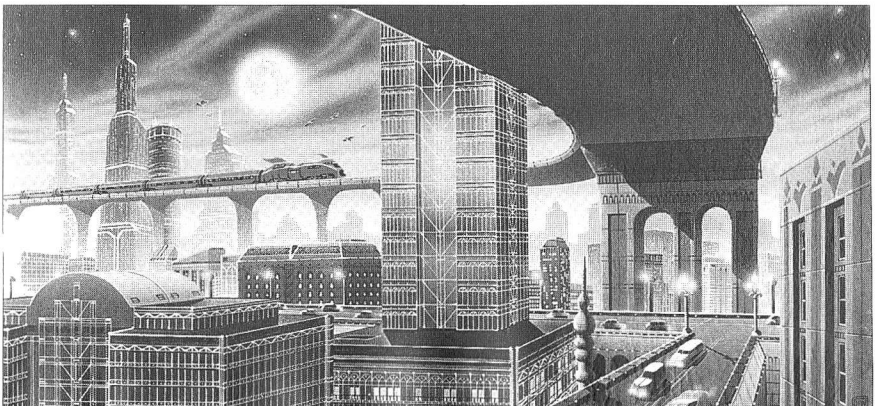
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~~Donated by.....~~
~~Janet Chester~~

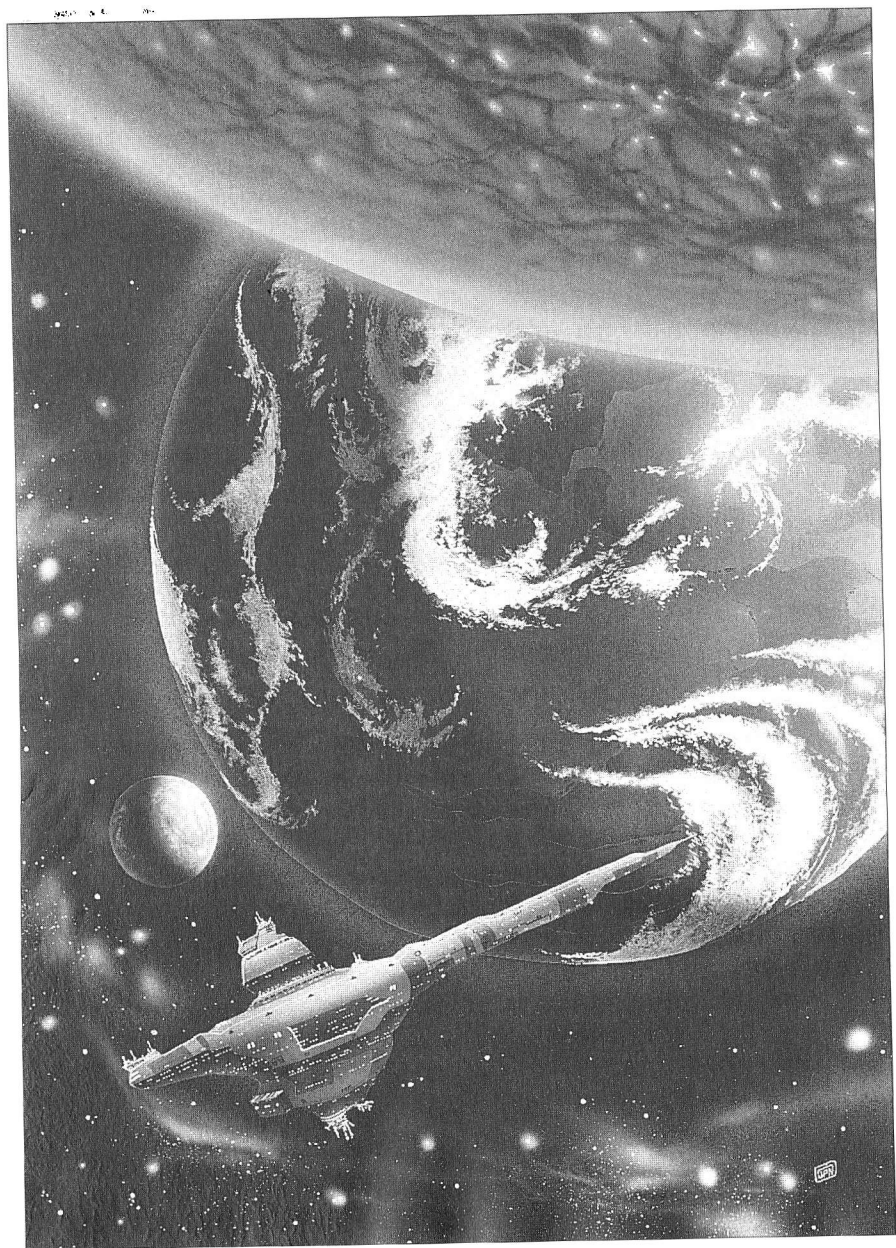
Winner of the
1996 Aurura Award for Art Achievement:

Jean-Pierre Normand

Jean-Pierre Normand has worked as a freelance illustrator, specializing in science fiction, for the past 15 years. He has also published covers in the young adult fantasy and horror fields. He usually works with airbrushed acrylics and dry brush on illustration board. Most of his originals are in the 12" by 17" format. His recent published work includes the Jan./Feb. '96 cover for "Canadian Geographic," "Reluctant Voyager" and "Tesseract Q" for Tesseract Books and an illustration for Jules Verne's "Paris au XXIeme Siecle" for a textbook by Words & Images in Toronto and 2 covers for "Science Fiction Chronicles." The aspects of discovery and exploration have always been his main interest in science fiction. The pulps and "hard science" were his inspiration, but recently doing illustrations for horror and fantasy stories opened a new field of interest.

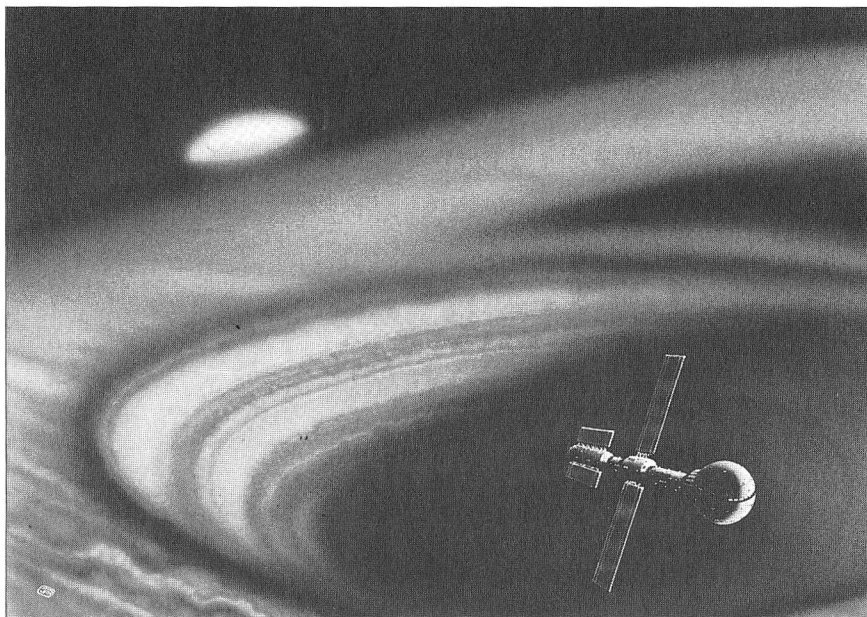


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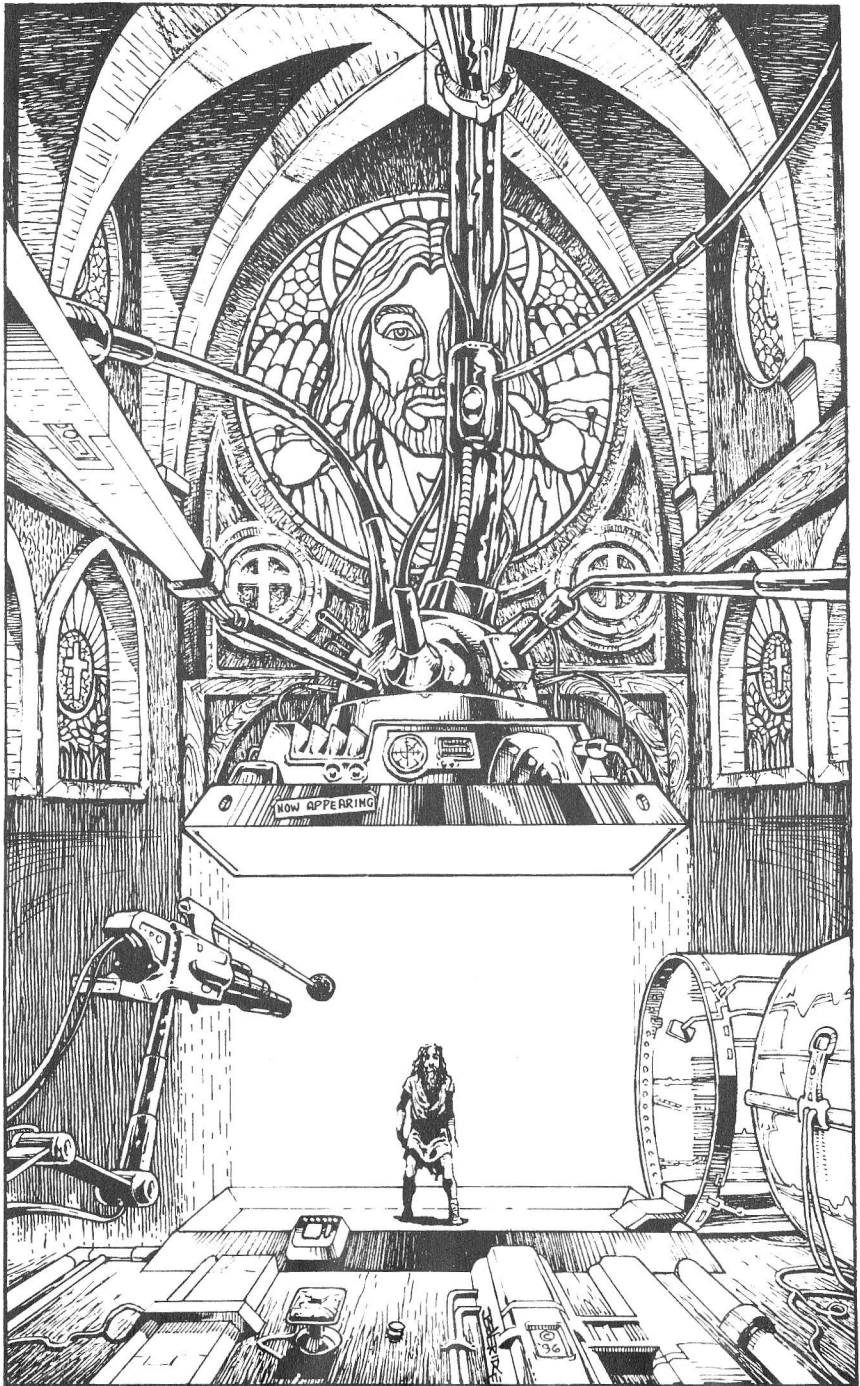
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The Second Coming

Heather Fraser

illustrated by James Beveridge

*When Allison decided to become a minister, she had no idea that she would end up following Dr. Timmins around with a clipboard, babysitting him through the preparations for Convocation. It was a poor reward for a good year as President of the Theological Students' Society. Oh, he was nice enough, but he was completely scatterbrained, and he went **on**. If you listened to him, you'd think he was personally responsible for the Second Coming.*

"Now make sure we have all the power cords for the Matrix," he said helpfully.

"We've already checked twice," Allison reminded him. "We're only missing the big industrial linkups, and the Matrix people are installing those tomorrow morning, along with the grids."

"Good, good," he said absently. "Now about the flowers. When do they arrive?"

"The florists deliver tomorrow afternoon," said Allison, flipping to that page. "We've got three flower arrangements for the dais, another six for the sides of the church, boutonnieres and corsages for the platform party and, of course, a bouquet for Jesus." Personally, Allison figured that Jesus probably didn't give a fig for cut flowers, but the Board of Governors had insisted.

"Oh, and have the programs come back from the printers yet?"

"Yes, this morning," said Allison patiently. "You have a copy in your breast pocket." He looked down, and patted it with satisfaction. She knew why Denise had given her this job, she did. Without her there would be no power cords, flowers, programs, or seating plan. She had arranged them all.

"Do you have another copy of the seating plan?" asked Dr. Timmins, absently scratching the top of his pate. "I seem to have misplaced mine."

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"Here you go." She had made five extra copies just to give to him, and she only had one left. He studied it momentarily, and tucked it, badly folded, into the pocket with his program.

"I think we're about done here, then. Why don't you go home and relax for the evening? We'll have plenty to do tomorrow."

"Sounds good to me," she said with relief, though she was looking forward to something better than going home.

She paused outside the door, biting her lip. "Have you seen Him, Dr. Timmins?"

"Seen who?" he asked, taking three tries to lock the door correctly.

She sighed. They'd only been talking about Him nonstop for the whole term. "Jesus, Dr. Timmins. Who else?"

"Oh yes, of course. I spoke to Him clay before yesterday. They had me in to help calibrate the Aramaic-to-English translator. His pronunciation is a bit flat and slangy, and the translator was having trouble picking out His words accurately. He was also somewhat disoriented by the transference, as you might guess."

"What is He like?" She tried to sound cool. It didn't do to sound like a fanatic.

Dr. Timmins shrugged. "He's a first-century man. Perhaps a bit smaller than most. Once we got the translator working and He'd adjusted to what had happened, He was unexpectedly calm. It would appear that our thoughts about Him as an apocalyptic preacher were correct. He was genuinely surprised that the world still existed two thousand years later. Oh yes, and He has a dreadful memory. He can't remember any of the Gospel events well enough to confirm or deny the details. We're starting to wonder if something's wrong with the Matrix simulation."

"Or maybe things just didn't happen the way we think they did," suggested Allison, snagging the church key before he absentmindedly pocketed it. It had been issued to her, and she'd have to pay for it if it vanished into the same black hole his had.

"Perhaps," he said doubtfully.

She waved goodbye at the corner, and headed back to the College, into Theological Hall, and to the off-limits fourth floor. The guard had her name on a list, and let her through.

Terry, the incoming student president, was already waiting for her in the student lounge. "You got away early," he commented, sipping lazily on his Coke. If Denise had seen his feet on the table, she would have had a bird, but fortunately the fourth floor was off-limits to her too.

"I got time off for good behavior," Allison retorted. "What have you been doing that's useful?"

"Nothing," he said contentedly. "Hey, it's your graduation. All I have to do is hand out programs." He tossed his empty can at the recycling box, and missed.

"Are you going to sit around here all day, or are we going to go see Him?"

"Sure," said Terry, trying to look reluctant as he got to his feet. "I was just waiting for you."

They walked down the hall to where the Matrix curtained off the fourth floor meeting room and the men's washroom. A guy in a Physics Department sweatshirt was tending the Matrix machines. "How're things going?" Allison greeted him.

"Boring as hell," he said, then looked really guilty. "In the strictest Biblical sense, of course," he amended.

Terry laughed, and she shot him a quelling look. "I'm Allison and this is

Terry. The principal invited us to see Him. But before we go in, could you give us the nickel tour?"

"Just call me Tour Guide Chuck."

Allison had heard about the Matrix from Dr. Timmins, but Chuck's explanation was shorter and more technical. "In effect, time travel is a misnomer. There is no way to travel from one time to another, unless you count living. The present is a singularity, and the math doesn't let us predict the future. But the Matrix does allow us to observe many past times, and with the VR attachments, researchers can experience the past as if they were flies on the wall."

"So could we tune in on Good Friday and watch the Crucifixion?" asked Terry excitedly. "Maybe we could clear up the mystery of the Resurrection."

"Nice idea, but the present isn't the only singularity. It seems that the most interesting times are the toughest to observe. Major wars and the founding of religions are the worst. In His case," Chuck jerked a thumb towards the curtain, "we were lucky to be able to get a month's worth of sampling dates. It's probably not just Him, but also the state of the Roman Empire and the Jewish revolt that's doing it. If it's any consolation, we can't get a fix on Mohammed at all."

"So how does that let us bring Jesus here?" asked Allison.

"It took a theoretical breakthrough at the computing end. Ito and Yamaguchi should be getting the Turing Award any year now. They discovered that if we could get enough samplings on a person or object, we could use the Matrix equations to project a simulation in our time. Again, it's not really time travel. But it's a pretty remarkable simulation."

Just then the principal came through the curtain. "Oh, hello," she said dis-

tractedly. "It's good that you've come."

"Thanks for letting us come, Jude," said Allison. No one called the Principal Dr. Chan unless they didn't know her. "Are you okay? You look exhausted."

The principal smiled wanly. "I've been spending six to eight hours a day with Jesus of Nazareth. It's enough to exhaust anyone. I'm beginning to regret letting David Taylor and the rest of the Board of Governors talk me into this. I haven't seen *them* in here making small talk, and they don't want to let the students help." Her brow furrowed the way it did when she was playing college politics. "But I thought Yeshua would appreciate the chance to meet a few more people before we thrust the whole Convocation at Him."

"Go home and get some sleep, Jude," advised Allison. "Let the world turn without you tonight."

"I hope it will, because I don't think I could stay awake if it didn't. Good night all. I'm going home for a massage, a stiff drink, and twelve hours of unconsciousness."

Chuck's eyebrows raised at this pronouncement, but he waved the students in anyway. *I can't believe I'm actually doing this*, Allison thought, her heart suddenly racing. Terry lined up behind her, waiting for her to go first. She took a deep breath, and plunged through the curtain...

...only to find herself in the utterly ordinary confines of the fourth-floor meeting room. Yeshua was visiting with Dr. MacDonald over a glass of wine. He looked up as they came in.

He was very small, about the size of a twelve year old boy, and dark skinned, with a long greasy beard and forelocks. He was dressed in a dirty, undyed tunic, and she could smell the sharp odor of

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His sweat from across the room. He couldn't have looked less like the Sunday School pictures of a handsome, Caucasian Jesus if He'd been designed that way.

"Uh, hi," said Allison.

"Good opening," whispered Terry from behind.

Yeshua smiled, and His dark eyes danced with mischief. Seeing those eyes, Allison had an idea how He could mesmerize a crowd. He gargled something in what she assumed was Aramaic, and the translator's flat voice responded, "Welcome to my modest home. Are you the students that Judith told me are coming?"

"That'd be us," said Allison, then blurted, "We're so glad to meet You, sir!"

His smile deepened as the translator reworked her words. "I am pleased also. Tell me your names, and sit with me and with Ian for our evening meal."

He stood with a basin of water and a towel, and offered it to her. "My name is Allison," she said, splashing her hands in the lemon-scented water.

"I'm called Terry," said Terry, giving his hands a cursory dip and wipe.

"Forgive me my poor hospitality," said the translator, "but it is all that is possible at this time." He offered them fried and baked flatbreads, dried fruit and wine. "The College had no expectation that I wanted to entertain."

"What did they expect You to do? Sit in Your cage and answer questions by the hour?" asked Allison.

Dr. MacDonald and Terry looked at her incredulously, and she subsided.

But Yeshua looked thoughtful. "I believe they do not know what to make of me. I am a disappointment in many ways. But this world is not what I expected either, so it is fair."

They sat and munched companionably. Allison wondered if the food was brought in from the outside or if it was an artifact of the Matrix. As they ate, Yeshua asked them questions about their studies. Terry let her give the answers, and His sharp eyes seemed to notice.

Finally she got up the courage to ask a question of her own. "How much do You know about the rest of Your history, and the Church?"

Dr. MacDonald frowned at her, but Yeshua smiled. "I know that I will die on a Roman cross. It is no surprise. They did not want to tell me, but so many of you wear the cross that I knew there is a reason. I am not unhappy. My father told me to travel this road, and it is good to know that I had an effect. I know that the Greeks and the Romans will take over the Church, and shortly there will be the words of Plato and the chains of bureaucracy where once there was the God of Israel. I know that many will die for the sake of my name, and not all by their own choice."

"Are You getting tired, Yeshua?" asked Dr. MacDonald, pointedly ignoring Allison. "There have been quite a few of us through here today."

Yeshua continued as if he had not spoken: "I think Plato also would not have known his own words in the mouths of his followers. I do regret the bureaucracy, though, for that is much the point of my teachings." He turned to Dr. MacDonald. "Will you have more wine, Ian?"

"No thanks."

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Allison filled it. "I'm the one in charge of the setup for tomorrow's Convocation. If there's anything You need, anything at all, I'm the one to ask."

Yeshua laughed. "I was also told this by John Timmins."

Allison blushed. "I'm his assistant," she mumbled, then added, "but if You really want something done, ask me."

He laughed again, louder. "I believe you," He said. "You are like a friend of mine. Her name is Martha." Allison frowned. She had always thought of herself as more like Mary, actually.

At that moment, the curtains burst inward. It was Dr. Taylor. Allison's heart sank. How had he known they were here?

"What are you students doing here?" he demanded. "This isn't Orientation Week, and we aren't open to the public. We are trying not to tire out our guest of honor."

Allison and Terry jumped guiltily to their feet. "The principal invited us," said Allison. "On behalf of the Theological Students' Society."

"She didn't clear it with the Board of Governors," said Dr. Taylor implacably. "We are concerned about protecting Jesus from the effects of future shock, quite a problem with past subjects, and directly related to the number of people with which the subject comes in contact. This party is over."

Allison looked for help from Dr. MacDonald, but he avoided her eyes. None of the professors cared to lock horns with the influential Board chair. "Okay, we're going." She turned to Yeshua. "Thank you for a lovely dinner."

"Thank you for sharing with me," He replied. He remained reclining on His couch, but as they cleared the curtain she could hear the bland tones of the translator saying, "Do you protect me from them, or them from me?" Dr. Taylor's answer, if any, was lost.

Convocation brought the loonies out in force. They seemed to be split into two teams. On the right side were the fanat-

ics who opposed this blasphemy, this, this *arrogant* attempt to make a copy of God. "Accept No Substitutes!" they chanted. On the left were the Jesus groupies incensed that the Second Coming wasn't open to the public. "Jesus Came To Save The Poor, Not The Academics," read their signs. The college had had to squeeze out the last pennies of their strained Second Coming budget to hire all the off-duty cops in the city, and a few private security people as well. Their blue uniforms perched at one-meter intervals down the street.

Allison and Terry peeked out the door about every two minutes. At first they were waiting for the Matrix van, but after a while the busloads bringing in the crowd became the attraction. "When is that truck going to get here?" fretted Allison. "If they don't come soon we won't be able to clear a path without starting a riot."

"Sounds like fun," said Terry cheerily. She glared at him, and he laughed. "Yeshua was right, you are like Martha. You worry too much. Everything will work out in the end." Allison didn't feel reassured.

About an hour behind schedule, the Matrix van pulled up. Mercifully, they drove through the side that wanted to see Jesus. It would be an incredible waste of money if a crazy took a gun to the van's power pack and shut down the Matrix.

It took a while, but eventually it dawned on the mob mind that this must be the van that held Jesus Christ. People surged forward, trying to get a glimpse. Some of the cops moved to surround the van, trying to clear the way. The procession inched forward with its human barricades, taking forever to cross the last fifty meters.

At last they backed up to the church

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doors. The cops gave the crowd one last shove and set up barriers. Screaming girls pushed forward. Several fainted in the press. Allison and Terry helped unroll the Matrix extender, a clear plastic tube about four meters in diameter embedded with fibre optics. The driver secured it on the far side of the van.

Allison could hear the crowd noise dim in anticipation. "Matrix secure," said a tech from inside. The doors of the van opened and Yeshua walked out, blinking in the sunshine. He looked even smaller than He had the previous night. The crowd saw Him too, and began the chant. "Je-sus! JE-sus! JEE-sus!" Even the "Accept No Substitutes" side was chanting.

"Please come in," said Allison, her eyes darting from one side to the other. She wondered how long the cops could hold back the crowd.

Yeshua gargled something faintly, His eyes lighting up as He saw them. Her name and Terry's might have been in there somewhere. "The translator's still in the van," explained one of the techs.

Allison motioned, and Yeshua came into the vestibule of the church. Allison didn't breathe until the translator was brought in and the doors were closed. Only then did she turn to get the basin and towel that she had lovingly prepared. She offered them to Yeshua and the techs. Yeshua dipped His hands thankfully, while the techs just looked confused.

"Shall I wash Your feet too?" she asked shyly.

"As I am your guest, I accept your service with gratitude," said the translator. Yeshua shucked His sandals for her.

The strong odor of Him filled her nostrils, but somehow His need of a wash only made it all the more right. It was different from all the Maundy Thurs-

day foot-washing ceremonies she had ever participated in. This wasn't another student, equally embarrassed; this was Jesus of Nazareth whose weary feet she was bathing. Before she finished, there were tears mingled with the wash water.

"Get a grip," whispered Terry as she stood up.

"You try it, then," she retorted.

"No thanks."

Yeshua walked companionably by the two students into the main part of the church. He gasped as He saw the vaulted ceiling, the crystal chandeliers, the stained glass brilliant in afternoon light, the elaborately carved and draped altar and pulpit. "This was built as a house to worship me?" asked the translator in its emotionless voice.

Something in the tone of the untranslated Aramaic caused Allison to turn around, and she saw Yeshua backed up against the door, tears streaming down His face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

It took Him a few moments to collect Himself. "Every display of wealth is built on the backs of the poor who must do without," He said passionately. "I am grieved to know that the world still thinks stone temples please God."

"But there are no poor in our society," said Allison. "No one starves any more."

"No, the poor are there," insisted Yeshua. "You have not learned how to see them."

"That's not fair," protested Allison, but Yeshua staggered away amid the wealth of the sanctuary, muttering to Himself.

By the time she caught up to Him, He had regained His composure. "Where are the masters of this great house to greet me?" He asked, His mouth curling in an expression that on any other face

Allison would have called contempt. "When any came to my house, from the highest to the lowest, I offered them my service, my table, my bed. But I come here as the honored guest and the only ones to greet me are the ones that the masters barred from my door. What greater calling keeps the masters away?"

Allison fumed, without an answer for Him. She was beginning to understand why the principal was going home exhausted.

Right then Dr. Timmins arrived, and cheerfully rescued Allison from the need to say anything. She crept away, using the respite to sort the programs, check the water in the flowers, make coffee for the Matrix techs. She and Terry put up the signs that told everyone where to go, double-checking against the one remaining copy of the seating plan. It was a while before she ran out of things to do.

"Allison," said a quiet voice at her elbow. She jumped a foot, but it was only Dr. Timmins.

"What?"

Dr. Timmins took a half step back. "I was wondering if you had a copy of the seating plan, as I seem to have misplaced mine."

"Here." She thrust her own copy at him. It didn't matter anyway; the signs were all up.

"Thank you," he said, then added in a concerned tone, "Perhaps you should sit down and relax. You have been working much too hard."

No thanks to you, she thought, but she bit her tongue. "Where did Yeshua go?" she asked when she thought she could be civil again.

Dr. Timmins pointed to the balcony. Allison could just see a small dark head with a prayer cloth draped over it. "He said He wanted a quiet place to pray. I thought He wouldn't be disturbed up

there."

"I'll make sure nobody disturbs Him." Dr. Timmins nodded and wandered off to attend to something else that she had probably already done.

"You wonder how he manages to find the floor in the morning," said Terry, heading off to see if there was any coffee left.

Soon the principal arrived, looking slightly more rested than the previous night. "Where's His Nibs?" she asked Allison.

"Oh, He's up in the balcony, praying for the poor of the world."

The Principal peered up, and looked confused. "I meant David Taylor."

"Oh him. He hasn't shown his face yet. Were we expecting him?"

The Principal let out a tightly controlled breath. "He won't let anyone else near his pet project, but he can't be bothered to lift a finger to do the work himself. God, that man cheeses me off!"

As if on cue, Dr. Taylor sauntered in. "Hello Dr. Chan, Allison. Have you seen Ian MacDonald?"

"I expect he's taken the afternoon off, like I did," said the principal tartly. "It was your day to shepherd the Messiah, or did you forget?"

Dr. Taylor shook his head dismissively. "No, of course it wasn't. I had a press conference today. I couldn't possibly have been here before now."

"A press conference?" said the principal in a dangerously mild tone, her brow furrowing. "I don't remember *anything* about the college holding a press conference today. Or is this another one of your little solo endeavors, like the one where you swayed the Board of Governors to spend all our money on this bloody publicity stunt in the first place?"

Allison hadn't been President of the Theological Students' Society for noth-

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ing. She knew when to make a tactical retreat. She turned around, and her eye leapt involuntarily to the balcony. Yeshua had stopped praying, and was watching her. She felt a thrill up her spine, like she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, though how college politics were like cookies it was hard to say. He motioned for her to come join Him.

What the hell, she thought. Things can't get much worse. She squeezed around the barrier she and Terry had erected, and went up the stairs.

"You are very tiring to be around," she said, settling herself beside Him. "If it isn't the questions You ask, it's that all my friends are fighting about Your visit."

"It is like this in Galilee also. People cannot seem to bear my truth." He put a companionable hand on her shoulder, a gesture that somehow conveyed a great deal. "I am glad you are here, Allison."

Their eyes met, and then He leaned over and kissed her gently. His breath was pungent with wine. A thrill went through her, a sudden imagination of what it might be like to touch Him more deeply. He drew back, as if aware He had broken some taboo, but the feeling stayed with her.

"Oh," she gasped. "I don't think You had better do that again."

He sighed. "I honor your desire."

She stood up to flee, but flight only meant being sucked back into the maelstrom below, so she sat down again, watching harried Convocation guests come in from running the gauntlet. The principal and Dr. Taylor had more words, but they weren't loud enough to hear. Dr. Timmins came down the aisle calling her name, and it was a pleasure to ignore him. Only when Denise spotted them in the balcony did Allison de-

cide it was time to emerge.

"Where have you been?" hissed Denise in her best admin-assistant's voice. "The mob outside is a horror show, John Timmins has been answering people's questions, and everything is in a muddle."

Allison shrugged. "I thought that was his job."

Denise put her hands on her hips. "Don't give me that. You know as well as I do that the man's an administrative nightmare. Why, he hasn't even got a copy of the seating plan!"

Allison smacked her forehead. "I'll deal with it," she said.

By the time things were unsnarled, Convocation was over an hour late, and invited guests were *still* arriving. She was so busy she missed the call to march in the procession, but she seized her academic gown from Denise on the way by, and looked mostly presentable by the time she got to the dais.

The Principal managed to control the sour expression on her face long enough to give the required inspirational address about the church of the third millennium. Then Dr. Taylor rose, resplendent in his robes of black and gold, to join her in conferring the honorary doctorate. Together they bonked Yeshua on the shoulder with the ceremonial bonker, and Allison came forward to give Him His bouquet of flowers. He looked at them as if He couldn't decide whether to wear them or eat them. Eventually He settled for tucking them into the floor display, producing a lopsided flower sculpture.

Undaunted, Dr. Taylor carried on. "I'm sure you don't want to wait any longer, so on behalf of the Board of Governors of this College, I bring you Dr. Jesus of Nazareth." There was thunderous applause, which ended in rhy-

mic clapping and a rather undignified chorus of "JE-sus! JE-sus!" which earned more than one disapproving scowl from the dais.

As Dr. Taylor plugged the translator into the sound system, Yeshua stood quietly. He looked very small and vulnerable behind the enormous pulpit, more like a child than the fiery preacher He was supposed to be.

"I am only a storyteller," He began. "So I will tell you a story. Let anyone with ears listen:

"There was a man who loved eagles. He loved to watch them soar, and he loved to watch them plunge after their prey. This man knew that his life would not be complete unless he possessed an eagle completely. So he called together his friends. Their journey to the eagle's nest was long, full of hardships and costing much money. But after a time, the eagle was caught and the man and his friends returned to his house.

"Once he had his eagle, the man knew no peace. The eagle would not eat the food the man brought, but strained at its jesses to be allowed to hunt for its own. He did not dare let the eagle soar, for he knew it would not return. He had his eagle, but he would not let it soar, and he would not let it plunge after its prey. After a time the eagle died, and the man also after it."

There was a murmur of unease from the Convocation. This was clearly not what they had come to hear Him say. He waited patiently for silence, and continued.

"You say that I am your Messiah, and you build great houses to worship me. But prisons are also great houses; neither do I wish to dwell there."

The murmur increased again, and Dr. Taylor had a few *sotto voce* words with the principal before angrily rising and

striding off the dais. Yeshua paid no attention.

"The Messiah my people wait for is to be a great king. I am just a poor man with more courage to speak the truth than most. And the truth I see is that you do not come here to worship me, for you do not know me. Instead, you come to worship the image that those who claim to own the Messiah have sold to you. O foolish people. Do not be bought with sweet words and empty promises, for no one can deliver what he does not own."

Go, Yeshua, go, Allison urged Him silently. Dr. Taylor was down speaking with a Matrix tech, jabbing his finger at the man's chest. The tech was looking sullen.

"I have little wisdom for you today. I have only that which I have said since first I began to speak. Love one another as you love yourselves, and let nothing stand in your way to finding God. Do not let kings, money, vain men ..."

Yeshua's image flickered in mid-sentence, then it disappeared. Half the choir, which was supposed to sing *Laudate Domine* after Yeshua's address, rose with their choir books ready while the other half remained seated in confusion.

Oh my God, thought Allison, *they've just crucified him again*. The translation device swung noisily against the pulpit, and she jumped up to silence it with a touch. The people looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to make sense of what they had just seen. "Have we no more room to hear Jesus' Word than the Pharisees had two thousand years ago?" she asked in a trembling voice. "Or is this Convocation standing in our way to finding God?" No one moved, or even breathed. She cast a pointed look to where Dr. Taylor and the Matrix tech were wrestling on the floor, and then she

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walked out of the church.

She stood on the church steps, blinking in the bright light. The crowd began another chorus of "JE-sus! JE-sus!" and through the open door she could hear Dr. Taylor's cultured voice, only slightly ruffled, saying, "It seems that the Matrix has unfortunately delivered the wrong man."

It infuriated her, and she screamed at the crowd, "Give it up! They just turned Jesus off in there, because they didn't like what He had to say." She didn't think her voice could carry that far, but the crowd quieted, passing the news from mouth to mouth. Then there came a roar of outrage, and the mob surged forward, trying to get at the "They" who had done this thing.

"No, no!" cried Allison in horror. Again it seemed like they heard her.

"There's no use. He's already gone. Go home, and think about what kind of a world we live in, that a righteous man can be killed for speaking His mind."

The crowd seethed, undulating like a live thing. She thought she could see arguments breaking out here and there.

Then, surprisingly, it began to disperse, in ones and twos and larger groups. Terry's voice said from behind her, "Ever considered a Pentecost speaking tour in Jerusalem?"

Terry and Jude and Dr. Timmins and half of the graduating class were there behind her, all looking bewildered at what they had done, but Allison had nothing left in her to consider the implications. "Oh go jump in the lake," she said, and sank to the ground in tears for her loss, without even an empty tomb to mourn. •

AUTHOR: HEATHER FRASER has lived in Moncton, Halifax, Calgary, and Kingston, Ontario, but now calls Kitchener-Waterloo home. She has been variously a lab tech, a high school science teacher, and a theological student. She wants it made clear that the characters in this story are purely fictional, and do not bear the *slightest* resemblance to any of her classmates or professors. "The Second Coming" is her first professional sale.

ILLUSTRATOR: JAMES BEVERIDGE has always had a deep abiding love for fantasy of all kinds. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and is active with a variety of media. Besides pen and ink, he also paints with brush, airbrushes almost anything, and is now using his 'puter to create art. He is now designing web sites:

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Spiritworld

Peter Koens

The north is a happy land,
primitively luxurious
the colored brochures told us.
Past, present and future are
individual nuggets sparkling
on a raw gold chain.

A wide-flung community of the living and the dead.
The shaman's drum brings anachronisms back, televised if
necessary
to live in you and in me.

And yet?

In the inukshuk, in the enuksos, living stone columns which
are

built in the form of a man, the past comes to life.

Stone men peering myopically through Arctic mists
guarding? watching? waiting?

Shrouded,

our arctic Stonehenge made up of
cairns,
caches,
graves and
beacons.

They are the shadow figures, the sentinels, the formidable
aura of power guarding
the North.

(continues...)

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Living memories from the twilight
of lost cultures,
ghost monks from another era,
acolytes of Baal,
disciples of Isis
chanting
the poetry,
the litany
that forms the cadence of the
northland.

Singing the myths of
the place names which evoke its
magic:

the Kazan River,
Yathkyed Lake,
Enusko Point,
Cape Dorset,
Southampton Island.

It is a lonely land
mind numbing
in its immensity.

Isolated now within me
the "I" needs comfort,
solace.

an inner echo from a seeming
"other"
re-assures me
that they
have been here before me and
will come after me.
Long after my trail is gone.

That spring we left the turbulence
of the Kazan
and its Kevlar piercing rocks
to sit
in the shadow of an Inukshuk
and found
a
moss-wrapped cache of caribou
meat
carefully
placed
by a crumbling skeleton

in an arched
rock grave.
On the horizon another watched
us
and we heard
the fire
tease
secrets
from
the
ancient
drift wood
with which we had made our
fire.

Suddenly, the whispers from the
fire demons warned us.

The
stares from behind us
stabbed
through the rational,
the reasonable,
the relative normalcy of
the twentieth century and
forced us to slip the leash of time
to cross a bridge
into another reality.

Abruptly the river banks
seemed filled
with them.

Lurking, waiting, herding
us. Where?

The figures loomed larger,
harsher
and
more dangerous.

Then
unexpectedly
we heard a drum.
Our strokes
were controlled by the tempo of
vibrating caribou hide
and sweating
our panic
openly,

we
followed the river
towards the rapids.
Fear
libriumed by a soothing concert
of throat-singing.
Human caribou
caught
by spirits trapped in stone,
forcing us towards
the club,
the arrow and
the spear.
But we shot through the white-
water
and
exhausted
we paddled to shore
for tea and tobacco.
Sandy pointed.
On the horizon
within the dark, lengthening
fingers
of dusk
they stood,
waiting. •

AUTHOR: PETER KOENS is a retired Indian-Northern Affairs Canada education administrator. His writing reflects three decades of living in the isolated native communities of Arctic-northern Canada. His poetry has been published in *Ink*, *Afterthoughts* and *Authors*. Publications where his fiction has appeared include *Village News*, *Authors*, and *Good Old Days*; publication is pending in *Highway Book Shop*, *Wawatay Native Communications*, *Photography: Ink*, *True Confessions*, and *OPSTF News*.



The Babysitter

Kate Riedel

illustrated by Adam Moran

The reflected light of the quarter moon lit the woodlot as brilliantly as if the moon were full. The snow had stopped at midnight, but the still-bitter wind drove dry new snow before it, covering raspberry canes and old goldenrod, filling crevices in the bark of old maples.

Brendan was just a baby; he needed someone to hold him. So she did, singing for him the same nonsense syllables with which her mother had once sung her to sleep.

"Your mother liked that song, too," she said. The tune, she knew now, was "Go Tell Aunt Rhody." Her own mother could never carry a tune, but that didn't matter. When fever-haze made sleep terrifying, what mattered was someone with you. It wasn't the voice, it was the accumulated comfort of thousands of generations of mothers singing, on- or off-key, the same nonsense syllables to the same tune.

Sokolski eased his bulk into the brown suit he'd worn ever since he'd moved up and out of uniform. He'd had some idea, never really formulated even in his own mind, that a brown suit would make him look less like a cop.

It didn't.

Check in at headquarters first, he thought. Then rejoin the search party, get on their collective tail. Hope to hell the weather holds until we find Chelsea Middleton's baby. Please, no messages from Saskia Derring.

"Saskia's mother called," his wife said. Sometimes Sokolski thought she could read his mind. "She was drunk," she added, before he could ask.

"As usual." He picked up his half-finished cup of coffee from the dresser and swallowed the lukewarm contents. "And?" He set the empty cup back on the dresser.

"As usual—" His wife picked up the cup to take it out to the kitchen. "—she has a message for you from Saskia."

"Long distance call, huh?"

"Don't," he heard his wife say from the kitchen. "It's too sad."

Sokolski fastened his waistband, pretending he didn't have to suck in his gut. Saskia Derring, he thought. Dead ten years now.

There's patterns to the way parents learn to live with the murder of a child. Some take to good works, some to religion.

Saskia Derring's mother took to whiskey. And when she got drunk, she got messages from Saskia. Or was it, he wondered, the other way around?

"I hope you told her to call headquarters," he said.

"Of course. How's Chelsea doing?"

Sokolski distributed wallet, keys, badge, among the appropriate pockets. "She's at her mother's."

"When Chelsea was just a kid, didn't Saskia Derring used to babysit her?"

"She was a good kid, Sass Derring," said Sokolski as he emerged into the kitchen.

His wife was pouring the remainder of the coffee into a thermos. "You always say they're good kids," she said.

...She paused in her singing. "It's hard to do alone. But you're not alone. Your mother wouldn't want you to be alone. That's why I'm here. I used to babysit Chelsea. Your mom, you know. It's all right..."

The eastern horizon was a pink line in the predawn dark. Red sky at morning / Sailor take warning. The storm wasn't over yet.

His wife was right. They were always good kids.

Sokolski watched wisps of snow curling across the highway in front of the car, kept an eye out for icy patches,

thought, "I've been here too long. Know too many of these kids."

He hadn't known Sass Derring, not while she was alive. He hadn't been here long enough, then, to know people.

Sokolski could still hear Mrs. Derring's too-calm voice across ten years. He'd hated that part of the job then, and it hadn't got any easier since. Hated going through the delaying bits that were supposed to ease the bad news. Never fooled anybody, only a dead giveaway that he had come with the worst news possible.

"We've found a body..."

"Yes. That's her purse. That's her name. Sass. Saskia. She was babysitting..."

Most people tried to deny that the body could possibly be their child, right up to the moment the sheet was folded back in the morgue. They didn't want to believe it. Mrs. Derring didn't want to believe it, but she didn't bother to deny it. It wasn't the first time Sass had gone somewhere other than home after she was done babysitting. "She babysits a lot." Denial still there at one level; it took a while to get into the habit of past tense. "She's good with kids. Last night? I... I'm sorry, I can't think of the name..." Sokolski waited, let her take her time. "...the little girl's name is Chelsea. Middleton, that's it."

"Sass?" Chelsea's mother had said when he'd questioned her. "Sass is dead?" And then, like an epitaph, "She was a good babysitter. She'd sit sometimes even when I couldn't pay her. Chelsea liked her." And in next room, at the mention of her name, Chelsea had looked up from positioning her dolls in some elaborate game of pretend.

Where did they get these names? Whatever happened to Mary and John,

names like that? He guessed a fancy name was maybe the best they could do for their kids; they couldn't give them any hope, so they gave them fancy names. Saskia. Chelsea. And Chelsea had named her own baby Brendan.

Chelsea used to wave at him when he drove by. Pretty, dark little thing, curly black hair. Not much past sixteen. Same age as Sass Derring had been, on what should have been just one more night she didn't come home from babysitting.

Too damn young to be a mother. But Chelsea had trusted Sokolski enough to ask for him by name when that son-of-a-bitch... Takes a real man to beat up a kid after he's got her pregnant, then threaten to kill her for going to the police.

Every time Sokolski'd seen that pale-haired, pale-skinned bastard, he'd been reminded of something you find when you turn over a rock. But that might have been the creep's record more than his complexion. Good-looking enough to impress some poor little girl, he guessed.

The bastard had talked about getting even with Chelsea, big on talk, but he never followed through on his threats. He'd known Sokolski was watching him. He'd finally skipped town while Chelsea was in the hospital. With luck, they'd get a call from some place else saying they'd found *his* body.

Chelsea had called Sokolski again, yesterday. He felt sick just remembering her voice on the phone. "Brendan's gone..."

Only the day before, he'd met her, carrying Brendan, in the supermarket. She'd moved aside the blanket, lifted one baby hand to show off the blue scarf and mittens she'd knit herself.

Why the hell hadn't she taken Brendan into the supermarket this time? The wind was so cold, she said, she just

needed a couple things and she could see it wasn't busy in there, she'd only be a minute. She'd left him completely covered with a blanket because one of the car windows wouldn't quite shut.

A couple of people had seen that blanket-covered car seat, but who knew what was really in it?

What the hell chance does even a good kid have when she's a second generation welfare mother? Like Chelsea with Brendan. Like Chelsea's own mother. Like Saskia Derring and *her* mother. Kids having kids. Don't mean to hurt anyone, but parents get frustrated, babies cry, someone loses their temper, gets scared, baby goes missing...

Sokolski refused to fool himself: it would be a body they found, and where would the evidence point? To a poor scared little girl who'd lost her temper, didn't mean to... Time I applied for a transfer, he thought.

"They're coming now, so we have to go," she told Brendan. "It'll be all right, you won't have to go alone, I'll be right there with you. It'll be all right."

The radio crackled and Sokolski reached for it, eyes on the potentially treacherous road.

"Sokolski? Get your ass over to MacElroy's woodlot on the County Line. We've got something."

"Affirmative."

"You don't want to know who tipped us?"

"Tell me when I get there." Sokolski broke the connection.

And they would. Time for a transfer. Definitely.

"Sass wasn't promiscuous," he could hear Mrs. Derring saying, all those years ago.

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And maybe, in a way, she wasn't. Parents sometimes made up these things, maybe had to, but what they made up was sometimes a kind of truth. Sass certainly hadn't been willing this time, but of course the minute word got out, talk started: "She was asking for it. Guess she got what she deserved."

"She liked kids. People were always asking her to babysit," Mrs. Derring had said.

People like Chelsea's mom. Young single mothers who couldn't get anyone else to babysit.

"She was afraid of being alone," Mrs. Derring said. "Why did she have to die alone?"

He forbore reminding her that Sass hadn't been alone; that whoever killed her was with her.

"Do you think you'll get him?"

"We've had some calls on the Crimestoppers line. One or two psychics..."

"Really?" Mrs. Derring laughed, the kind of laugh that to Sokolski, even then, rang like an alarm bell. "Really? Do you really take psychics seriously?"

"We have to follow up on every lead." Even leads from goddamn charlatans preying on people who are already victims, misguided believers scabbling for any proof of their "talent" without a thought of the extra pain they might be causing.

They sure hadn't been any help finding Sass's killer. It was dog-work that had found him, work and patience. A lot of patience, a lot of caution. One move, one word without the evidence in hand, and the son-of-a-bitching defense lawyers would have been laughing.

Sokolski had taken his time and got him. Nothing spectacular, no serial killer, no drug connections, just a small-

time piece of slime who'd known Saskia slightly, figured it wasn't rape if the girl screwed around anyway, then killed her so she wouldn't tell.

"Sass..." Mrs. Derring had said, slowly. "She had a dream once. She dreamed this would happen. That she was dead, and someone had killed her. Do you believe that?"

He didn't. But, "Maybe," he had said, because he could see she wanted to.

That had been a mistake, although he didn't know it until a couple years later, when the Weissman kid drowned. Five years old, wandered off at a picnic while the mother was all wrapped up in her new boyfriend. They were getting ready to drag the river when Sokolski got the call. "How do you know we'll find her there?" he'd asked Mrs. Derring; patiently, slowly, clearly, hoping he was penetrating the miasma of alcohol that seeped through the telephone.

They hadn't had to drag the river. They found the body right where Mrs. Derring had said they would. Where Mrs. Derring had said Saskia had said they would, in a tangle of willows at the head of a sandbar.

A black-and-white parked across the County Line turnoff backed up to let Sokolski past, then rolled back into position. The sun was a red glow at the horizon. A line of trees cut the wind just enough to let the snow pile up in ridges that bounced his car along the gravel.

More vehicles at the field road that led into the woodlot. A young uniformed officer took him to where snow had been brushed away from a pile of goldenrod and raspberry canes.

"I hope to God you covered this for evidence before you let everyone tramp all over hell's half-acre," said Sokolski.

"Yes *sir*. Photographs, the whole thing. Bad luck about the snow, any tracks are gone. But we know how these things usually work out, don't we? *Sir*."

Sokolski knew all right; he was damned if he would say so. He looked down at the tiny body, the black curls, like Chelsea's, plastered across the ghastly doll's face. It always surprised him how quickly life went, not just life but the appearance of life.

That self-righteous bitch who managed the supermarket had said it served the girl right, leaving a baby alone in a car.

"No obvious marks," the officer added helpfully. "Could be either suffocation or freezing. Suffocation? Then she panicked, drove around until she found a place to..."

"Leave it for the goddamn coroner," said Sokolski. "How'd you find him?"

"Mrs. Derring called. The usual message. Said her daughter was babysitting here. Well, she only had one daughter, didn't she? How many messages from beyond does this make? Three? Five? If the old lady was ever sober for longer than it takes her to cash her cheque and make it to the liquor store, I'd start to wonder if she didn't do 'em all in herself. What'd'ya think? *Sir*."

Sokolski didn't answer. He was hearing, in his mind, Mrs. Derring's voice on the phone, the day after the Weissman kid went missing. "Sass called. She said she was babysitting. She said she couldn't let that little girl die alone..."

Sokolski stared down at the body in the snow, in its now-unnecessary blue snowsuit, blue knit scarf, tiny blue mitten dangling from its braided string. He could see Sass Derring, that morning ten years ago, naked limbs like nothing that had ever moved, red hair, still incongru-

ously bright, partly concealing the face. Trauma, they called it on the report. Pretty word for having half your face blown away by a shotgun. The wind had blown away a single loose hair. He could still see that one red hair wrapped around a few blades of grass where it glittered like Christmas tinsel in the sun...

The newly-risen sun shone briefly between the horizon and the rough crayon line of clouds at the edge of the sky. Red light reflected from snow already sifted over that sad doll. What happens when a little girl finds out a baby isn't a doll?

The wind was picking up, stirring loose snow from the crevices of maple bark, slipping it across the glazed surface to catch in the knitted lines of the blue mitten flung out from that tiny, still fist. Sokolski couldn't bear the thought of Chelsea knitting that mitten.

Goddamn it, Sass, if you really can tell us where they are, why the hell can't you tell us who did it?

His eye moved on, following the drifting grains of snow back to the tree. The wind that carried the snow lifted the end of a single red hair trapped in the bark.

A red hair...

The lowering clouds dimmed the sun.

Not red. Only an illusion of the brief sunlight, now darkened.

Well, he'd expected something like this. He started to turn to point it out—what did they teach 'em in police school these days?—when one last ray of sun broke through, glinting on...

Not red. Not dark.

"Hey!" called Sokolski. "You guys blind or what? Somebody bring a baggie, and get that camera over here. Move it! We gotta finish up here, there's more snow on the way."

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He pointed to where a pale blond hair glittered on the maple tree, caught there to be covered, and now uncovered, by the drifting snow.

Blond, he thought. Not curly black. Straight. Pale. Blond. You son of a bitch, you got your revenge, God damn you to hell. Now I get *you*. But he didn't say it aloud. Time enough for that once they had enough evidence.

•

The snow was already starting to fall as Sokolski backed his car around to drive out to the highway and into town where Chelsea waited with her mother.

Better him than some stranger, some new cop on the job. "We'll get him, Sass," he said aloud.

Sokolski didn't believe in psychics. Sometimes he wasn't so sure about ghosts. •

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One One

by Preston Hapon
illustrated by Mary MacVoy

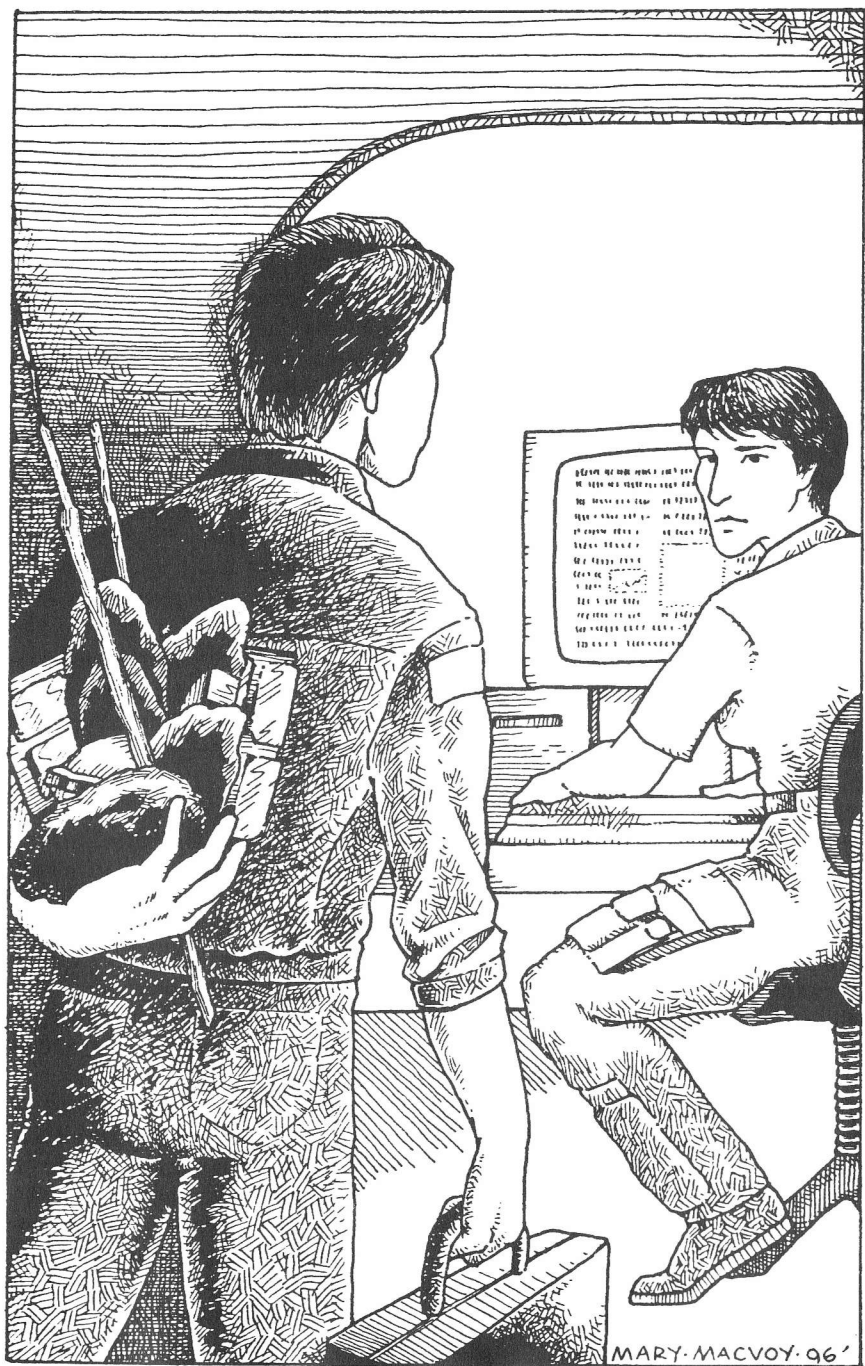
Eleven days after landing, I saw sodium snow. Surface temperature dropped through -98 degrees Celsius and about an hour later, tiny crystals flashed like microscopic stars. I called to Paula. She came to look, but as usual, she didn't really see. She's a scientist without a soul.

Ian called me to the monitor. He said, "Paula, it's snowing!" Well, I doubted that we could call it that, exactly, though I admit it was a small surprise. I had expected Mercury's thin atmosphere to do something far less dramatic in the predawn. Anyway, good scientists don't stop and gawk—I sent Ian out for samples and began recording conditions.

"Suit up and get samples," she said to me. Not even a hint of "please and thank you for your trouble" in her voice. I had come to expect as much whenever she had observations to concentrate on, numbers to keep track of, and theories to postulate. What crap that is. Standing around admiring it was, she said, inefficient.

I saw him, reflected in the monitor, standing behind me. Why I had to turn and look at him in order to get him moving, I don't know. But I did. And then he took his own sweet time at it, too. Ian is a nice guy, but a little hustle and drive would make a great, overall improvement. Taking my eyes off him seemed a bit risky, but there was work to do and I set to it. The computer can be a hell of a relief—fast, reliable, and usually without argument.

Thin snow. Tiny crystals hardly bigger than electrons, I swear, but they glittered as equals among the blazing stars. She didn't have to force me outside. I loved it out there. Never, never could I go outside the shelter without stopping to take hold of the wall for balance, then beam my soul into the boundless sky. That night, Venus had fallen far behind, but Earth was still ahead. I stood perfectly still and concentrated, so my eyes believed they could discern movement in the stars and in Earth's place among them. Here I was, close, so close to the center of the solar system. There they were, like a great crystalline clockwork, racing ponderously from one second to another. Wonder kept work at bay for a while but, after a few moments, work smothered my wonder.



MARY·MACVOY·96'

It broke my concentration, realizing he'd been gone way too long just to collect some samples. Even if he had cleaned and refueled an isolation container... Well, I could have done four in that time. But I was not going to interrupt my work. If he'd needed me, he'd have used the radio.

I almost called her and invited her out. To give her a break, you know? But I didn't call her. I set out by myself in the buggy, a container and digging implements in back. There was an even though microscopic glitter everywhere I looked, but there were other tasks to perform and so I combined them into one happy jaunt. Thus, I went in search of a clean drift, so to speak, and also began the day's rounds of monitoring sites. I even knew where I'd find my best, uncontaminated samples of the marvelous snow.

Some days there is just no point in trying. No sooner was I up to my corpus callosum in aberrant data, than a 20MG chunk arrived from Earth. Merely suspecting that it was Christmas cards from the families and appropriate messages from appropriate executives wasn't enough. It had to be decompressed, checked for errors, acknowledged, and examined for "immediate attention" files. So, I unhappily turned away from Mercury's chemical queerness and settled into a less satisfying routine.

Dust angels just weren't the same as snow angels, but I made three of them anyway while watching Earth brighten. Mercury is so beaten by cometary debris and asteroid pieces rushing headlong into the sun that those angels were the probably the smoothest spots on the planet. I'd exposed the lighter colored regolith and

it looked like a wind had blown dust from bedsheets buried in the ground. Dull in the darkness, they would be blinding when the sunlight reflected from them. I fancied the thought of angel beams towering into the heavens. Then I floated back onto the buggy and scooted toward the old Aries probe.

Sure enough, I was right. Of course. The whole transmission was a complete waste of my time. I didn't want to watch videos of Mom and Sis at the ice sculptures, ooh-and-aaw over holographic cards from Gramma and Grampa, nor listen to chattering gossip. Then, worst of all, I had to figure out some snappy-but-thoughtful replies. We were still three hours in advance of our next scheduled transmission, and I wanted to have all the reports completed long before then. Ian, as usual, wasn't taking on his share and I couldn't be sure everything would be ready. I hoped that he was making the rounds and long past the Aries probe and Particle Station Four.

It occurred to me, as the buggy lights washed the path, that Paula liked work so much she made extra so she'd never run out. Every curiosity, every measurement, every observation had to be sectioned and packaged according to standard operating procedure as if she could finish studying the entire planet herself and single-handedly bring an end to expeditions. Correct that: she wanted me to help. Sure, there was lots of work to be done. There was enough to fill four hours of every day we were here, except for three free days in which nothing had been scheduled. One was to settle in. The company realizes that even seasoned pros need a chance to admire the scenery when they finally get out

of the cramped rocket and onto a strange world. Another day is set aside to pack for leaving. Many an unfortunate item has been left behind, and many a key switch left turned on, all because people get into a last-minute rush to go home. The company insists, in fact trains us, to sit down and chat, read a book, make coffee, bid farewell to the equipment, and idle over checklists on that last day. Oh, and one day is Christmas Day. We don't work that day—contractual obligations. So what was I to do with someone who insisted on working ten hours a day, even though there simply wouldn't be enough work to go around? I had worked with Paula before. She'd leave Mercury the way she left that Lunar Geostudy Tychosomething: too busy to be finished. I gunned the buggy for a low mound and became a low-trajectory space ship, pinwheeling dirt. Dust angels. That's what she needed. A bright flash from the edge of a rill was Aries reflecting my headlights. The buggy landed with a gentle bounce just as an idea for the perfect surprise struck me. From that moment I was after more than just an pure sample of sodium snow. I wanted some zinc.

When he finally returned, he was down to his reserve air.

A silver puddle had solidified underneath the probe—some kind of a cover or something designed to melt off in the heat of Mercury's daytime, I guess. Anyway, I lifted the frozen disk out of a crater and tossed it onto the buggy. I also twisted off a few other items the probe wouldn't miss. Finally, I brushed a few nanograms of powdery snow crystals into an isolation cylinder and turned it on. All this took longer than I had expected. It

took most of the work period, as a matter of fact. That meant I had to skip the visit to Particle Station Four and I figured the Gamma Array would also wait until tomorrow. I drove straight back to Renoir Base.

So I tore a strip off him. Why would a man with any intelligence risk the mission, risk his life, and risk my life, too? There was plenty of air to do the simple task at hand, but no. He has to linger outside until he's empty and has to use the emergency reserve to get inside.

She gets upset over nothing. I had a full reserve of air minus three breaths when I returned. That's what it's for.

Don't think that's the only emergency he's created. I've worked with him before. We were on a Lunar Geographical survey mission together: Tycho-435. One shift, instead of suiting up with the rest of the team, he stayed behind. Ten minutes later, he comes out of the lock, but he has to duck because he's wearing big, stupid rabbit ears. I'm serious. They're at least two meters long, made of light aluminum shielding, and he's attached them to his helmet. He came out of that hangar, hopping in the low gravity, his hands like little paws in front of his chest, and when he turned around I saw he even had a little fluffy tail he'd made out of I don't know what glued to his butt. Well, you should have seen the other team members. They were laughing so hard that one guy lost his balance and fell over. One of the women dropped her wrench set in the excitement, and we never did find it. You know how much it costs the Company to ship a top line set of tools like that to the moon? A lot. That set was worth six hundred and ninety-three NewEss dollars. Lost for the sake

of some silly antics. I wasn't his direct superior on that excursion, so I can only assume someone else docked his pay and gave him the suspension he deserved. At least for the rest of the stay, everybody called him "Bunny," an indignity that should have cured him—but I think he actually liked it.

I had some trouble keeping my cache of goodies out of her sight, and unloading it all was the real reason for my transgression against Personal Oxygen Supply Directive 23.4.2a, but she never knew that.

By day 22, I could see the sun was going to rise. By day 33, there was a glow arch on the horizon, like you get on worlds with heavy atmospheres, but on Mercury it's caused instead by the sun's atmosphere peeking over the horizon.

The sun was huge, a magnificent sphere of molten light, sopped into the blackness like water on a paper towel. It spans a quarter of the horizon. While great mountains shrink in awe, valleys fill with pure fire.

The time for cooling was over. There had been 88 days from terminus to terminus; 88 days for Renoir Base to cool before the light pounded it again. We were to stay, watch the first sunrise, and leave before the shadows did. That safety margin was for both psychological and physical reasons. Physically, the base residence couldn't stay cool enough for habitation under Sol's intense scrutiny, and psychologically, the mind wasn't always prepared to cope.

They say that when the sun rises, a person feels naked, crushed beneath that bloated star. They claim your body feels the heaving gravitational tides and senses the light like driven rain. Some claim you can hear the

solar wind whistle across Mercury's desolate hills.

Some claim.

Mercury's little trick during a Perihelion Sunrise had never been observed directly. With two separate sunrises, I expected double the sun-dawn joy.

I knew exactly what to expect, and I was frankly surprised the Company hadn't used previous opportunities to make measurements, since data from solar atmosphere observations between sunrises would have been worth plenty. That Christmas, Ian and I were to be the first.

I worked quickly to be ready, leaving the observations to machines perfectly capable of taking care of themselves with no need for human intervention. Paula had recalibrated, polished, aligned, configured, aimed, tightened, and checked and rechecked every device on the planet including the toilet. Thus, numbers would be gathered, and gathered with cold accuracy and pristine precision, I might add. Humans have a higher purpose. The Company makes good use of its most valuable equipment: people.

People piss me off, sometimes. I told Ian I wanted to recalibrate the color-phasing photometers before sunrise and recheck the circuits on the Archer Spectrographs to ensure thermal stability tolerances were correct, but he always had something more important to do. So with only two hours before the first direct light, I stopped him cold in the airlock for a little conversation.

I had no intention of listening to her. She accosted me at the lock with a list of completely unnecessary jobs. I renewed my air supply, all the while nodding and murmuring fake responses until I finally escaped outside.

Technically, a second surface excur-

sion is allowed by company policy provided the first did not exceed three hours, and the second does not exceed two hours and is performed under direct supervision via constant radio contact with an employee qualified to provide both emergency assistance and complete the task the former employee has undertaken, should the emergency interrupt its completion at a time when it would create a hazard or create a new emergency situation. I know he was barely aware of company policy as I watched him on the monitor.

I knew she'd be quoting regulations to herself as she watched, but I didn't care. The regs are guidelines, meant to protect the company as well as the employee. Regs have never saved my life. Common sense, moderation, and properly maintained equipment. And backup. That's what keeps you alive. I've seen it a couple of times, this trust in regulations, where it robbed workers of plain thinking ability and nearly killed them. I do some silly and crazy things, but I'm not stupid.

Whatever he was doing, it was out of my sight. The external cameras didn't overlap. Suspicion made it impossible for me to work. More and more, I grew furious with the man. Out of sight, doing God only knew what stupid project—I half expected him to appear on the screen with those ridiculous bunny ears again. Finally, after two hours and forty seconds had passed, I suited up. Ordinary radio contact was out of the question, in my mood. Violent physical contact was more to my liking.

She came around the edge of the rock formation just as I was re-aiming the camera. I wish I could have seen her face. She sort of slowed down. And

then stopped. And then took another three slow steps. Her helmet turned my way for a moment, then turned back. I walked over to her side, and together we admired my gangly, glittering, Mercurial Christmas tree.

For the first moments, I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. He'd used scrapped food containers to make intricate foil "needles" and a discarded copper landing strut for the tree's trunk. Four spare condensers had become twinkling spheres hung from the copper branches. There were methodically torn strips of reflective insulation hanging as tinsel and a vaguely star-shaped iridium alloy detector precariously balanced on the top. All spare parts or scrap, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with tears. I really had wanted a Christmas, I guess.

"Merry Christmas," I told her. I figured she probably forgot with all her schedules and lists. Or, she just didn't know how to make one and dared not fail in trying. She walked up close to it. I followed. For a long time, she just stood there. I didn't know if she was mad or happy or what. Just about the time I figured she was going to kick it over or pull my helmet off, she looked down at my hand and took it in hers. The light hit us from behind. Call it solar wind, call it light pressure, call it psychological, but the sun gave me a gentle push, and I took another step forward. Light blazed on the mountain tops and rivered down the slopes as if from a great, melting lake of amber.

Suddenly unshaded, glaring light fired the scraps of metal to incandescence. I'd planned for that. My suit's cooling system revved up about six notches and my face plate darkened against the glare, but it didn't distract me from my flaming, radiant creation. It em-

braced the sunlight, scattering it and illuminating shadows. My heart lifted into my throat. In seconds, bits of gold foil melted into heavy drops on the branches. They dripped off, splashing onto the ground and forming golden stars randomly puddled in the grey dust.

Holding his hand, I felt a bit like a child, again. It was nice for a minute, then I didn't like it anymore.

She let go of my hand. I followed her back to the shelter where we locked and desuited. As I reached for my clothes, I felt her looking at me. I turned and sure enough, there she was, as undressed as I and just standing there, looking at me like she'd never seen a guy with scrawny knees that pointed at each other, sunken ribs, and the posture of a man three times my age. Then I found I couldn't keep from taking my own look; she was flabby with unattractive breasts, cellulite on her thighs, and bluish skin. I was looking at a stranger, until I looked at her face. The familiarity made me uncomfortable.

He looked at me, too. We traded shy smiles, the kind that goes with a shrug, and finished dressing. He looked older than thirty-three. And he had big, clumsy feet, little body hair, and the cold had scrunched up his scrotum and penis so much they were nearly invisible. I saw him looking at my breasts, and my jelly-donut thighs, but I didn't see the disgust I expected. Not that it would have bothered me; I have no time to worry about beauty. The last decade of suiting up with strangers has been spent with far more important concerns, like making sure my telemetry and IA monitors were in the right place, my TempShell had no wrinkles, and any rookies on my team

were properly assisted. Beauty can be someone else's worry.

For a guy who figures he can find beauty in anything, I sure had been ignoring something important. I put it off for one day; no way was I going to do anything more on Christmas Day than relax, read, answer my mail, send a couple of Megs home to my family, and snooze. But the next day was a regular work day, and I put in my time as usual. Then I swiped one of Paula's lists and started at the top. There is beauty in discipline; I just hadn't paid it any attention. She didn't say a thing about it, but I saw a look from her that reminded me of unsuiting in the lock, and the way she'd looked at me then.

I didn't know what he was doing. I didn't know why. The more I knew Ian, the less I knew him, and that didn't make any sense to me at all. The worst part was that I spent time every day looking at the tree on the monitor. He'd stop and watch me wasting my time, then move on as if there was nothing to say. What I wanted was to show him how the zinc had become hot, had melted and then frozen into waxy, metal rivulets when the shadows returned. I guess he'd thought of that.

It was time to go out again. Before I knew it, she had suited and left without me. I finished what I was doing, and followed.

Everything had reversed. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and Ian's tree stood in shadow again. On the scrappy little thing, melted zinc had refrozen into long, silvery stalactites. Or stalagmites, I couldn't remember. As an excuse to say something, I asked Ian which term was correct. "Icicles," I told her, thinking it

wouldn't do, thinking it would make her mad, but I heard her smile. A little trick I learned.

"It won't last," I told him. Mostly, it was for me that I said it. I didn't want to like the sparkling mess of melting metal so much that I would hurt to be without it. We both knew the tree would be unrecognizable by the time this area reached the west terminus and the sun finally quit its torture.

That didn't matter.

I told him I was sorry about the things I'd said to him. I told him that he was good person to work with, smart, competent, and that others could learn a lot from him. It was true, and I don't know why I always thought the opposite.

I'd always, and wrongly, thought her confined by perfection. But discipline was her beauty. Realizing that changed how I felt. Never, never before did I think I would actually care what she thought of my efforts—I did more than enough to earn my wages but, I have to admit, I actually liked to hear her say it. Even if she was just trying to be nice.

He said something else. I don't remember what it was.

I had to tell her she was beautiful, but I know she didn't understand. She thought I meant something like her smile, or her eyes or tits or something like that. I remember sighing and shaking my head while she looked at me from behind an opaque faceplate.

He was trying to be nice.

Eventually, Mercury had to live up to its reputation, and the climbing surface temperature reduced our tree to a lopsided framework standing in a few shimmering pools of melted zinc, gold alloy and crumpled iridium. I felt bad about leaving someone else the mess I'd made, but our suits couldn't take the full force of the sun for long enough to do any good. Our schedule sent us home.

I had a list of last-minute jobs, including cleaning up that tree. Ian talked me into leaving it for the next crew. We spent some of the time on the important tasks, and some of the time we just talked.

We did the important tasks, then sat together awhile. This way, I shared a little bit of my dreams, and Paula shared a little bit of her regimen.

Ian was much better for it.

She certainly was. •

AUTHOR: PRESTON HAPON: "I want sex. I want money. I want fame. I get food. Maybe I'll write another story: 'Blonde Swedish Stewardesses Who Are Actually Princesses, from Mars.'" Suddenly, I'm hungry. Hmmm. This is story #4 in *ON SPEC* for me. Nothing could make me more proud of my short stories, except to be writing about #5, of course. 'One One,' my story with the weird title, is one of my favorites. Enjoy."

ILLUSTRATOR: MARY MacVOY is a freelance illustrator and all-around creative wizard who has worked out of Toronto for the last three years. To reach her, call (416) 657-6249.

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.

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Ms. DM, of Gibsons, BC, comments and asks:

Q I am tired of house cleaning. Can Mr. Science help to provide relief?

A There are but two possibilities. The first is simply to give up house cleaning. After all, it will simply get dirty again. The second choice is to build one of the new self-cleaning ceramic houses. When such a house needs cleaning, one simply removes the few flammable pillows and sheets from the premises and turns on the self-cleaning electrical system. In a short time the house will be heated to about 900 degrees Celsius, and all dirt will simply be burned off of the ceramic surfaces, with all smoke vented safely outside. Later, when the house has cooled, you can return to admire the spotless character of your domicile. This method can be truly beautiful to observe when performed during the summer (when you can remain outside for the entire night) as, in the darkness, your entire house can be seen glowing cherry red!

Mr. JG, of Peterborough, ON, asks:

Q Why are wire twist-ties green?

A It is not the fact that wire ties are green that is important, but the colors that they are not. The green appearance of wire ties means, of course, that light of other colors is being absorbed. If one were to look at light reflected from their surface with a spectrophotometer of sufficiently good resolution, one would see that the reflected light spectrum consists of a myriad of dark voids between the bright areas. This was accomplished by the addition of a variety of dyes to the paper surrounding the wire core. It was intended to be an automatic item identifier and price reader for use in stores. The system was expensive and unstable, as many dyes are not adequately light-fast. This invention was replaced by the modern bar-code reader, but so many experimental green wire ties were made that we still see them today. •



Changes and Identifications

Michael Mirolla

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

A. Changes

At each entrance, morose—yet quick to grin—security guards, hands held casually behind them, refused Becker entry. At the same time, they let others in with a nod of the head. And a studied politeness. There was the smell of slickness and oil about these guards and their facial similarity—the rectangular chins, the Roman noses, the bloodless cheeks—heightened the idea they might be mechanical. But, of course, they weren't, as Becker would occasionally catch them scratching their foreheads just below the hairline—or sneezing strenuously. Or sneaking off to have a leak behind the nearest shrubbery. Guards were positioned at the exits as well. He knew these were exits because the doors would only open outwards and because the guards had their backs to him. After circling the building once, he found himself at the front entrance again. There, behind the first guard, sat another whom he hadn't noticed before. This guard lay sprawled on a folding chair, in front of a desk that was much too small for him so that his legs stuck out from beneath it ludicrously, like a second-grader who has failed so often everyone's lost count and who is now on the verge of puberty. Becker shouted, demanding to be let in. The sprawled guard only grinned, with his studied politeness, and shifted position, practically taking the desk with him. Becker pleaded. He had to gain admission, he said, before his left leg atrophied completely. The guard looked up with infinite patience and asked for his papers. Papers? What papers? Can't you see I'm ill? The guard put down his pen and lifted his eyes skyward, shaking his head in unison with the other guard who was patrolling listlessly back and forth. Then, in a voice one would use to lecture a child, he pointed out that, as this was a hospital, sick people alone could be admitted and then only after written proof of their illness had been produced. Proof? You want proof? Look at this. Becker pulled up his left pant leg and showed the guard his limb. Look, he said, it's withered to practically nothing. What more do you want? But the guard said he was hardly qualified to determine whether or not the man before him

was ill, now was he? That was for those with higher certification than he had received, wasn't it? And, to show that there should be no hard feelings, that he shouldn't take it personally, the guard leaned over and whispered confidentially that, in his opinion, the leg did seem a trifle undermuscled. Doesn't it look pretty bad, he said to the other guard, motioning him over. The other guard examined it from a safe distance. He agreed that it looked positively unhealthy, the distaste showing on his face. Now, if it were up to us, the sprawling guard said, I wouldn't hesitate to press this button, to release the electronic lock and let you in. But look what happened to that last person who got in without the proper papers. Eh, he said to the other guard, remember that? The other guard made gagging noises and held his stomach. No, not a pretty sight. I think for your own good you'd better get papers. And plenty of them. Over-authorization never hurt anyone—especially when it comes to getting medical treatment.

The first doctor Becker visited (to obtain the proper papers) told him, as he felt the shrivelled limb, that there was nothing—absolutely nothing—wrong with his leg. That he couldn't move it was simply a misplaced wilfulness on his part. The doctor treated him instead for a slight cut over his right eye. He had obtained this while trying to sneak into the hospital the previous night. After being denied entry at the front gate, he had circled the grounds one last time and there, miraculously, was an ivy-covered window which had been left slightly open. But no sooner had he climbed in than he was seized by two guards who had obviously been waiting there all along (thus explaining the inexplicably open window). They dragged him along a dim corridor, undressing

him on the way, and brought him into a room that was bare except for a straight-backed wooden chair with restraining devices and a horrifying black apparatus (his mind registered giant ant in velvet opera cloak). This apparatus faced the chair at a distance of a meter or so. The guards sat him in the chair, his shrivelled scrotum clammy and cool against the seat, and tied him down. He heard a switch and was blinded by a bank of spotlights fastened to the ceiling. This was torture equipment, he found himself thinking, and I am about to endure some. "Surrender to" was perhaps a more appropriate description as his mouth was already open, already spewing out a flood of confessions, and he was dangerously close to losing control of his sphincter. There was a click. His atrophied leg twitched. Then a whirring sound, like machinery repositioning itself. The guards lifted him, chair and all, and turned him sideways. Another click. Then, they dressed him as he was dragged back through the same corridor to the same window. One of the guards gave him a hand up to the window sill and pushed him out. The window locked behind him.

It was only in the doctor's office the next day, as he yawned when ordered, that he realized what they had done to him. No torture, he thought. Just an infusion of some deadly radiation, set to send his cells into uncontrolled fission or urging tiny tumors to blossom in his brain like the petals of scavenging flowers. The doctor assured him this was impossible and refused to give him a card stating he was sick, although he did put a bandage on his forehead and told him to avoid infection. Those tiny scabs can be the most dangerous.

Becker tore the bandage off the moment he stepped outside. Nor were any

of the other doctors any more helpful (one of them going so far—while making out his automatic bill schedule—as to say the new system of free medicine had created a nation of hypochondriacs and socialist shirkers). Each patched him up in some way or other, according to his specialty: the cleaning up of the original wound on his forehead (infection, young man) and the putting on of a new band-aid; treatment for chronic constipation and hemorrhoids; cure for a wart; vitamins for iron-poor blood and bad eyes.

No longer able to lift the leg at all and forced to drag it behind him, Becker was provided with a pair of crutches by the last doctor he visited. ("This is not an admission that there is something wrong with your leg," the doctor said in writing, "but a way to ease your psychological trauma caused by rebellion against the natural order of things, i.e. trying to be what you are not.") The trauma increased when he removed his clothes that evening. The leg was definitely shrivelling and, in the faint yellow fluorescent light, it resembled a rotting tree-trunk filled, perhaps, with fat juicy maggots, wriggling just beneath the skin. He touched it with a shiver of sexual excitement and a hint of revulsion, shutting his eyes as he passed his hand gently over the gnarled surface, the thickly-knotted skin like bark. What kind of perverse blindness prevents them from seeing and helping me? he asked himself. But he realized, upon asking the question, that that was too high-blown and a bit ridiculous: theirs was the natural state; he was the freak.

On returning one more time to the "hospital" (always with the thought that this would be the day they let him in, welcomed him into their fold with open arms), he was greeted instead by full-

sized posters of himself as he looked the night he was caught. They were pasted on to the doors: the naked, wide-eyed, horribly frightened creature on the chair, staring out at the world without comprehension. As much as he tried, he could place no distance between himself and the rotting body in the photographs. The camera had caught with uncanny insight the fear, the bladder-emptying horror, and the leg's decay seemed three-dimensional, as if it could wrinkle the very paper itself. The whole effect was completed by a brown-and-black caterpillar that crawled over the poster at the front entrance, pushing its crutchless, rhythmic way towards the shrunken genitalia. There was, however, no cut on his forehead. Ah, easily explained, he thought. They had retouched it so that no one would get the false impression they'd hurt him. The radiation? He dismissed it as wishful thinking. This was the real torture.

The guards were as fixed as ever, morose yet on the verge of smiling—all except for the one who had spoken to him the first day. This guard stood up upon seeing him (knocking over the desk) and greeted him as a long-lost friend. He then asked him to autograph one of the posters. He was collecting them, he said. This one (a wide-angled shot of his distorted mouth screaming in anticipated anguish) was particularly good, an excellent example of psychic projection, the twisting of the time-space continuum to suit individual needs. ("A student of quantum mechanics and special relativity," he said shyly, rubbing his hands like a school child. "My one passion.") But when, after signing the poster, Becker asked the guard how long it would be before they let him in, he was answered with a swift kick to the stomach. Then, he was helped up and

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told to get on his way for now he wouldn't be let in under any circumstances. He was a marked man. The other guards gathered around to watch, forming a circle about him. At this point came his worst moment since he had first noticed the atrophying leg. He fell to his knees and grovelled before them, begging and crying to be let in, groping for the nearest pant leg, hugging and kissing and licking a mud-encrusted boot. A warm stream showered him across the back and head. Thank you, thank you, he murmured, bowing even further so that his face touched the ground, so that he could allow himself to be mashed into it. There was laughter, fading laughter, and crude remarks. When he finally lifted his head, he found the guards had returned to their posts and he was pleading before his own picture.

While lying on his bed, checking the law books for loopholes and the medical journals for names he might affix to his disease, his left arm suddenly failed to respond. Turn the page, his brain ordered. The solution is on the next page. But the arm was a dead weight: there it lay cool and completely detached from the cares of the rest of the body. As if it had shucked off its sweaty encumbrance and become ephemeral, devil-may-care. His worst fears were being realized. Soon, unless he received help, his body would become completely useless, sapless, dried up. Disguises! Perhaps a disguise might work? His arm twitched one last time (more like a tickle) and then expired. If the guards didn't recognize him, they might let him in, as they'd let in others with no visible physical defects, others who seemed to him perfectly healthy. But the old Indian with the long white braided hair and soft leather vest was stopped and politely detained. ("I

have my rights," the Indian said proudly. "Native rights. Treaty of '91.") It had been the cut on his forehead that had given him away. He limped off on one crutch, the left arm dead against his side, already shrivelling and turning grey. Only later did he remember that it couldn't have been the cut on his forehead that had given him away: there was no cut on his forehead in the poster. Ah well. Maybe the treaty of '91 had been abrogated along with all the others.

And then the true nightmare struck him: what if, at an impossible distance from the "hospital," his other leg went? Whom could he count on to lend a hand, especially as they kept insisting there was absolutely nothing wrong with him? Roll all the way? Or squirm? No, the topography was very rocky and uneven (it was a terrible struggle navigating it with crutches let alone on his stomach) and the chances were very good he'd be run over by one of the tank-like—forever speeding—cars, squashed like an overgrown grub. He decided, while he still had the strength, to do the logical thing—and that was to sleep on the well-kept and manicured grounds. That way, if there ever should be a change of heart or policy, he'd be right there, reminding them of their error, an object of pity they couldn't ignore. The guards—perhaps being cognizant of the fact their union had recently ratified the Protocol on The Banning of Cruel and Unusual Punishment—made no move to eject him when he put down his sleeping bag beside a little brook that babbled its way through the grounds. The only condition was that he refrain from eating the flowers. He told them he never ate flowers, but he did that night. Splendid rose petals and a whole carnation which he simply enveloped with his

lips and sucked in. The next morning he received a severe thrashing from his old friend, the head guard (who now kissed the posters quite openly and rubbed himself against them with the abandon of a moonstruck lover). Becker was told this wasn't for eating the flowers—understandable under the circumstances—but for urinating on them. He insisted he'd done no such thing. The guard threatened him with worse beatings if he didn't keep quiet. After all, it was he who'd sought them out, begged entrance, pleaded to be allowed to stay on the grounds. It was only natural he'd be at their mercy.

The fatal day arrived several weeks later. The numbness crept up along his groin, down his shoulders to his chest, across his face and scalp-line, coming to a point at the top of his head. This is it, he said. He could no longer move. He lay on the damp sleeping bag and shifted his eyes to the left and right. Then he blinked them. Even though it had started to rain—and from the hiss he could tell there was more than water in the drops, he deemed himself fortunate to be on his back. That way, he could at least see the sky for the last time, with the lines of factory smoke curling across it and shredding its leaden predictability. Instead of feeling heavy and awkward, as he imagined it would feel, it was as if his body simply wasn't there. There was only a dead space, a blankness, between him and the world. Shadows flitted across his eyes. This is it, he said again, and without even the indignity of soiling my pants. First a shadow, then nothing. But it wasn't it. It was only the head guard peering down at him, waving papers scrunched in his fists, making angry, concerned noises about how come he hadn't applied to them earlier, and why had he, in his stubbornness,

waited till he was so grievously ill. Four guards lifted him up. Ah, now they would carry him to an empty field somewhere strewn with garbage and rusted cars; they would dump him into a shallow hole, toss earthworm-y dirt over his face; they would abandon him to uncivil creatures who would start by eating his extremities and finish with his still-beating heart. Or polish his skull clean from the inside. Six of one; half-a-dozen of the other. Good-bye, he said to the sky as it rained harder and harder, as it came down in steady acidic bursts. Sweet dreams. My end is here. But it wasn't, of course. For the guards carried him ... not to a garbage heap ... or shallow hole ... but inside ... into the "hospital"! Yes, the door clicked open and drew inward. If he had been able to speak, he would have been speechless. For this was acceptance at last. All the months of suffering hadn't been in vain. Welcome, the head guard said, walking along beside him a while and patting him on the shoulder. They placed him on a foam-mattressed bed and left. He stared up at the ceiling. It was a fresco: a man with a hideously terrified—and terrifying—look on his face was being dragged down into ... into ... he couldn't see any further, couldn't turn his head far enough. Someone smoking a pipe came in and leaned over him. His breath was aromatic, almost sweet. He left. Another person entered and removed all Becker's clothes. Then the room suddenly filled with people, pouring in from every direction; bright yet gentle lights were focused on him, bathing him in warmth; rubber-gloved hands reached down for him, probing his mealy flesh. Just in time, a deep bass voice said. Only the elementary visual and aural functions still intact. Amazing. Observe, gentlemen—and ladies—observe how the

human brain protects itself to the end, wraps a neuronal sheath about itself. Here we have a human being of average capacity (or a little under, in truth) reduced to the level of a moron: sans sensory perception, sans motor control, sans speech. Yet distinctly alive and ready to fight. We too must fight, gentlemen. This is our greatest challenge yet. We must reverse the general trend to atrophy, get the cells to regenerate without carcinogenic overkill and then restore the body's higher capabilities. Following that, our little moron here can rejoin society as a perfectly-functioning human.

It was the cut on his forehead that they treated first—or perhaps used it as a way to access the rest of his insides. Then they performed numerous mysterious operations on his arms and legs: pumping out fluid, pumping in fluid; cutting open veins, closing up veins; disconnecting nerves, reattaching nerves. Finally, they opened his chest and either put something in or took something out or else perhaps did both through a synchronized process Becker couldn't follow. And he had the chance—to follow, that is—for he was awake throughout and the operations and procedures were projected on a giant screen above his head. But, no matter what they tried, nothing seemed to do any good. The voices around him, once so trilling and excited, became despondent and lackluster, followed by a general slackening. They also became fewer and fewer until only one or two were left, plodding stubbornly on. Becker didn't mind, however. He fancied that his brain, cut off from the circuitry needed to run his body, was developing resources of its own. He began to see things beyond his line of vision, to move without moving. While the rest of him

was barely kept alive through machinery both arcane and distant, his mind scuttled off into corners he'd never envisioned before, angled impossibly, cut off from logical surmise and left to dangle, left to twist in a wind without meaning. At one point, he had the distinct impression he was looking into the future, was actually seeing it unfurl before him. Or going back and reconstructing the past. But who could tell? Who could he tell? And what was there to tell?

And then quite naturally one day—weeks, months, years afterwards—the connections to his body reopened. It started as a tingle in the big toe of his left leg, a wiggling he couldn't resist. Then, he jerked his left arm to scratch his forehead, knocking off a clot of dried blood and feeling the raised surface of the scar beneath. The mind that had flitted off, that had bunched itself into one tight corner, that had seen the future, that had reconstructed the past, came back to its mundane self. He was healed. For some three days and nights he lay on the bed and rubbed his muscles. He could feel no scars from the operations—except the one on his forehead. Then he practised screaming. No one came in to see how he was doing. In fact, when he finally got up to look around, he found the place deserted. Cobwebs formed queer patterns across the window. On touching one, it made a twanging noise, a melancholy melody. Steel. A strange bluish-orange sun managed to light up the fine metallic dust that covered the corridors ankle-deep. It rose into the air as he walked, becoming so bad he had to put on a surgical mask in order to breathe.

He explored the rooms. All were in the same condition. In one of them he found the apparatus that had so frightened him with its clicks of deadly radia-

tion. It was busy taking pictures of the empty chair and the floor, looking about like a spinster school teacher, moving in a broken pattern that always brought it back to the same place. He counted the number of steps it took before the process repeated itself: seven; eleven; seventeen. In another room were all types of knives and scalpels that crumbled when he touched them. In a third, mounds of his photographs, both full-face and profile. They too were yellowed and crumbling. The rest of the "hospital" was empty save for the metallic dust. He stepped out into the garden. It was overgrown with weeds and vines. The brook had dried. It smelled of urine and was caked with a coating of yellowish salt crystals. He turned back towards the hospital. To his surprise, the life-size posters still flapped against the doors. They were all worn out about the lips and genital areas. He was getting ready to walk away, to leave it all behind, when he heard the snap of a dry twig. What a surprise! For there, coming around the corner and moving more mechanically than ever, was his old nemesis, the head guard. He had aged to the point where recognition was vague but became all too familiar when he stooped down to kiss one of the posters. They embraced.

Like two old cronies, arm in arm and leaning against one another, they went off down the middle of the road, now suddenly flat and devoid of traffic. The "hospital," framed by a gigantic half-sun from which flames licked the sky, watched them growing smaller and smaller. Then, with a sigh that could have been relief, collapsed. Both Becker and the guard screamed, each slapping at his own forehead. When they pulled their hands away, the scar was gone. The guard made sure to clutch his friend

Becker all the more tightly; Becker made sure to clutch his friend the guard more tightly still.

B. Identifications

Helpless, waiting to be admitted to the hospital, I was left to puzzle over a strange pattern in the middle of the huge flower garden where I had been deposited by the attendants. This pattern—or design—was only several yards to one side of me and consisted of a cluster of rose petals encircling a white cigar-shaped cocoon about six inches long. These petals varied in number—sometimes seven or eleven; sometimes thirteen and even up to seventeen—but they always surrounded the cocoon completely, with no overlapping and no space between them. The first time I saw the pattern I thought the rose petals must have fallen from the trellises overhead and, by one of those fluky coincidences, had formed themselves into the perfect symmetry. This idea had to be quickly abandoned, however, when the same pattern appeared on the following day—with the number of petals having changed yet still in that exact concentric circle around the cocoon. Even more astounding was the fact that, as the days and weeks went by, the petals never wilted, shrivelled or decomposed. Either someone was replacing them or they were made of some sort of nonbiodegradable material. I refused to acknowledge this combination of plasticity and everlastingness, a newfound ability of inanimate objects to alter themselves to fit the situation. So I had to assume that the petals were ordinary rose petals and that someone was adjusting them around the cocoon during my frequent fits of feverish sleep.

Of course, it would have been simple if I could still move—a touch, a reach-

ing into the cocoon and the heart of the matter would have been exposed. But, by then, both my legs and at least one of my arms were already in an advanced state of atrophy and I didn't have the strength to turn over on my cot, let alone slither across the grass. Now that I have been healed and can once again explore freely, the garden has long since overgrown. No, not overgrown. That's too mild a way of putting it. The garden is no longer recognizable as such.

(As I lay there, I had plenty of opportunity to develop a certain sharpness of thought, at once interesting and pathetically useless: If what has been for some time a garden can't be seen amid the jungle, does it still exist? Does the invisible statue lay dormant inside the solid stone block?)

My initial candidate for the position of cocoon caretaker was a small boy who showed up each morning to wander the grounds. He seemed to live within the hospital itself and the garden was his backyard. His alabaster, almost translucent skin and the dark clothing he wore made a startling contrast amid the colorful flowers that blossomed on all sides. And his oversized eyes gave him a prematurely aged look, the look of someone wise beyond his years. But, after the first day, I realized he couldn't have been the caretaker. Not only did he not tend the petals but actually pretended not to notice the pattern.

He amused himself instead on the banks of the nearby brook with tiny fragile sailboats that always sank with the least wind. These he made no effort to retrieve although the brook wasn't more than waist high at its deepest. Apparently, he didn't care, having an inexhaustible supply provided by a toy maker somewhere within the hospital.

And, when he grew tired of the boats,

he liked to wreak havoc in the other parts of the garden, slicing the heads off flowers and climbing trees to pick the fruit even before it ripened. But it was only when he came close to the design that I would break into a sweat. I had visions of his stepping on the cocoon and splatting it with a careless twist of his shoe, while I could do nothing—not even warn him to stay away. My fears, however, were groundless. Not once did he do it any harm—not even the time he hurled a homemade lance and missed it by less than a foot.

I was a different matter. While never actually admitting my presence, he did enjoy tripping over me, spitting at me, kicking me (several times in the groin), and jabbing me with sharp sticks. He even released a wasp on me, holding the open end of a jar against my neck and striking it with his hand till the creature bounced about crazily, seething with anger. I felt nothing when it stung over and over again.

Then there was the lady—or my lady, as I liked to think of her, although she too never acknowledged me. During the first week after I'd been left there, she appeared each night wearing only a shimmering nightgown. Her walks were a thing of beauty, filled with a gracefulness that mocked my shrivelled limbs, my chunky and unhealthy reality. There were times when, at the right angle, the moonlight seemed to stream right through her, leaving only the tinged outlines, the haunted form, the wisp that tugged at my recalcitrant flesh. I could be forgiven for believing she was some sort of ghost, a vivid spirit conjured up from an imagination unchecked by any sense of reality. But that idea lasted only until she was set upon by two of the ever-morose-but-always-on-the-verge-of-smiling security guards. Forced to

submit to their crude advances, she simply lay on the ground, making no attempt whatsoever to resist or even to scream for help. And, as she waited patiently, the moonlight gleaming from her belly, they fell over each other, tearing farcically at each other to be first. Hardly had they penetrated her when they were rolling off into the dirt, howling and clutching their genitals, screaming that they were on fire, that flames were spewing from their urethras. With the guards still trying to rip away their own members, the lady got up and calmly continued her walk through the garden. But it was the last time I saw her, as if some sacred bond had been broken, some secret agreement designed to keep flesh and spirit apart.

During the week she made her rounds, the lady would stop for a moment each night to clear away the weeds around the design. And, though the rest of the garden became a tangled mass after she disappeared, the circle she had cleared always remained. But I never once saw her manipulate the petals themselves.

As for the security guards, it was inconceivable that they would act as caretakers for the pattern. In fact, their general brutality and the malicious way they stomped about on their rounds made me fear for the eventual destruction of the cocoon. For they daily would pick one section of the garden and scour it thoroughly, to the point where no rock was left unturned. But, on the fateful morning they were scheduled to examine the area around the design, it suddenly occurred to me that they, like the boy, were destined to pass right by it. And that's exactly what happened: either because of some protection (invisibility? the lady's ring of weedlessness?) or because they had strict orders concerning

the matter and were actually looking for something else in their daily searches.

All this, however, distracted me from what I considered the two key mysteries in the garden: What did the pattern mean, if anything? And, after having eliminated the boy, the lady and the guards, who was this caretaker and why did he make sure I never caught him in the act?

As to the meaning of the pattern, there were times when I was certain the cocoon was empty, concealing nothing but a certain darkness, that any movements were simply the stirrings of the wind across an almost weightless series of fibres. And there were times when I was equally certain the cocoon was the jacket of a singular transformation. At those times, I awaited eagerly for the covering to split, for the stretch of wet, mottled wings and the slow rising into acidic air: a creature so enthralling, so exceptional, so marvellous as to be beyond physical description. And it would suddenly all make perfect sense to me: the rose petals were its preferred sustenance; the garden its domain; and I the only one who understood as it perched on my chest and dried itself in the speckled sunlight.

But the feeling that I'd solved the puzzle would last only until thoughts of the caretaker returned. And the need to know who this person was quickly came to dominate all else. I tried to alter my sleep patterns in the hope of catching him or her in the act. It didn't work. I tried to establish some regularity in the alternating groupings of petals and in the cycle of their changes. I found none—except perhaps some tenuous connection with the prime number series: seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen. But what did *that* mean?

Then, on the day following the

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attempted rape, the boy inexplicably dove in after a sailboat and, striking his head against one of the sharp stones, drowned in less than a foot of water. I could see him out of the corner of my eye floating face down, surrounded by a diluting halo of blood. The boat he'd tried to retrieve seemed no different than all the others as it butted repeatedly against his head, with nothing special about it, neither in size nor in intricacy of shape. I, of course, had been helpless to save him—even to call for help. Later that day, the attendants fished his body out of the water with a pike-like contraption and took it away.

No one else came to visit—neither lady nor boy. During the day, I stared incessantly at the pattern, hoping to uncover its meaning by sheer strength of will. At night, I dreamt. In one of these dreams, I suddenly saw myself rising as I lay there. I saw myself walking towards the cocoon and placing my hands around it. Cupping it, yes. And the warmth of those hands broke it open. But no indescribable butterfly emerged, no monarch preened its majestic wings. Instead, a pus-covered, multi-folded, pale-green worm with steel pincers and a massive poisoned spine rose up. It reared and thrashed, jerked and buckled, growing larger and more demented. Then, it began to devour everything around it: the shell, the rose petals, the roses, the shrubs, the trees, the hospital, the sky. Finally, slobbering and hissing, the fermenting juices dripping from its jaws, it made its way to where I was watching myself watch it and started without ceremony on my legs. I awoke, screaming silently. My right arm could still flail about at that time and I slapped

left and right, suddenly aware of all the creatures that had gathered around me, dropping down from the willows, bursting up from the earth.

Somehow, the guards sensed my fears. They began to gather up these innocent slitherers—the drab and the multicolored, the dehydrated and the bloated—and deposit them on me. What made it even worse was that, in the midst of it all, my right arm failed me. I was left completely helpless as the creatures writhed across my body. Or tried to extract themselves from the various cavities in which they'd been placed. This went on for several weeks—until the guards grew tired of the game or found someone else to torture, someone who reacted in a more positive way.

Thus, during my final days in the garden, I was left in peace. Unfortunately, I was no longer able to make out the cocoon because the weeds had grown so high around it. In fact, it was only when the attendants came to fetch me and lifted me up above the grass line that I caught a last glimpse of it. I would like to think that it had grown immensely, changed shape, pulsed, was on the verge of bursting. I would like to believe that, as the attendants carried me towards the hospital, it split and webbing reached out into the world like a gigantic net, enveloping everything in its path.

But the truth was that the cocoon hadn't changed one bit. Not one iota. It lay there—milk white, six inches in length, surrounded on that day by seven petals—the only fixed, immutable object in a world seething with transformation. Not the least of which would be my own once I went through those hospital doors. •

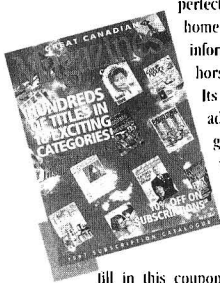
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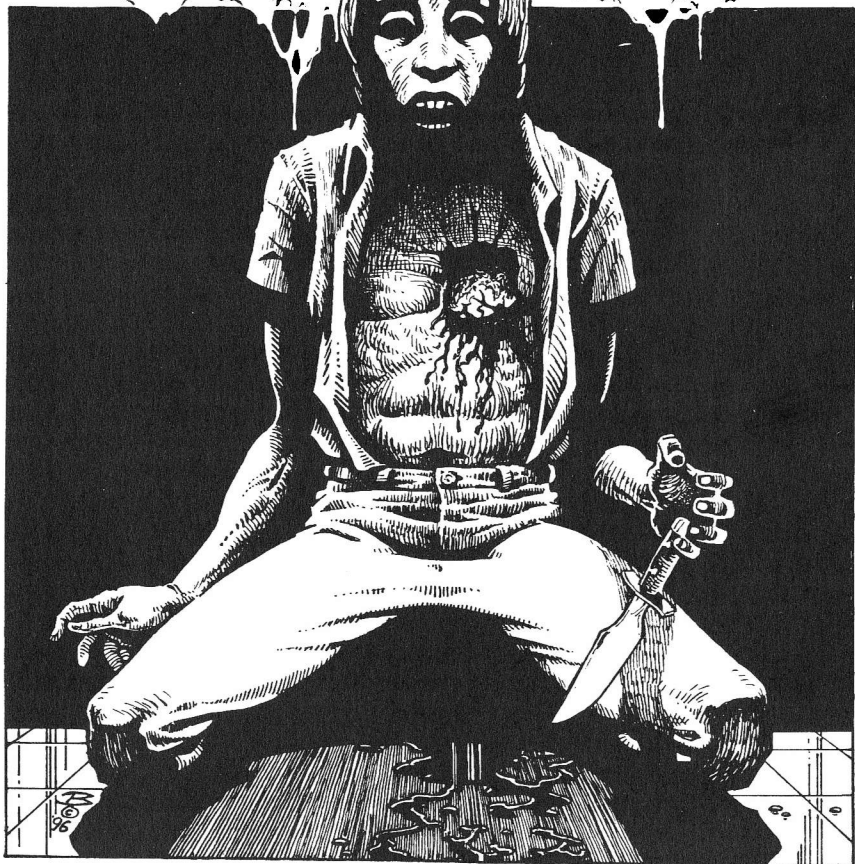
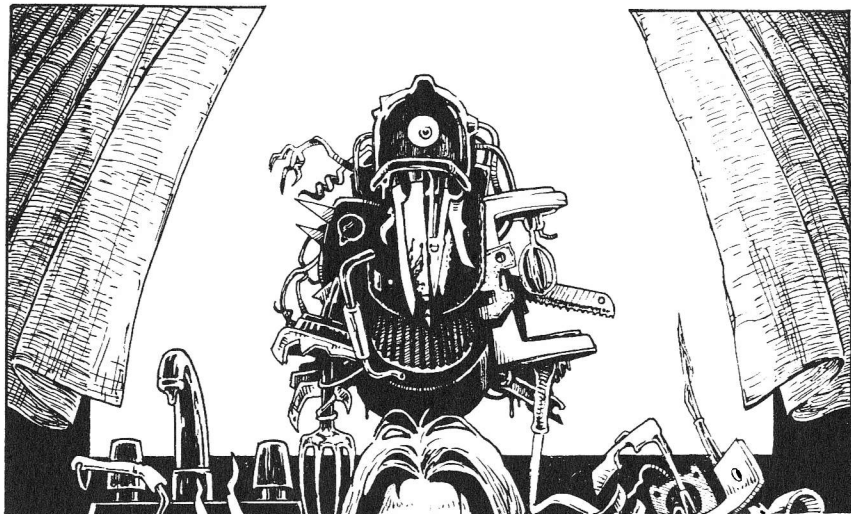
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Empty Interiors

Wayne Santos

illustrated by James Beveridge

Harry was awakened by a dying animal.

It was a dim signal, whispering to his dreaming mind that something had landed on his belly. He ignored it, his mind not yet conscious enough to realize the wrongness in such a thing. But gradually, the patterns of the waking world returned, and he came to the idea that something small, yet substantial, was moving on top of him.

Moments later he registered sound. It was muffled through the blankets, but it was light, and urgent. It was mewling.

"Oscar..." he mumbled groggily.

He fumbled a hand out of the blankets, to push off the stupid thing, and maybe try to get a little more sleep while there was still time. He was initially puzzled, then alarmed, when his hand met not fur, but plastic. It was twitching.

He struggled to get out of bed. Oscar—or whatever it was—slid off and thumped to the floor, setting off a series of weak, pained noises. Harry pulled off the covers. He looked over the side of the bed.

It was a red and white Con-Mart plastic shopping bag. It was tied off at the top with a green wire twist. It was mewling. It was moving.

"Oscar?"

From the kitchen he heard the sound of utensils spilling on the floor, metal clashing, almost laughing. The smell of copper was thick in the air.

Harry slid off the bed and tentatively reached for the struggling plastic bag. His nerves got the better of him and he watched his hands tremble as he unwound the tab, the movements from the bag growing less pronounced by the moment.

He opened the bag. Blood trickled out.

Oscar was an orange tabby. His eyes were a deep blue and he liked to sit by the window for hours at a time, watching the birds on the tree outside. Now he had no belly. Now his insides were filling the room with a smell rich with heat and gristle.

Harry kicked himself away from the bag, screaming.

In his kitchen more utensils crashed to the floor.

Okay, he told himself, *this is bad. This is really serious, this is downright, fucking dire.*

He forced himself to calm down, to review what was going on and deal with it. First order of any rational human being; assess the situation. There was another crash from his kitchen.

Thief.

Thief that liked eating utensils.

Thief with an attitude and a really bad sense of humor.

Thief that was about to have a parting of the ways with his right lung.

He went to the closet and opened it as quietly as he could, reaching past the garbage bag full of marijuana he'd been keeping for Salvatore and pulled out the sheathe with his survival Bowie knife, complete with mini-wilderness kit in the handle and a compass on the bottom. He'd never fished with it, never found his way out of the woods with it or even cut anything, but it was a good conversation piece when the crowd was drunk enough.

He pulled it from its sheathe, held it, downwards, ready to stab, its floating, eight-ball compass pointing solidly north. That was somehow reassuring. His cat was dead, his spoons were all over the floor, but at least he knew north was somewhere through the bathroom.

Another crash.

Harry edged towards his bedroom door. Then into the hall. He passed the Bowie knife back and forth between his hands, feeling the weight of it, the idea that it could cut and rend where he could not. He had a weapon. He was tough.

Unless the fucker's got a gun...

And on the heels of that:

No. Don't think. Thinking will stop

you. Just do.

He hefted the knife in his right hand. There was another crash, and he flung himself around the corner assailed by two sudden thoughts:

The first was that he didn't have enough spoons and forks to make all that racket. The second was that he smelled a new car.

Panic seized him, but not before inertia did, carrying him and his fear around the corner and into the kitchen.

"You certainly took your time, didn't you?"

His first impression was that he was suffering from some lingering, marijuana fugue state of paranoid fear for all things mechanized.

Fuck, it could speak...

It laughed, and the room was filled with cash registers slamming shut, bending sheet metal, and a million knives, spoons and forks being thrown against a car.

It looked like the deranged product of some crazed General Electric employee who'd seen *Fantasia* one time too many.

It looked like a crow. A crow with no wings. Made up from the guts of his kitchen.

He could see the remains of his cappuccino machine in its abdomen, all shredded plastic and warped glass, the drink still percolating inside, bobbing at the "two cups" marker. The motors of his cuisinart whined in protest as the thing bobbed on the counter, the size of his chest, its beak a mishmash of scissors, steak-knives and duct-tape, its legs made out of barbecue tongs still greasy from last night's cookout, claws made from forks, taped up thumbtacks and staple sheaves. In what passed for its head, amidst the jumble of sparking circuit boards and insulated rainbow wiring, was a single, human eye, staring out at

him with an intelligence and hate that made him think back to his old days in Catholic school, all that talk of devils, demons, the monsters that knew.

It hopped off the counter in a clatter and looked up at him with its eye. *"You don't look so good, Harry,"* it commented. Its voice a combination of decelerating subway trains and the digitized sample of some nameless Englishman that passed for his clock. *"Would you like something to drink?"*

It parted its legs and cappuccino dribbled out while it laughed, the noise making Harry want to cover his ears and run for shelter.

He felt the Bowie knife gripped in his hands, looked at the thing on his kitchen floor, and suddenly felt very stupid and very terrified.

"Not in the mood? Some orange juice then?" It reached one forked claw towards the table with the fruit bowl. Harry could see his own juice-maker grinding and opening up like another mouth on the thing's back.

Harry turned and ran.

He could hear it moving behind him, the whirl of servos and gears, the low chuckle. It spoke to him as he stumbled out of the kitchen and towards the door.

"Really, Harry... I expected a little more from you. Where's your dignity? Talk to me."

He ignored it. It couldn't be there, so he couldn't really be hearing it. And if, by some cruel trick of God, there really was a bird made of cannibalized kitchen parts enticing him with its English accent and murderous, industrial strength laugh...

Odds were conversation probably wouldn't have been a good idea anyway.

He remembered Oscar.

His adrenaline screamed at his legs.

The door that led out of his house seemed to telescope away from him, a sadistic Spielberg trick of the eye; details becoming brighter, beautiful, more painful as the image receded, intimate knowledge, unbreachable distance. He was aware of every individual muscle in his feet, the way they bent and gave as they pushed closer, further, away from the door.

He remembered a pond, in 1978, a Kentucky summer, insects buzzing past his face like white dust with a purpose, his father throwing rocks into the pool, the receding ripples, moving past the expanse of his vision.

"It keeps going, you know," his father had said. *"It hits the ground and moves on through the dirt, slower, quieter, but it's still there, making waves. Everything is like that. Just because it moves past your limit of sight doesn't mean it ends."*

Harry was remembering the way his father had lit his cigarette after saying that, when the thing landed on his back, bringing him to the floor in a roar of broken gears and dying garbage trucks.

"We're not finished yet, Harry," it hissed in his ear. *"Oh, not by any means. We've only just begun, really."*

Harry shouted something, maybe a "no," maybe a plea, but it was lost in the raw fear that sat in his throat, shredding his voice as it came.

"Did you know," it said, very calmly, very English, *"that in an hour, the average human heart generates enough power to lift almost half a ton of mass off the ground?"*

Harry thrashed. He could feel himself bleed.

"I think that's fascinating..."

He felt one of its legs come away from his back, firmly clamping onto the ground. Crumbs of hardwood flew into the air with the impact. With its other

leg, it rolled him over and dug into his chest.

Harry remembered the knife in his hand. He thrust it towards the thing's eye.

It moved slightly. The knife deflected off a piece of aluminum toaster, sparks flying.

"Ah, ah. You could hurt yourself." The thing stretched out a claw and broke the knife into three neat pieces.

It leaned in; he could see its eye now, a distant, diamond blue. It could have been beautiful but for the veins, the hate that was etched into it.

"I wonder, Harry," and its eye rolled up musingly towards the ceiling. "I wonder just how much your heart can lift? Shall I find out?"

"NO!"

"Oh, I think otherwise," it replied, moving its mouth towards his rib-cage.

Its tongue extended, lacerating his chest.

He passed out, screaming, a dim, detached part of his mind wondering where the thing had found a scalpel.

He woke up to jazz.

It had the tinny, scratchy quality that he remembered listening to on his mother's old Victrola up in the attic. It was Chet Baker.

"This is the most important kind of music, I think."

He opened his eyes. He was on his bed. The bag with Oscar was beside his left leg. Sitting on the dresser at the other end of the room was the crow-thing, watching him.

Harry flung himself back, hitting the headboard. The jazz was coming from tiny speakers in the thing. His chest felt peculiar.

"This sort of music," it continued, "has that quality of going straight to the

center, don't you think? It tends to affect the parts that matter."

"What," Harry rasped. "What are you?"

"Ah. I was wondering when we'd get to that. You me call me the Gat."

"WHAT THE FUCK'S YOUR PROBLEM WITH ME!?"

"Language, Harry, Language. And I don't have a problem with you. At least not any more."

"I don't get i—"

"Your chest, Harry. Look at it. Feel it."

Harry looked down.

There was a hole. It was covered by Saran Wrap. The cavity was still visible underneath the sheen of tautly stretched plastic. He could see silvery wires where his arteries and veins should have been, a mercurial lump pulsing steadily.

He couldn't even pull himself together enough to scream.

"It's the symbolism about the whole thing that I admire," it crooned. "I have your center. The thing that keeps you going both physically and spiritually has been removed. It's almost a poem, don't you think?"

"W—where..."

The thing, the Gat, jumped from the dresser, disappearing from view. It scuttled across the floor, hopping onto the bed. Somewhere along the way it had picked up something; the big old, frilly edged, heart-shaped Valentine's Day chocolate box which normally sat in his closet, filled with old letters. It dropped it on his lap. There was blood on it.

"Go ahead. I think we both know what we'll see."

Harry stared at it, wide-eyed.

"Go on, Harry."

Harry picked it up, felt the gentle pulsation coming from inside. He flipped open the lid, felt a breeze sud-

denly blow through his chest, and looked down to see a meaty mass, cradled in a spiderweb of silvery wires, beating quickly, regularly.

The Gat's claw reached out and grabbed the box back. Harry felt as if something had suddenly dragged him by the chest. He watched his heart wobble inside its silver cradle, and felt queasy.

"Do you remember," the Gat said, its voice calm, conversational, "how you once had your little spiritual crisis? How you wandered the earth and all those disciplines? The Taoists, Christian Scientists, Hindus... The Romanticists, the Transcendentalists?"

Harry watched it as a claw gently traced the outline of the open box.

"You were always so ... obsessed. This whole idea of spirits, balance, things leveling out on practical and metaphysical levels ... all for what? Peace of mind? Knowledge for its own sake? And then this. This sudden turn of existentialism, really, how boring. Does the mystical and spiritual suddenly mean so little to you now?"

"How did you do... Why am I still alive?"

"Silly boy. Because I want it. Because you want it, and I can't go against you. Not in the deep ways, anyhow."

"I don't get it."

The Gat laughed, its eye pinning him against the headboard. "You don't have to, Harry. It's not about understanding. It never has been. It's always been about **knowing**. You seem to have forgotten that somewhere along the way. That's why I've done this. You don't need it any more."

His mouth dropped open. "What are you talking about?"

The Gat place a claw directly over the box. "I'm saying I'm keeping it. It's mine now. You've relinquished possession by

way of dereliction. Now get out."

"What?"

"Leave. I promise you'll be fine. You can go out into the world and keep on the way you have. Maybe someday you'll be ready for this again." A claw hovered just over his heart. "But I wouldn't do anything rash, Harry. I wouldn't rely on the world you've embraced to save you. Falling back on such resources could be ... well, detrimental."

The Gat squeezed the heart.

Harry's chest felt it, a bright fire that threatened to consume him in breathless, mindless agony. He writhed against the headboard, gasping.

The Gat released, watching in silence as Harry's hand held itself a few frightened centimeters over his chest, still unwilling to touch it.

"Now get out, Harry. Get out before I kill you."

Harry stumbled off the bed. The Chet Baker stopped, replaced by Ella Fitzgerald crooning. Harry walked towards the door, the Gat behind him, the box held in one limb as it hopped along.

He got to the door and held the knob, turning around one more time to look at the Gat.

"Go to work, Harry," it said cheerfully. "Buy yourself a new car; you deserve that much."

Harry turned the knob and walked out the door. It slammed shut. Behind him a great collapse of machinery thundered amid a laughter that was cold and loud.

Salvatore O'Brian was twenty-seven, born of Irish parents. His mother wrote bad romance novels and his father was a musician with the orchestra, playing the clarinet. His only logical recourse was to outdo them both and become a

performance artist, though some had called it simple fucking around.

He lived in a warehouse filled with the tortured junk of dead aesthetic movements. His latest installation was a piece where animatronic mannequins dressed in everything from sixties mod to zoot suits attacked him with tape measures tempered like steel blades. He defended himself with a pair of blue jeans, shouting out "Comfort! Comfort!" In the end the mannequins would be shattered and he would be naked.

He was up early, drinking Southern Comfort and fixing the elbow joint of a mannequin in the twenties neo-Egyptian motif when his doorbell—a whiplash, followed by someone screaming—went off and someone banged against his door.

He answered it, prepared to give the Jehovah's Witness behind it the berating of his life. Instead he found Harry, standing barefoot, his pajamas covered in blood, his top buttoned up as far as it would go.

"Hey, Harry," he said.

"Hey."

"You need a hospital or anything?"

Harry shook his head.

Salvatore nodded and stepped out of his Japanese sandals. He kicked them over to Harry and thrust the glass of Southern Comfort in front of him. He turned around and walked over to the kitchen zone. He needed eggs, ham, some espresso, toast...

Harry closed the door, slipped on the sandals and walked numbly over to the table. He slumped down and finished the glass off in a gulp. He looked at Salvatore's installation. "You've changed Stella," he said.

Salvatore nodded. "I figured she looked better in swing a dress. It's a nicer cut. Oh, bacon, right..."

Salvatore attended to the stove, lost in the intricacies of breakfast. He knew Harry well enough to wait. It was just a matter of time.

Harry got up and walked over to booze shelf. He picked out a bottle of Glenlivet and walked back to the table. He poured himself a glass.

"Do you remember our confirmation, Sal?"

Salvatore paused at that, and covered it up by reaching out for some pepper. "I guess."

Harry drank the Scotch. "How come your parents did it?"

Salvatore shrugged. "'Cause they wanted my grandparents off their back, I think. They thought it was a big joke."

"My mom and dad, they believed in that shit," Harry said. He poured another glass, but didn't drink it, holding the glass up to his face, watching the Scotch move. "I was standing behind you in line, wondering when we'd get back to our comic-book collection, and my parents were back there in the pews, looking totally serious. It was a big responsibility for them. Their kid was supposed to be old enough to decide whether he was gonna take or leave God."

Salvatore shrugged again. "Yeah, well, Catholicism. Go figure..."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head fiercely. "It's more than that. It's no big deal now, but the whole thing is supposed to be about acceptance, isn't it? I mean, not just God, but everything. It's like someone is saying, 'okay, your parents have been taking on the world on your behalf, but now you can do it on your own. What are you going to accept? What are you going to reject?'"

Salvatore turned to look at him. Harry was staring at the stained-glass window he'd set into the far end of the warehouse, watching the light stream

through.

"What if there's still something to that?" Harry said to no one in particular. "What if the world could still get at you just because of what you leave or take?"

Harry's eyes focused on the glass. He downed it. Salvatore cooked breakfast in silence.

They ate it the same way.

When they were finished, Harry turned around in his chair, his back to Salvatore. He looked down at his chest.

"I was hoping maybe it was a dream," he said over his back. "I thought maybe I just needed to be around something real again."

He turned back to face Salvatore, his pajama top open.

Salvatore's mouth went dry.

"You want maybe I should get some of the tequila?" Harry asked.

Salvatore nodded.

Harry got them some glasses along with the bottle, then told the story.

"So what you're saying," Salvatore mumbled over his third glass, "is that this Gat thing took your heart out 'cause you weren't using it properly?"

Harry was leaning back, his hands over his eyes. "That's the general impression I got, yes."

"Well what the fuck is 'properly,' then?"

"I've been trying to figure that out," he said, keeping one hand over his eyes, reaching out with the other for the glass of tequila. "I think Jung has something to do with it."

"Jung." Salvatore voiced it as a statement but the question was evident in the air.

"Archetypes," he said before swallowing. He bit back the tequila. "Symbolism manifest."

Salvatore shook his head. "I told you that university stuff was gonna damage you. What about the resources stuff? What about detrimental?"

Harry finally looked at him. "That's easy. Nothing real."

"What?"

"No cops. No armies. No ghost-debunkers or wrecking balls. No level-one stuff."

Salvatore thought about the garbage bag full of marijuana sitting in Harry's closet. He liked the way the Gat thought. "And how'd you come to this conclusion?"

"Because it's mine, Sal. Haven't you been listening? I understand that fucking thing. At least a little. We think alike. It knows me, knows my past, my memories. Existentialism, the material world, all the stuff that we're in now, the way I've always thought of it ... it won't let me use that. But I think I can use you. I think you can help me."

Salvatore nearly fell out of his chair. "Get out of my house."

"I'm serious, Sal."

"Why me? Couldn't you read it some bad poetry or something? You've got lots of that lying around in your journals."

"Because you're the only one I speak to any more from the old days. You're my last connection to the mystic stuff, the irrational things. You're the only thing I have now that's not about numbers and corporate ladders."

Salvatore slumped over in his chair. "That thing eviscerated Oscar."

Harry nodded.

"It took your heart out of your fucking chest, for Christ's sake. And you want me to go back in with you to face it?"

"I think you'll be okay. You're not part of me. It only seems to want me."

Salvatore stared at his glass. "We should be drunk by now."

62 Empty Interiors

Harry leaned back. "Funny how mortal terror will keep you sober, isn't it?"

Salvatore snarled and looked away.

"So are you going to help me?"

Salvatore threw his glass onto the floor and stood up, walking towards his closet. Harry would need some clothes. "I think you're wrong," he said, frowning to himself. "I think I must be drunk if I'm doing this."

Harry nodded and poured himself another glass.

Harry lived about seven streets up from Salvatore, in the nebulous zone where neighborhoods hesitantly ended and industrial areas began. The drive back in Salvatore's German jalopy took about four minutes.

They stood in front of Harry's door, listening to the quiet.

"Maybe it's gone," Salvatore whispered hopefully.

"Maybe it's standing on the other side, eavesdropping on us," Harry replied.

"You know, I don't remember seeing any malignant kitchen appliances putting themselves together at yesterday's barbecue."

"I don't think that's exactly how it worked. And you were stoned out of your gourd anyway."

"Well, yeah, there's that, too..."

Harry put his hand on the knob. Salvatore put his hand on Harry's wrist and looked at him with a *My-God-are-we-really-going-through-with-this* expression on his face.

Harry opened the door and went in. Salvatore looked up at the sky. "Hey, God, if you're up there and you feel like, you know, lending a hand or something..."

He took a deep breath and plunged in after Harry. Harry was in the living

room. Or what used to be a living room.

Salvatore let out a low whistle. "Your little friend is quite the interior decorator."

The room had been shredded.

The walls had been cut into, clawed and torn into deliberate designs, mystical configurations that meant little to Salvatore, but which struck a chord with Harry; the so-called sacred geometries. The mandalas, pentagrams, geodesic arrangements that were so fundamental to the spirituality of living, old, and dead cultures. Furniture had been carved into temples of foam and metal springs. The floor had become an arcane labyrinth of wards and symbols.

Harry suspected he'd find the rest of the house in a similar state. Or it soon would be.

"This is not normal, Harry," Salvatore said numbly. "This is right up there with the time a bunch of us tried to summon Elvis in the Gabriella cemetery."

"What happened then?"

"I got drunk and wet my pants."

From somewhere below came the sound of something being broken.

"Is that...?"

Harry looked down at the floor, as if he were trying to see through it. "In the basement."

"This sucks, Harry."

Harry nodded.

"I wanna go home, Harry."

He nodded again. "Let's go. Slowly."

"Wouldn't be so bad living with a lump of metal in your chest," Salvatore muttered as they crawled along the wall. "My uncle Austin does it. At least you can eat whatever you want..."

They descended into the basement.

There was light coming from below. The light of flames. Harry could see the flicker of it, the shadows that danced on the walls. He could hear something

moving; the now-familiar cacophony of metal on metal, tiny motors and joints moving about, somewhere past the bundles and piles of old memory; behind the childhood paintings, the trunk full of junior-high memorabilia, the souvenirs of dusty high-school victories long dead, broken toys long forgotten.

And then he saw it, its eye gleaming, a moving, mechanical ballet, nothing clumsy or ungainly about the way it hopped and turned, almost dancing around an altar of sorts. There was something on it.

"Oh fuck..." Salvatore mouthed behind him.

Harry thought it was shock that prompted the comment until he took the whole scene in and began to realize what was going on.

The thing on the altar was made up of more of his machinery, pieces from his car, his television. It was a little bigger than the Gat, but it was shaped similarly. There was a cavity in its abdomen, a cavity filled with a web of silver. At the foot of the monstrosity was the box, its lid open, his heart beating within steadily.

Another one.

It was making another one. And it was going to put his heart in it.

Salvatore was moving.

Harry was too dumbfounded to do anything but be surprised. Suddenly Salvatore was ahead of him, moving towards the Gat. The Gat stopped what it was doing and stared at him.

"I remember you..." it said in wonderment.

Salvatore pulled out a gun, an old .38.

"Sal..." it said, and began to laugh.

"Sal!" Harry called out.

Salvatore didn't bother replying to either of them. He pulled the trigger. The

room was swallowed in thunder.

The Gat was hit. Parts of its left side exploded in fragments of shattered metal and plastic. It kept moving. It threw itself into the air and hit Salvatore, knocking them both to the ground.

"That won't work on me, Sal," it cackled as it bit at him. "You should know that very well by now."

Things were moving too quickly for Harry's mind to keep up: the gun, the violence, Sal's sudden ferocity—even now he was spitting and gnashing his teeth, banging away ferociously at the sides of the Gat as it attacked him, lost in a blind fury that Harry hadn't known he possessed.

Harry responded by not thinking any more. There was only the urgency and adrenaline left. He leapt past the struggling figures of Salvatore and the Gat. He reached out, making a grab for the chocolate box and its precious occupant.

Behind him, Salvatore screamed.

Harry turned around, ready to dodge, jump, pounce, whatever was required, as long as he got out.

Salvatore clutched at his wrist, blood running between his fingers. The Gat wasn't paying attention to him to him any more, its eye squarely on Harry, its body prepared to move at a moment's notice.

"What do you think you're doing, Harry?"

Harry didn't move.

The Gat took a step forward. "I thought I told you, you're not good enough for that anymore."

"You can't make that judgment," he said in a low voice.

"Oh I think I can," it replied. "I think I'm more qualified than you'll ever be."

Harry broke off to the left, trying to get past it. The Gat casually slid over,

blocking his way.

"Kill it," Salvatore hissed. "Wipe out the fucker..."

"Salvatore can be so impulsive sometimes, can't he?" The Gat's eye remained fixed on Harry. "But that's what's so endearing about him." It moved towards Harry. "Give me the box."

He retreated a step.

"Harry..." It warned.

Behind the Gat, Salvatore stood up, still covering his wrist. The Gat didn't seem to notice. Salvatore stared at it, then at Harry. He turned around and walked towards the stairs.

"Sal!" he cried out.

Salvatore kept walking.

The Gat laughed. "It's because he knows, Harry. He can hate me because he knows. And he can leave you for the very same reason."

Harry backed off some more, his legs bumping against the altar. He turned down to look at the dead machine thing that lay there, its mouth open, waiting for its first breath of life.

"That will be the Burn," the Gat said. "And maybe someday there will be more..."

"You said that someday I could have it back!" Harry shouted. He could feel the box against his chest, the heart inside it beating more rapidly now.

"I wasn't lying," the Gat said innocently. "You simply would've had to have gone through the Burn first." It looked up at him, almost smiling. "I'm really surprised with you, Harry. I didn't think you still had this in you. I expected it would have left when your heart did."

"I liked it where it was."

"Yes, but did you ever ask *it* how it felt about that?"

Harry's mouth opened. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

The Gat looked at him, its stare burning. "**Did you ever ask me, Harry?**"

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Of course you do!" The Gat shouted. "That's what it's all about, knowing! Haven't you listened? The Burn will be free of you, something I never had a say in. I was cast out without a choice, left to wither and die..."

A horrified inkling of the Gat's words sunk into Harry's brain. "You are not a part of me," he whispered.

"I'm sure you wish that. But it always comes back, Harry. The things you do always resonate. The Burn comes from your center. I come from your head."

"I still have both my eyes..."

"And what about your third?" The Gat asked quietly.

Harry shook his head.

"And what about your **third**, Harry?"

"No..."

The Gat screamed out; raw pain, hate, loneliness, fear, the cry of the damned and alone. It leapt on top of him, its claws open. Harry felt it dig into his flesh, felt the burning points at his chest and side. He didn't let go of the box.

The Gat tore at him. It dropped all pretense to intellect and became a broken, mad thing, its only joy in the drawing of blood. Harry could feel his own mind dropping away, replaced by a burning need to protect and run away. The two of them struggled against each other, reduced to animal impulses, predator and prey.

Harry felt it bite deeply into his right leg. He felt the blood, warm and slick as it soaked into his clothing. He gritted his teeth and struck back at the Gat, fists banging and slipping uselessly against the protrusions of the Gat. Neither one of them was particularly interested in

anything except taking pieces out of the other.

Harry didn't know how long they struggled with each other. It was lost in a haze of anger and blood, grunts of fury and pain, until the Gat was suddenly flung away from him, howling, banging solidly into the wall across from him, and crashing to the sounds of crushed metal and broken glass.

He looked up, startled.

Salvatore was standing over him with a bright day-glo crowbar. It had been meticulously painted in a green and yellow checkerboard pattern, festooned with ornaments; rosaries, rabbits' feet, earrings, and tiny fuzzy dice.

Salvatore hefted the crowbar in his hands, feeling the weight of it. His eyes burned on the Gat.

The Gat looked at him, let out a low laugh. A thick, black liquid oozed from its side. *"You always were the smart one, Sal."*

He spat at it and charged.

The Gat responded in kind.

Harry fought to get to his feet, watching as the two of them ripped into each other. The Gat would gouge at Salvatore, and he would ignore the wound, continuing his attempts to hammer at it, swinging the crowbar into its abdomen, knocking at its head, its legs.

Harry watched as the Gat slowed, took wounds.

Finally Salvatore threw himself at the Gat, grabbing its legs with one hand, the rest of its body with the other, keeping the beak away from himself.

"Now, Harry!"

Harry rushed over, afraid and confused as the Gat thrashed madly, looking at him all the while. *"Now what?"*

The Gat twisted itself about, managing to kick Salvatore in the chest. *"I can't do this much longer, do it, do it!"*

"Do what?!?"

"The eye! Take back the fucking eye!"

Harry and the Gat stared at each other. The Gat's struggles increased.

"Harry!" Salvatore shouted.

Harry swallowed and dropped the chocolate box. His left hand grabbed at the Gat's beak, clamping it shut. He reached for the eye and closed his hand around it. He pulled.

The Gat screamed.

He felt the white tingling in his hand as he drew it back, dimly saw Salvatore release the convulsing body. The Gat wasn't in it anymore. It was still screaming, only the scream was coming from his hand, along with a bright, white light.

"The box!" Salvatore shouted. *"Open the box!"*

Harry nodded and did it with his left hand. He flipped open the lid, saw more light burst into the room, and reached down, cupping it in his hand. Salvatore was shouting something else, but he couldn't hear it over the light, over the noises coming from his hands.

It didn't matter. He knew.

He moved one hand towards his face, another towards his chest.

The world was swallowed in a roar of light.

They were back at Salvatore's place.

Harry was sprawled out in one of Salvatore's beanbag chairs. Salvatore sat across from him, a trash bag full of marijuana beside him, rolling a joint.

Harry ran a hand across his chest, felt the reassuring solidity of it and looked at Salvatore, who was intent on his rolling.

"How did you know?" He asked.

Salvatore shrugged. *"It was just wrong. I took one look at it and I wanted*

it dead like nothing I'd ever seen in my life."

"You knew it, didn't you?"

"Sort of. I think we all know something like it. We just don't want to admit it." He finished rolling his joint and put it in his mouth.

Harry leaned over with a lighter. "How come the gun didn't even slow it down and the crowba—"

"It wasn't a crowbar," Salvatore said.

"Sure it was."

He shook his head. "Maybe to you. To me it was my favorite artistic-whatsit."

"Huh?"

"I use it when I'm making," he said, taking a drag. "It wasn't a real world

thing anymore, it was an art world thing. An inner world thing."

"How did you know that was going to work?"

Salvatore shrugged again, and got into an adjacent beanbag chair, sinking in. He passed the joint over. "I didn't know, really. I just figured I'd fight fire with fire. If it was going to turn kitchen stuff into demon stuff, I was going to use my automobile stuff turned into spiritual stuff."

Harry took the joint. He puffed on it.

"How do you feel?" Salvatore asked.

He pondered that.

"Different? At all?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "But I suddenly want to go to Tibet." •

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<http://www.homepage/sage/index.htm>

Flight of the Meat Bees

Derek Kingston Fairbridge

They've come to take me away
In pieces
Now that I'm dead.

I know all of this because I am watching
From above
Or below, or something like that.
I think.

But I'm still close enough
To hear their wings—
A dense wall of hum
That I must pass through
Piece by piece.
I'm still close enough
To feel them suck fermented pollen
From the hole in my stomach.
I'm still close enough
To taste the honey on their feelers
As they flutter and tingle over
What is left of my tongue.
I'm still close enough...
 I'm so far away
In their hive where I will be
Reconstructed
To be fed to the queen
Along with Big Mac dumpster-patties
And uncooked throw-away steaks. •

AUTHOR: DEREK KINGSTON FAIRBRIDGE lives somewhere between
Victoria and Penticton, BC. This is his second poem to appear in *ON SPEC*.



AK96

High Moon

Jocko

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

So yer a golly-geologist, are ya? I've been waitin' to meet a scientist for a long time to see what one would make of this story o' mine. Now, ya kin believe this or ya cain't, but out here on what used to be the frontier, ya saw crazy things some nights. You ever notice that some places have a kind o' power all their own to attract people and events? Well, a place like Split Rock seems to attract strange goin's-on. Now, it happened while I was a grave digger—why, hell, you and me are practically in the same line o' work. That is, I used ta be in the diggin' line. That was years ago, though, and let me just say that dead bodies don't scare me none or make my haloosinate, so I definitely saw what I saw.

Hell, I've made almost as many dead bodies as I've buried! Ya get tired is all—older, and ya want ta settle down and ... forget some of it. Have a bath.

But I never could settle down in Split Rock. And they didn't want me around then neither. I was too much like the edge of an axe, and they were smooth, straight and narrow like the handle. We were all pioneers back then, but I'd never hesitated from puttin' a lead eye in someone's head. So we was all more comfortable with me doin' the hangin's and the buryin's. I got to be near my old friends that way too. Most of 'em died here in this town. Come ta think of it, I helped hang one of 'em.

Now, when I say "friends," I mean we had a patch of the same mean streak in all of us, and I woulda kilt any one of 'em over a poker ante, but that don't matter because a funny thing happens when scum such as we was passes on. I'd gotten sentimental maybe, and I took some comfort in the old days and in workin' by their sides again—those boys who was just like me, except for their bein' deceased.

Old man Jenkins at the mortuary gave me the work because, what with more and more settlers movin' in, he had to expand the business and spend less time diggin' the graves himself. It was agreeable to all parties that I turn my close acquaintanceship with death into something useful.

That is, until one night under a full moon that changed everythin'.

The graveyard was just over the biggest hill near town—out of sight, like people preferred. And they generally kept away because they thought I'd been struck senseless by livin' so close to the graveyard. So I sometimes put off work till nighttime because I liked my privacy, bein' alone there with my thoughts, especially with the light of the moon cool on my neck. I'd get up late in the day, take a spade, a shovel, and a Winchester from my collection of souvenirs from the departed. You see, all those guns on the wall—I didn't have quite so many then. But I'd already got myself a good assortment of fine guns—mostly from the few settlers who could afford the best but didn't know how ta use it. Some of the next of kin would just throw the gun that had failed to save their loved one's life into the grave. And the gunslingers? Well, that was part of the deal Jenkins and me had. I got first claim on any and all clothing and merchandise. I dressed better'n most folk in the town, not that they'd notice since I was mostly covered in dust and dirt all the time.

There'd been a fire, in any case, and I had two burials that night—an older couple, the ... let me see ... the Hansons. That's right. Died in a fire two days previous. Happened at night and started in the barn, according to the sheriff. No one could figure out what'd set the thing goin', as they'd stopped keepin' animals, and the barn was pretty

much empty, and it'd been a cold night.

Luckify it'd warmed up some by the time I had to start diggin', and the diggin' itself was enough to keep the chill away. And I passed the time like I usually did, by talkin' to the boys.

Don't get me wrong—they never talked back, not that I heard nowadays. But I always felt like they were listening—you know? I'd keep 'em up on the town gossip, though I rarely got close enough to people to hear none. And I'd tell them jokes and tall tales—some of which I'd told them time and time again, but I just thought that it was good for them to hear a friendly voice from the livin' oncet a while.

Stringer Pete, Bob McCale, Little Hewie, and Tulsa—he only went by the one name 'cause he didn't want the newspapers to get confused by too many names when they was givin' him credit for the men he'd killed. It never occurred to him that the people of Oklahoma might take exception to their gettin' credit for so many killin's. Turns out his reputation was shorter than his name. Mind you, he was a great shot—he thought quicker than anyone else, ya see. Reflexes is all in the head. And that was precisely where someone shot him from behind, in the Split Rock Saloon.

Pete, Bob, Hewie and me rode together a few times before we split up. But darned if fate doesn't bring the same people back together over'n over again. Like there's only so many faces ya kin meet in one lifetime before you start goin' through them all a second time. The sheriff here took one look at Bob and Hewie the day they rode in, and recognized them from a job they'd pulled on a bank when he was a customer with his hands up high and his eyes open wide. Hewie made it out of town, and they found his body a few days later not

too far from town, pinned under his horse who was also dead. And Bob, well, damned if I didn't hafta put the only necktie of his life around his throat. I kin still hear him now: "No hard feelin's, Half-Burnt."—He called me that because I was the best cook we had on the run, 'cause I only burnt the food half the time, or was it half the food all the time? Anyway, he says, "No hard feelin's, Half-Burnt. I'll stand on your behalf if you'll stand on mine."

"Now, Bob," I says, "our acquaintance will damn us more than all the things we done on our own." And he laughed, nervous of course, and we hung him.

As for Pete, well, he showed up after the sheriff had taken ill during an unseasonable shower of lead, and he asked to take over the job. He asked me why I'd never thought of it, and I told him straight that I'd never known much about the law and had done what I wanted to do without ever understandin' just when I had crossed those lines people were so fond of drawing and that I could not see. I'd never liked him, ya see, and him takin' the job only cinched it that he was a bit of a coward. But then, after some thought, I realized that I was hidin' in the graves I was diggin', and Pete and I became real friends for the first time in all our days together. Then he caught the pleurisy and died.

I see you lookin' at the tin star I'm wearin'—no, it's no souvenir. This one's homemade and I've worn it ever since—look, I'm gittin' ahead of myself. I'll come to that, just you wait.

So there I am that night, just finished the first hole and watchin' my moon-shadow while I rested a spell, and when I turned around and bent down with the spade over the next untouched bit o' earth, I saw my shadow again. I stood

up and looked to my right and to my left—a shadow on either side o' me.

An' when I looked up I saw something that made my blood turn hard so that my veins pained me. Up above me there were two moons—one where it should have been, about a third of the way up the sky, and the other almost directly overhead. And the one directly overhead was makin' ... noises. Well, not noises exactly, but one long sound. Kinda like hummin', but without a tune.

Then it started to glide across the sky until it crost in front of the real moon. It was round and bright just like the moon, 'ceptin' I couldn't see no face on it. Nothin'. And I'll tell you, son, if you never breathe a word to no one, I was scared. I mean, I'd seen everythin' by then that could turn a man's innards around into a hitch knot with a horse pullin' at each end. I'd learnt that no matter what terrible things happened, never to blink, because ya might miss somethin' that was even worse. But I saw that round light move across the moon I was more familiar with and I dove for my Winchester, rolled to my back and shot straight up at it.

Ping! Ping! I heard, so I knew I'd hit it, but it just kept hummin', and that scared me almost as bad as the red light that shot down from it and blasted the ground right next to me. I say blasted, and maybe you think I mean it kicked up some dirt, but it tore a small hole in the earth right next to me, and I rolled out of the way only to forget where I was, and I fell right into the grave I'd just dug. Needless to say, when I got my senses back, I wasn't too comfortable with the cover I was behind. That's when I decided to run for the shack and get the rest of my souvenirs.

When I think on it now, I knew I was scared, but somethin' made me go to the

shack rather than run to the town. I figured the most dangerous thing next to that new moon within the nearest twenty miles was me—if I could just keep my head. I wanted all the guns 'cause I figured that that thing might not go down without a helluva fight. And, yeah, I was even scared that I might not even be able to live out the night. I didn't know what the hell it was, but one thing for sure, it had shot at me and I understood that better'n anythin' else it coulda done. If it'd never shot back at me, I might still be standin' out there today, dumbstruck. But now I knew it could speak my language.

When I made it back outside, I looked up and the other moon was gone. I thought just for a secunt my eyes mighta been playin' tricks with me. Then I looked straight ahead, just down a ways from the far slope of the hill, and I saw some lights, all different colors, like jewels goin' off and on, on top of a little upside-down bowl on legs. I didn't know what to think except that somehow my moon had turned into that thing. Then I thought, "I was lookin' at its bottom." And it made sense—well, not that anythin' else made sense 'cept for that.

I crouched down to my knees to stay out of sight and still get a peek at that bright bowl. When I put my right hand down to steady myself, I nearly shouted out because my fingertips just about burnt right off. The ground was hot and dark in places where the light hit. And now I could see the light had ripped up more ground than I thought at first. The hole was deep enough for me to slip down into, and I did just that, keepin' my eyes ahead of me on that thing. I tried to steady myself to spot all my guns, but somethin' grabbed my arm.

I jumped, but kept myself from

screamin'. It was just a hand from one of the locals that the light had dug up. The whole incident had me so nervous I was even afraid of the dead. Suddenly that empty grave seemed a lot more invitin'.

But just when I was about to move ahead to a less crowded hole in the ground, somethin' by the thing started movin'. A whole mess o' lights flashed in front of it and suddenly it was dark down there again, and I could see some shadows movin', though I couldn't tell just what they was shadows of. In any case, they was movin' towards the edge of the hill where the graveyard was, and I wasn't loaded yet. But it went through my head that at least now I might have real targets, provided that they didn't just go *ping* too.

Mind you, I could tell whoever they was had come a far piece, 'cause I'd never seen anythin' like that bowl, and I got this silly notion that maybe they'd come from ... you know—up there. But I was thinkin' angels or maybe even devils judgin' by their accuracy and the way they introduced themselves.

Then they pulled up out of the shadows., and I could see they was ungodly tall. Two-legged, though, and they moved real slow but with—I dunno, a kind of cockiness. 'Course there was no real way for me to tell, because that was where all resemblance to things human stopped cold. The moonlight was spillin' down them now, and I could see those long thin bodies, purple, brown, dark orange—I couldn't say for sure 'cause they kind of ... shimmered, that's it, from one color to another with every long step. And their bodies seemed to swim more than walk, colors swirling up from them in little spirals. It made it hard to see exactly where their bodies ended and the dark began.

An' the funny thing was, it looked like one of 'em was pulling at the one who was in front. Pullin' him back from the hill and towards the ship. But the front man wasn't havin' any of it, and he suddenly turned and, with a big swipe, hit the other guy an' knocked him down. That fella got up and scampered back to the bowl. A light flashed, the littler one ran back to the bowl, and was gone. The others, meantime, kept comin' in my gen'ral direction. Now I could see clear enough to tell there was five of 'em.

It felt pretty silly, in spite of shakin' a bit, to be sittin' there waitin' for those bogeymen, not even knowin' what they wanted or what they would do if they found me before I kilt 'em. I considered callin' out to 'em to see if they was in a mood for a truce an' maybe to apologize for the impolite way I'd knocked on their door. Somethin' kept me quiet, though. One thing I'd learnt over the years is to study somebody real quiet first, an' then say a few things to test the waters. I'd learnt to never watch a man's lips flap-ping, but to watch his hands. Were they restless? Did the knuckles go white around whatever he was holding? Did he keep them perfectly still, as if they were waitin' for a signal? Did he wave them around or did he keep them close to his body? Then there was the rest of the body. The angle he held his head at, whether he slouched, did he look straight ahead or down at the ground with an occasional glance up as if he wanted to see everythin' but not be recognized?

What about these boys? They all held their long faces up and looked every which way, so I could tell they were new in town. The one in front kept lookin' back at the others, and they all glanced at each other off an' on, here an' there as if— Then I started to wonder if

those boys were lost and got blown by some bad wind my way, or whether they'd come to see if there was room here to settle down. 'Cept they didn't look like no settlers. Ain't it strange? I had no idea what the hell those boys were, an' I just got this feelin' that I knew exactly what they were all about, an' that's why I kept my mouth shut. Ya see, they coulda kilt me in a secunt with that light of theirs, but they didn't. They wanted to come find me in person. No settler woulda ever fired back. Anybody who was lost woulda kept goin' if they were just tryin' to find their way again. These boys, son, weren't gonna let no insult pass, an' they were comin' to pay me the return compliment in person.

Then I knew what was at stake, ya see. If they blow through town an' get what they come for, then maybe next time they come back, or they spread the word that Split Rock's easy pickin's. An' if I scare 'em off with a few shots, then they come back with more next time, and they sneak up behind me and— that's it. An' if I kill four of 'em and one gits away, then more'll come to see who's such a hot shot in Split Rock, and they keep on comin' and comin' until my luck runs out. Or until I died of old age, which was the likelier of the possibilities. Hell, I didn't even know if I had a few good quick killin's in me anymore. But the upshot was that I had to try.

So I started figurin' just what I had to do, who or what I had to shoot, in what order and so forth, when I realized that every which way I pictured it, I ended up dead. Dependin' on how they was heeled. I could get the drop on two of 'em before they blinked—if they could blink, I suppose. Unless that slow way they moved was an affectation, an' they could draw quicker than I could think of a jackrabbit. Let me tell you, I sat there

until what seemed like the next full moon, jus' sweatin', an' the more I sweated, the colder I got, an' I started to shake a bit. The funny thing about the shakes is that even if you get them from bein' cold, your body starts convincing your mind that you're shakin' 'cause you're afraid. An' then, before ya know it, ya actually start bein' afraid. I knew I didn't have much time left to decide. So I tucked a pistol into my pants and grabbed two of the rifles.

I unbent my knees enough so I could get my arms clear over the edge of the hole, and then I swung my rifle up, aimed, and fired twice at the head honcho before I even let out a breath. Then I ducked down and grabbed the next gun and gave 'em more o' the same. By then I wasn't even thinkin'—my mind was as cool and clear as a shady pool.

It was right about then that the earth lit up and exploded all over me. That shook me pretty good, for certain. But I still had my other rifle and a few bullets. The thing was, the side of the hole had come down and buried the rest of the guns. I scratched my way to the handle of one, but that was all I could find before I thought I'd better take another look at my visitors.

They were still comin' towards the graveyard, facin' me now, and they hadn't sped up none, and they sure as hell weren't turnin' tail for their air wagon. An' now I could see they was each carrying a small glowin' thing in one ... hand, I guess. I saw one of 'em point at me and I ducked just in time to catch another dirt shower.

I ain't too shy to say that I let out the first prayer through my lips that had passed up my throat in many a year. "Help me Lord help me Lord help me Lord," all together like that. The same

thing happened durin' one job that went particularly bad, when I was on a roof watchin' for the marshal to come along, and ready to give the signal to the boys down in the bank, when I saw all those train guards come runnin' from the Kansas City bound that'd just pulled into town when we started the job. "Help me Lord help me Lord," I said real low, suckin' in all the breath I could, knowing that He had no special reason to be goin' into the robbery trade, but we shot our way out, partly because I was on that roof, and I kept the guards off the street while the others made it out the back and got me my horse.

So I knew that even if the Lord didn't come to help me, He was free and clear because He could always say that it was me, in fact, that owed Him one.

By then, that other gang was firin' from what felt like all sides, and the ground was just flyin' up all over the place. It was like bein' pinned down by a lightnin' storm, and the lights and the sound were gettin' me madder and madder by the minute. And that's the kinda thing that always got me in trouble when trouble was wide enough to get into.

I jumped up and started walking real calm towards them, raising up the last two rifles, squeezin' off the last four shots, and I knocked the glowin' thing out of one hand and stopped them all cold for the first time even though I didn't hit a one of 'em. Then I had no bullets, and my head had all barrels empty too. I just stood there and waited to see what I would see.

It didn't take them long to get their composure back—though how was I to know if they'd ever lost it? The one in front began walking again, a little slower, towards me. The others fell in alongside him gradually, and they weren' but twenty feet from me. I could

see them real good by then. Their edges were still pretty fuzzy, the moonlight still playin' off them in crazy patterns. But then the colors on their skin went less shimmery and got real sharp an' ... scary. It was like watchin' the face of a man at a poker table change when he realized you'd been cheatin' him little by little all night long. They weren't pointin' anythin' at me, an' that scared me a little more, I guess, because I knew they knew I didn't have any teeth left.

The only thing I could do was to drop the rifles and bring myself up straight, and take whatever was left to me on this earth like a man. Of course, you probably remember better than I did that I had a pistol tucked into my pants, and when I stood up, I felt it there. Six shots. But so far I hadn't hit anythin' worth mentionin'. I didn't like the odds, but then, the odds of livin' through anythin' once they got their hands on me were considerable worse.

Out comes the gun quick as you please and that impressed them, 'cause they stopped. I trained it on each o' them one at a time and went "Bang," every time the barrel bounced towards one of 'em. It was my first attempt to communicate with them, because I knew they probably wouldn't unnerstand my English, which, I've been told even by people of no account, is pitiful.

How could I tell they got my drift? Well, the leader, he raises his gun-thing real slow just a little and makes the strangest sound—"Tssss"—that was a bit like bacon crispin' in a pan. Then he nods at each of the other gents and makes the same sound four more times. They all raise their guns real slow and point them at me. They may have been foreigners, but they all unnerstood the meanin' of a bluff.

As a geologist an' all, you've probably

come across your fair share of bones in your time, but has that ever got ya thinkin' about your own mortality? I think I'd got that graveyard job because in the back o' my mind I could feel death opening a door way down at the other end of a long dark hallway. I never thought that picture in my head affected me, but then I ended up takin' care of the dead. I wanted to be as close to the door at the near end of that hall as I could, so maybe I could jump him—I dunno. I wanted to be next to the dead so I could practice what it would be like. Get ready. Somehow I convinced myself that life was one long draw, waitin' for years for death to make his move. That way, I imagined I could win. In another queer way, I always thought he was my friend and that I was his handyman, helpin' out wherever I could. There weren't no bad in nothin' I'd done, only death. Funny how all o' that just flew out of my head like a big, heavy, loud, crow out of a tree. Not a pretty sight and not a pretty feelin' when I'm staring at five strangers with five guns I'd never seen the like of before. The ret'ibution was at hand an' the only consolation I coulda found at the time was that someone had had to send a long ways to get the boys who were gonna do me in.

I half-choked just sucking in a breath, and I said, "You kin fire at your leisure, gents, but I'd like ya to know that some of us will be leavin' together."

At first I thought that they'd caught the drift of what I was sayin' or that they'd been bluffin' or maybe they didn't like the sound o' my voice, but they stopped movin' towards me. The colors over their bodies changed too, got more confused, the patterns shifting in a wild-eyed sorta way. Hell, they even took a step or two back all at once. So I took advan-

tage of the moment and kept the gun trained on 'em, but started backin' away myself, hopin' I could make a run for that hole again an' find some more ammunition. They weren't movin' no more, so I kept inchin' back, waiting for even a flicker of interest for me to start shootin', but they were like statues. Back an' back an'—then I stopped. More like somethin' stopped me. I felt behind me and grabbed somethin' cold and damp an' sandpapery. I tried to turn so's I could keep an eye on my guests, an' I stole the quickest look I could at what was in my way.

Turns out it was a body. And not just any body, but from the looks of that sad way of standin' and the tight remains of a thin dangerous smile, I could tell it was none other than Pete. I think I must've screamed—but ya unnerstand, I hadn't seen him in a while an' he'd sorta snuck up on me—like he always useta—so it's only natural he'd give me a start. On any other night, I might've even run screamin' all the way ta the moon, but 'course this weren't no ordinary night. An' the truth was, when I saw Hewie, Bob and Tulsa comin' up shortly behind him, or most of them anyway, I had just plain run out of scared and was easin' back slowly towards calm.

Add to that the fact that they had in their very hands the guns I had lost in the dirt, an' I was becoming almost comfortable again, though why, I don't know, because the boys surely had had little practice in the intervening years between then and their demise.

I turned back to the visitors and told them somethin' like, "This is the way things are around here. Ya can kill us, but we keep on comin' back. Death's just an inconvenience." I knew they couldn't unnerstand a word, but I was hopin' they caught the way I said it.

Before I knew it, me and the boys were all lined up facin' the visitors, and they was all lined up facin' us. Nobody needed to say a word. We was all frontiersmen there, and bein' quiet and still was a natural tendency to make up for the rest of our lives bein' so loud and quick. What happened then was just what you'd expect. We had them on the draw, but the first few shots just kinda made them shimmer different, and they still had time to raise their guns and let off a few. Hewie was the first of us to go, and he kinda blew apart like a red hot fire of sticks that someone kicked into the air, ashes and all. Bob, meanwhile, took down his man, then got his head shot off as it finally won the struggle to separate itself from the rest of his body. But Tulsa was a tougher bird that night than he'd ever been. He took out two before a grazing ray of light set his skin on fire, an' he rolled to the ground an' kept rollin', as far as I could tell, until the fire was out, but then he didn't move at all. Pete an' I took the other two with our last two shots, and we could still hear the thunder rolling away from us after the bodies dropped.

Pete looked at me through those empty eyes of his, and I nodded. "Pete, you guys are all paid up with me as far as I'm concerned." He nodded back, and then slipped to the ground real quiet to leave me standin' there listenin' to the beginnin' of real thunder off in the distance, answering our call an' comin' to claim us.

I spent most of the night puttin' what was left of the boys back, although this time they had to settle for a large one-room underground cabin, 'cause there wasn't time for more. An' I threw the visitors in with them, 'cause, after all, there couldn't be any hard feelin's when everyone knows the rules. They all had

more in common than not. Pete an' the others never complained to me about the new arrangement anyway, so I've no 'cause to think otherwise. As for the rest of the mess, I jus' told Jenkins and who-ever asked that lightnin' had struck twice that night at the graveyard, and every man an' woman who heard that story of the awful storm crossed themselves at the wonder of it and at the miracle of those patches of land the lightnin' had turned to glass. Lightnin' struck twice, I told them. "It must be a sign of some fortune, good or bad. I'll be seein' the reverend directly to ask his advice."

I kin see you're gettin' restless and wanna be movin' on back to the city for the night. But I kin at least give ya directions to that crop o' rock you're looking for. I don't know what ya plan to find there, but good luck to ya. Just be careful that whatever you turn over doesn't turn you over instead. Heh heh. Ooh, I'm stiff gettin' up these days. Could ya get that blanket for me, it got away from me. Oh, I almost forgot. See these? I've only got two of them that I keep under the blanket at all times, but I think one of 'em is mor'n enough if friends of those fellas come back. See how the handle and the barrel—well, it's not so much a barrel as a fat needle nose—come

together without any seams? I've had these things for years and I cain't figure out how they're made or if they even need reloadin'.

Oh, so now you're interested! Didn't believe me, did ya?

Well, here's the proof, if that's what you scientists need. An' no, you caint have one because I need all of 'em right here. Ya see, the other fella in the air wagon flew off straight into the stars, so I have no idea what's to come of all this yet. No matter how precise and careful you are, you're bound ta kill someone that belongs ta someone else, so I reckon it's only a matter of time before somebody comes through that door lookin' for me. And Pete an' the boys—well, their hands are all played out. No mistakin' now that I'm the only one left in charge. That's why I wear this badge, ya see. I sorta consider myself the unofficial marshal of these here parts until one of those visitors takes the job away for good.

Before ya go, let me show ya some-thin'. Stand by that door and hold this glass in the doorway. Don't be nervous. Steady it. I just want ya ta see what one of these things can do. Trust me—just like anythin' else you'd least expect, this might come in handy someday. •

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ILLUSTRATOR: ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN is a self-styled renaissance man. His repertoire includes drawing, painting, sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, magic and musical composition. He has worked in comics, constructed prototypes for model-manufacturing companies, painted theatrical backdrops, does artwork on commission and is one cool guy.



Mummery

Allan Lowson

illustrated by Andrea Baeza

"Ta da!" A final flourish from Adam's apple to point of chin. Simple, clean and deadly—John had a soft spot for cut-throats. Nothing like a straight-edge on your jugular to steady nervous hands. Besides, it was where the big-stake punters played their games. John liked living on the edge.

He gave the ball of his thumb a nick before folding the old hollow-ground blade between its ivory bolsters. Not much, just a little drop to quench the "malkie." It had belonged to a Glaswegian "Razor King," and possessed a terrible thirst.

Well, he had to look sharp, this was his big debut. Forget the borscht-belt exorcisms, predictable divinations, and "first name terms" summonings. Tonight he was lifting his leg a bit higher on the lamppost.

A splash of gin by way of aftershave, and it was on with the motley. Han, at Limehouse Laundry, had managed to get the reek of opium and slept-in sweat out of his suit. The deeper stains were past redemption, but that was where John got them.

He sipped at the gin and selected a tie—vermilion. The old pub-pallor needed a bit of color, it was the season after all. He puffed a Silk Cut into life as he watched the choker coil and intertwine. "No, the Windsor knot, you berk," he admonished. "Throw a bleedin' noose if I'd let you." *Even simple spells get to mischief when they sense the time of change*, he reminded himself morosely. *Opportunistic little sods.*

He regarded himself in the wardrobe mirror. *Not bad for pushing yer luck forty-odd go rounds.* Couldn't do much with the eyes though—windows of the soul 'n all. Look deep enough into them and it was like Dorian Gray's photo album, not that anyone ever looked for long. He went over to the bedroom window. Piss-tinkling cold under a gong-hard moon. The night begged for a little match-girl, and he was gonna be the fool to give it one.

"Pity?" he sniggered to himself. "Cruel is cool, Pity sucks titty." His twin in the glass smiled knowingly. Easier to bamboozle a demon than your heart. He'd got half

Hell convinced he was the arch-mage; but John was getting too soft for the life, a Pagliacci trying to play Five Wits. There was a sudden chill at his back.

"Might at least have knocked," he grumbled at the new reflection in the window pane. "I could have been in my skivvies."

"You left the mirror open," Death pouted. She closed the wardrobe door and removed her evening gloves. "And I have seen my share of naked stiffs."

"Got yer stiff hanging," John slapped his right leg just above the knee and leered suggestively. The best mortal riposte to Death is always procreation, but that was cocky.

She measured him with the speculative appraisal of an undertaker. "Dreamer," she smiled, wiggling a limp, black-nailed pinky. Gothic never went out of fashion with Death; from the rakishly dented spring-topper to her high-buttoned boots, she was a tubercular empress in high mourning.

John was impressed despite himself. Even if you don't much respect life, you gotta respect Death. Some balk at her apparent youth and gender, but John knew it was her least threatening aspect—and he'd seen plenty. "Nice outfit," he complimented. "Who died in it?"

"Oh, these old weeds?" She pirouetted girlishly, then her eyes narrowed on his throat. "I really like your tie."

John got his finger into the collar ahead of a sudden tightening. Just to remind him that vanity doesn't end in the grave. Hanging was a realistic phobia for men like John; she'd danced jigs with a few over the gallows trap.

Death laughed like an icicle xylophone. "John, you're the incorrigible fool; I'm so glad you're the one chosen for our charade." She came over to the window and peered out. "Such an

exquisitely bitter night. Any sign of 'Hell on Wheels'?"

John went over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a bracer. "You know Hob, first to fall but last to arrive," he said lightly, but with a wary look over his shoulder. "Can I fix you a drink?"

"Something with bubbles," she giggled, breathing frost-ferns on to the pane.

How about the piss pot with a spoon of fruit salts? John contemplated, wisely to himself. She knew he always kept a couple of Babycham in the ice-bucket—cheap knicker elastic solvent, works like magic.

A terrific, window-rattling roar outside cut the conversation. Hob, of course, always the noisy devil.

"Ooh!" Death had opened the window and was jumping up and down, waving. "Look, he brought the hearse."

John poured an extra shot of Tanquery in with his bitters, sighed, and took over her fizz. Yup, who else would drive something out of *The Munsters*? Long and low, slick 'n' black—a hell-born lead sled slug with obligatory living flame job. Be a shitload of sinners turning the treadmill under that glistening hood. The throttle blipped impatiently, and you could hear the screams. A black glass top slid back, but it wasn't Hob. To John's relief, it was...

"Sin!" Death muttered jealously under her breath.

John threw her a wink; they'd been introduced.

The driver tossed back her head and bared glitteringly perfect teeth in a lascivious smile. Platinum blonde, vulvate feral-pink lips, and oh—those great big baby-blues. So easy to mistake their utter lack of conscience for innocence.

No prizes for guessing which fifties icon we are today, thought John,

admiring her Cadillac-sized “bumpers.” They were straining at a red, spray-on sheath dress that left little to even his active imagination.

“Hob’s been...” She put a seashell nail to pneumatic lips, the quintessence of bimbo, and considered. “Unavoidably detained.”

Death looked sharply at John; she wasn’t pleased with this understudy. She pursed thin lips, but his attention continued roaming.

“Isn’t this fun?” Sin chirped with another jiggle. “I’m usually in the back seat.”

John could feel the overheated mill from where he stood. *Can’t imagine why.* He wondered about her voice too, such nuances. So cutesy-poo you wanted to smack her in the mouth, wanted to do all *sorts* of things. Something about overripe innocence that brings out the worst in a man. *Course you’d expect Sin to be good,* he allowed, *and better than than the Devil to pay.*

John became aware of that chill again, and he realized that Death was staring suspiciously at him.

“Ah, yes. Didn’t I mention?” He couldn’t quite manage to conceal a smirk. “Me and Hob had a bit of a falling out, but I thought he might have made the count by now.”

Sin looked at him with a predatory, Mae West-ian appraisal—then she shrugged and blipped the throttle. “Hope he has to crawl the long way back from the pit,” she said gaily.

“There’ll be all Hell loose when he finds out he missed the performance of the millennium—but a little pleasure before the pain, I always say.”

Yeah, shit smells, but sex sells, John thought, reaching for his mac. *And they’re too close to get one without the*

other.

Sin raised an endlessly perfect leg and her pink spike kicked the passenger door open. “C’mon down, big boy, we don’t want to miss the show.”

“Ooh! Homeric,” Sin cooed as John tossed himself beside her, bouncing on the genuine tuck’n’roll tattooed skin upholstery.

“Have to teach me how to find the gears sometime, darlin’,” he said, absently placing a nicotine-ambered hand on her silken knee. Worst thing you can try to do is ignore Sin.

“All in one box, and all in good time, Johnnie-boy,” she purred.

Death slid in and drummed stick-fingers on the needle-stung vellum. “I may be endless, but life is less patient. Drive! It’s not like we’re on our way to a funeral.”

Sin can drive anyone to just about anything, and faster than you’d credit. It’s just the ways she takes. She took them the back ways through Pandemonium.

They burned down a cholera-black tongue of bubbling obsidian that writhed between guttering, glowing buildings. Pedal to dah metal and flames screaming out the hood vents the color of supercharged acetylene. Sin loved the hot places, the blinding negative-white family snaps on carbonized walls, *big* fireworks in the sky.

“Glad you like it, but Hiroshima wasn’t much of a holiday for me,” Death sniffed. “Besides, August of harvests has past, this is midwinter fest.”

John coughed on his smoke. Death could be pretty droll. Sin laughed too; she ran loose as the race-clearanced mill and didn’t give a dry-handed toss. Sin was loyal only to fun and variety.

Broadsiding on the ruptured blacktop,

Sin made a sudden turn, and they were out of the city. The scenery settled into a relentless, Midwest straightaway bake-a-thon, but they didn't have time to be bored.

Sin checked her hair in the mirror. "Company," she announced. "Toll-riders."

John craned his neck around as thunder rolled up. Two lines of bikes snarled alongside. *No such thing as a freeway out of Hell*, he reminded himself.

The shake, rattle and roar of an ancient two-cammer Harley bludgeoned his ears and silver rings rapped against the triplex. John reluctantly rolled down his window and stared into wind-sunken pitbull eyes. They locked on to his smouldering Silk Cut, and mute appeal replaced menace. The lantern-jawed rider raised two yellowed fingers to his cracked lips—the silent Masonic plea of a fellow addict.

John handed him a fag and, lighting it off red-hot exhaust pipes, the big biker sighed like a soul found ease. He looked over his shoulder with the cigarette in his teeth; other gauntleted hands raised to gap-toothed grins and nodded. John sighed and handed over the pack. The riders fell back to fight over their spoils.

"Bloody highway robbery," he grumbled as Sin took them around another unannounced two-wheeled turn.

It started to drizzle tears, and she reached for the wipers. "Go on., you're just an easy touch," she purred. "I like soft centres."

John chewed on that and shut up bitching. After a moment he absently conjured up a fresh pack, tore off the celluloid wrap, and lit one. He could pull rabbits in his sleep.

Death looked out the sectioned window as the rain turned fluffy. "I think we are getting close to reality again. Snow-

ing in Hell would obliterate half the bonds on the soul market."

"Don't let it fool you," John cautioned. "Probably asbestos particles, or fusion ash—ovens even." But it was getting colder, and the miserable streets were horribly familiar. "Not much of a night for the main event," he muttered as the gumballs skidded on black ice.

"Tell that to solstice babies," said Sin, spinning the wheel with abandon. "Baal, Mithras, Freya ... the one I can't name. Oh, and poor Dionysus—he was *such a lovely baby.*"

The lights flickering up ahead resolved into burning barricades and the torches of a street mob. Sin slid the hearse to a stop alongside a crumpled water cannon, most of the cobblestones had been torn up. "We're here," she announced cheerfully.

Yeah. Bedlam, thought John as they walked towards the screams and wild laughter. *No*, he corrected himself. *Saturnalia, the world turned upside down. Same as the last millennial change; mass rioting, Armageddon, cults, social collapse.*

It was more than an out-of-control street party, it was the backdrop for their performance. It was ordained that, however briefly, the tables would be turned and, for tonight, Fortune's wheel would rest on the necks of the rich and powerful. They passed a huddle of riot police being reviled by a mob of women and children. The cops were almost in tears, and it wasn't just the lingering wisps of their gas.

Everything was upside-down as the burning BMWs and Rollers. A wild orgy was underway in a sacked church. Fat men in expensive rags served delicacies to hordes of homeless hammering on trestle tables. The starvelings insulted and tripped them; their waiters may

have been Eurocrats or merchant bankers, but now they were plain scared shitless. Trendy furniture had been pulled out of homes and shop windows to line the streets. They passed a pretentiously large bathtub that was mulling ale from staved-in barrels.

John's nose caught the warm, yeasty richness, and his eyes widened at the meringue-like foam; it was like a drunk's bubblebath. It smelt of winter ale and roasted apples, of whipped cream and eggs, mysterious spices—like the breast of a sweetly-drunk mother. Even Sin stopped; she could never resist temptation.

"Lamb's Wool, older and better to the season than gin-punch," boomed a merry voice from behind them. They turned to a rough-looking old giant wearing an askew platinum beard. He was bursting out of someone else's "Starvation Army" Santa suit. From the matching stains, John figured that someone wouldn't be needing it any more. He was the final ingredient, as if you could perform high magic without free will.

"Why, if it isn't Lord of Misrule himself," Sin breathed as she tiptoed up to kiss his leathery cheek. "Wanna take some liberties with an old fashioned girl?"

"Hi, Anarch," said Death, looking around at the chaos. "Got here first, I notice."

John puffed nervously on his ciggie; the "Grand Old Man" was notoriously temperamental around new-wave performers. Waiting to be introduced, he took a quick shuftie about. Some drunks were discharging shotguns into trees bent by strange fruit. Blood-daubed wall slogans advertised the nutritional advantages of rich meat, and fires were being lit with money.

"Is this the John?" A calloused thumb jerked in his direction. "So this is the best act Present has to offer? I thought you two were meant to be culling the lames."

Sin and Death gave each other a meaningful look.

"Times change," Sin soothed, twisting her fingers in his real beard. "That's what it's all about, honey. The kids gotta get a piece of the action sometime."

Death, typically, was more direct. "Anarch, we've been playing the circuit a bit more recently than you. The audience will identify with his style, honest."

John never had much time for prima donnas or pleasantries. "Let's get this show on the road, I got other engagements." He looked around again. "Which way is the audience then?"

"Fools rush in," rumbled the colossus, but gestured for them to follow him. From behind he looked like a particularly large silverback stuffed into wash-shrunk red combinations. Hard to take him seriously, but he was the source. Wouldn't be any show without Punch.

He led them down a sordid alley that dead-ended under the overpass supports. Kicking aside a hovering collection of mutts and strays, Anarch indicated a cardboard and wood pallet shanty. "She's inside, what's left of her. As innocent a poor sinner as they come, and she's due any moment."

"Is she expecting the rites of change?" Death was getting impatient; no one appreciated the importance of timing better than her.

"Oh come on," Sin mocked. "She can't even figure how a girl of her persuasion *could* be expecting."

John went over to the pathetic lean-to and shook the appliance carton walls. "Wanna come out and play, darlin'? You got visitors."

"You'd better leave me alone," came a desperate voice. "I gotta knife."

Anarch stepped forward and tore away the corrugated laminate like it was last year's Christmas card. "I'm afraid it wouldn't matter now if you had a thunderbolt, Maddy," he said gruffly.

In the shadows cowered a punkette clutching a big kitchen knife. Her eyes had the look of a birthing deer cornered by wolves.

"Leave me alone," she keened. "Can't you see I've had it? I don't have nuthin' left, you even got my name."

Death regarded her, compressing Kohl-blackened lips. "Actually you have everything that is to come, and we are here to attend the arrival."

The girl shivered with cold and fear; she was plainly as near the end as any beginning. Anarch cursed under his breath about murdering an audience and stamped off; even John felt a flash of pity. He knelt down and offered her a cigarette. "Go on, luv, take one—bit late to worry about yer health now."

She cupped her hands around the match, eager for any comfort. The light illuminated a plain, tear-stained face; pudgy if she didn't happen to be starving, and too young for this.

First sign of age when your victims start looking too young, thought John. *Next I'll be skimping on the cat's blood.* He looked at her stiff, trembling fingers trying to hold on to the fag, and pulled out a battered hunting flask. "Here, darlin', get yer beak into this."

Suspicion flared briefly in her eyes, but the desire for numbness burned brighter.

"Go ahead," he urged gently. "It's only a drop of mother's ruin." Sin and Death shared a knowing smile; he was going soft. Ripe for the part.

Maddy laughed harshly. "Fuck every-

thing," she spat, and drank hard. It was the only painkiller she would get.

"Make way," boomed Anarch, throwing down a great burning log and depositing a tablecloth full of goodies before her. "Ho-bloody-ho!" He bel-lowed sarcastically. "'Tis the season to be jolly, long as you got all the lolly."

"When we are *quite* ready," Death reminded them.

They looked down at Maddy, busy cramming down food with the dedicated compulsion of motherhood. She didn't look up as they changed, which was proper. First the sweeties, then on with the show.

Sin turned her back, then slipped something jiggly into her handbag. The platinum wig and red sheath followed. John couldn't keep his eyes off this warm-up, but Death stared into the distance and frowned bleakly. *Probably just getting into the part*, he reasoned, but felt the first twinge of stage-fright.

Anarch was busy tending the Yule log and plying Maddy with further delicacies. Despite her disinclination to men, especially older ones, there was just something about him that called to an earlier time. When life was simple and she was innocent. Not that long ago, just hard to remember.

Sin turned around and John's jaw dropped. A pretty rent-boy doing Bowie impersonations, or a pimple-chested dyke in jogging gear?

"Hello again, lover." Sin's voice had shifted into neutral, but it got Maddy's full attention instantly.

"You! You..." Maddy flared to her feet in anger, then sat down abruptly, holding her side. "You're the one who did this to me," she accused, bursting into tears. "How *could* you do it?"

Now that's a good question, thought John.

"My girlfriend threw me out when the tests came back positive, and the dyke community called it sleeping with the enemy. No one would believe me." Maddy's voice choked on sobs. "They were all I had. I lost my job, my place. I nearly lost my mind, you fuckin' freak."

I could see you being confused, thought John. He couldn't tell for sure any better than poor Maddy; but that wasn't his problem: he couldn't get pregnant. *Desire runs AC/DC*, he reflected. *You can get a nasty shock if your only grounding is in Reality.*

Sin pulled a long cigarette from her bag and nonchalantly sucked it into life. "You chose to fuck around, and I don't recall any questions of gender. Life was your choice too; you could always have terminated."

Another spasm set Maddy gasping.

"Hmm. Too late now, lover," Sin observed cattily.

Maddy sobbed uncontrollably. "I tried, God knows I tried. I just couldn't go through with it." Her face firmed up from inside. "My baby is the only hope I got left." Her eyes flashed through the tears and thin fingers curled like claws about the knife handle again. "Nobody is going to hurt my baby." Sweat started popping out of her forehead, the contractions were getting awful close.

"Who are you?" she panted. "Why are you here?"

John reached into his trenchcoat pocket and pulled on a jester's cap. "Isn't it obvious?" He shook his head in a merry jingle of silver bells. "You're the mummy and we're your Mummies."

"Mummies?" She stared from one bizarre face to another. "You mean like Morris Dancers?" Her voice was taking a hysterical edge.

"Moorish," John corrected. "But no black-face in this minstrel show."

"This idiot is Fool," grumbled Anarch, getting into his size 20 boots. "Sin here plays Teaser, and Death, of course, is the Reaper." Simian-sized fingers adjusted his false white beard. "I'm the Old—Ghost of Christmas Past, you might say."

"Sin? Death?" Maddy was panting urgently. "You're all as crazy as the fucking rioters. You're going to hurt my baby, I know it."

"Look, luv," John reassured. "I know they're not the three wise men, and I'm no herald angel. But I promise you, I won't let anyone harm the sprog." He took her hand. "See, I'm human, I'm here for you." He'd had practice at bedside lies.

Another contraction turned her torment inwards again. Sin sighed and glanced at her Rolex. "They're coming close together now. Curtain time—Fool."

John reached into his coat pocket and tossed a handful of lime on the flames. Light sprang up and he bowed low to Maddy, straightening up with a clown's nose and a lit fag. He waved it, tracing in the air like a wand, then blew an enormous, slow, smoke-ring.

"The prologue," he began, poking his head through it.

"Gentles all and pit," he nodded to Sin.

"On with the show, this is it.

When Future draws night, it's

Past time to die

For Teaser has scored a new hit."

Sin high-stepped up to the cabaret as he bowed out. She splashed a heart-breaker smile, arched her back and thrust out a hip.

"Just call me Teaser, everyone's

pleaser

You'll never know which way to
turn.

*My gift is a thrill, but you're left
with the bill
And you'll learn that the price is
a burn."*

Death appeared from a swirl of her cloak and even the Yuletide flames lowered, casting her into half-shadow. Her fleshless smile was a rictus of inevitability; her voice flowed like a chill wind.

*"Reaper am I, scything all born
to die
Stay me not, nor question the
bell.
I've no glittering meat but the
pass, bitter-sweet,
That bids each his heaven, or
hell."*

Anarch creaked down on his knees before a round-eyed Maddy, thumbed his nose with a stage wink, then tore open Santa's straining suit to the waist. He thrust out a hirsute barrel-chest.

*"I am Old, but wild and free
Dearer these than life to me.
My gift lies closest to the heart
Its flowing blood completes my
part."*

John capered forward, then assumed a tragic pose.

*"Ah, babes were ever free-man's
bane
Old phoenix burns to rise again.
Though motley Fool, I counsel
true
To kill the Old and birth the
New."*

Maddy gaped in horror from the knife in her hands to Anarch's heaving chest. He nodded, encouragingly and pointed to his heart.

They were all watching, waiting like junkies at an all-night chemist.

"You're all mad ... or I'm mad. The whole world's going clean to Hell." Her breath came very fast and her eyes went funny. She turned the knife against her

distended belly. "I was wrong. My baby doesn't deserve *this*. Better to end it all now."

John snatched off his crest-fallen cap. "Jesus, lady," he begged urgently. "Don't do that, we got the next millennium riding on you." His hand shot out, and he carefully turned the point to rest over Anarch's placidly beating heart. "He don't mind, the old ham's done more death scenes than you've had hot dinners. Just shut your eyes, imagine he's someone you hate, and bloody well do it!"

"I can't," she wailed in an agony of body and spirit. "I've never wanted to kill anyone enough."

John turned to the others, but Sin shrugged and Death only moved closer. Anarch muttered something under his breath about having to save the show when amateurs flubbed. He spat into his hands, then jumped up and tore off the whole suit. He towered over Maddy, naked and obscenely erect.

"Yes, but you did, Maddy-girl." His face and voice had changed, a Jekyll and Hyde tour-de-force. She cowered away whimpering, her heels making feeble kicking motions in the dirt.

"Daddy!" Her eyes were enormous and all black pupil, knuckles whitened on the knife.

"Do you still remember our little game? Our very special secret?" His assumed face was an ugly mask of guilt and cruel lust. Sweating hands reached out to rip at her shapeless rags. "The choo-choo is going back into the tunnel. Nobody can stop the runaway train."

It seemed she gathered her whole self and loomed over him. Behind her John saw Tisiphone of the Furies, the blood avenger, and many innocent hands gripping the knife. Audience participation incoming.

"No!" Her terrible scream split the night, and the blade stood in Anarch's chest. He fell forward, a contented sigh bubbling at his rough lips. He loved the death scenes.

The first chime of midnight began; it was the great time of change, and the rituals had been followed. The cast received their applause.

Twelve brutal contractions burst Maddy open like a rotten fig. It had to be that way. Hard, fast and bloody ... and only the Future could survive. Her eyes briefly reflected the purging of all illusion. She was the Grail, the vessel, the mark—exit, stage left.

Death closed in, extending her cape in a flurry of black feathers—and was gone. Who can do exits like Death?

Sin stubbed out a Virginia Slim and pulled the red dress back on. Stuffing the gel-sacs into her pectorals, she turned to

John. "Wanna ride, big boy?"

He bent down and scooped the strangely silent infant up from twin, thickly spreading pools. He tried not to look at the torn, empty wrappings that had been Maddy. *Some presents*, he thought. *The fruits of Sin, the release of Death and the sacrifice of Freedom*. He felt lower than shit on a dwarf's shoe. *She had been the Present ... just a means to the Future*. "Nah," he declined. "You'd probably knock me up too, and spoil my good name. Incidentally, this is your kid, isn't it?"

Tires screeched into the distance, and a small voice piped up irritably. "Trust a fool to end up holding the baby." A tiny set of teeth gnawed at his nicotine-flavored fingertip. "I'm hungry, where's that placenta?"

John looked down into the eyes of the future—and shuddered. •

AUTHOR: ALLAN LOWSON is a regular contributor to *Canadian Biker*, and runs the "Laughing Indian Riders" (570 members) newsletter. Mainly published in various motorcycle magazines (fiction, articles, and reportage), he is a collector of comics, motorcycles, and the peculiar.

ILLUSTRATOR: Apart from a brief stint at the University of Alberta, ANDREA BAEZA is a self taught illustrator and painter. She is currently working as a tattooist at Ritualistics Body Modifications on Kingsway. She is considering expansion.

ON Writing:

Speaking of dialogue

Robert J. Sawyer

Writing convincing dialogue is one of the hardest things for new writers to master. In fact, it's so rarely done well in any form of fiction that when it is done right, people rally around it. The movie Pulp Fiction, Terry McMillan's novel Waiting to Exhale, and the TV series My So-Called Life were all remarkable in large part because of how believably the characters spoke.

Here's the kind of dialogue you read in many beginners' stories:

"What happened to you, Joe?"

"Well, Mike, I was walking down the street, and a man came up to me. I said to him, 'What seems to be the difficulty?' He replied, 'You owe me a hundred dollars.' But I said I didn't. And then he hit me."

Here's how real people talk:

"Christ, man, what happened?"

"Well, umm, I was goin' down the street, y'know, and this guy comes up to me, and I'm like, hey, man, what's up? And he says to me, he says, 'You owe me a hundred bucks,' and I'm like no way, man. In your dreams. Then—*pow!* I'm on the sidewalk."

See the differences? Most people's real dialogue tends to contain occasional profanity ("Christ"), to be very informal ("guy" instead of "man," "bucks" instead of "dollars"), and to have lots of contractions and dropped letters ("goin'," "

"y'know"). Note, too, that when relaying an event that happened in the past, most people recount it in the present tense ("he says to me," rather than "he replied").

Also note that in the first example, the speakers refer to each other by name. In reality, we almost never say the name of the person we're talking to: you know who you're addressing, and that person knows he or she is being addressed.

A few other features of real human speech demonstrated in the second example above: when relaying to a third party a conversation we had with somebody else, we usually only directly quote what the *other* person said; our own side of the conversation is typically relayed with considerable bravado, and the listener understands that what's really being presented is what we *wish* we'd had the guts to say, not what we actually said. We also tend to act out events, rather than describe them ("Then—*pow!* I'm on the sidewalk"). Indeed, without the acting out, the words often don't convey the intended meaning. The speaker was probably standing on the sidewalk throughout the altercation, of course; what he meant by "on the sidewalk" was that he was knocked down.

Now, which of the above examples is better? Well, the second is clearly more colorful, and more entertaining to read. But it's also more *work* to read. A little verisimilitude goes a long way. Dropped final letters are rarely shown in fictional dialogue (they're usually only employed to indicate an uneducated speaker, although in reality almost everyone talks that way), and vagueness about verbs

("I'm like" instead of "I said"), verbalized pauses ("umm"), and content-less repetitions (the second part of "He says to me, he says") are usually left out. In a short story, I might perhaps use dialogue like the second example above; in a novel, where the reader has to sit through hundreds of pages, I might be inclined toward some sort of middle ground:

"Christ, man, what happened?"

"I was going down the street, and this guy comes up to me, and I'm like, hey, man, what's up? And he says to me, 'You owe me a hundred bucks,' and I say 'in your dreams.' Then—*pow!*—he knocks me on my ass."

Of course, not all your characters should talk the same way. I read one story recently in which there were dozens of lines of dialogue like this:

"Interchangeable?" he said.
"What do you mean the characters are interchangeable?"

We have the attribution tag between an initial word and a sentence that repeats that same word. This is clearly being used to denote confusion—and works fine once or twice, but grates if the same dialogue device is employed more than that in a given story—especially by multiple speakers. Assign distinctive speaking patterns to single characters.

One trick is to come up with a word or two that one character—and only that character—will use a lot (in my novel *The Terminal Experiment*, the

character Sarkar loves the word “crisp,” using it to mean anything from well-defined to delicate to appealing to complex); you might also come up with some words your character will never use (in *Starplex*, I have a character who hates acronyms, and therefore avoids referring to the ship’s computer as PHANTOM).

Profanity is also important. Terence M. Green’s rule: you can’t worry about what your mother will think of your fiction. But, again, not all characters swear the same way, and some may not swear at all (in *The Terminal Experiment*, I have a Muslim character who never swears, although the rest of his speech is quite colloquial).

It’s tricky handling characters who are not native English speakers. No matter what language they’re speaking, people tend also to be thinking in that language. It’s common to write a French character saying things like, “There are *beaucoup* reasons why someone might do that.” But at the time the person is speaking, his brain is thinking in English; it’s as unlikely for him to slip into French for a word as it is for a computer running a program in FORTRAN to suddenly switch over to BASIC for a single instruction. Instead, if you want to remind the reader of the character’s native tongue, have the character occasionally mutter or think to himself or herself in that language.

The best way to learn how real people talk is to tape record some actual human conversation, and then transcribe it word for word (if you can’t find a group of people who will let you do this, then tape a talk show off TV, and transcribe that). You’ll be amazed: transcripts of human speech, devoid of

body language and inflection, read mostly like gibberish.

To learn how to condense and clean up dialogue, edit your transcript. For your first few attempts, try to edit by only removing words, not by changing any of them—you’ll quickly see that most real speech can be condensed by half without deleting any of the meaning.

Finally, test your fictional dialogue by reading it out loud. If it doesn’t sound natural, it probably isn’t. Keep revising until it comes trippingly off your tongue (yes, that’s a cliché—but remember, although you want to avoid clichés in your narrative, people use them all the time in speech).

A couple of matters of form that seem to elude most beginners: when writing dialogue for a single speaker that runs to multiple paragraphs, put an open-quotation mark at the beginning of each paragraph, but no close-quotation mark until the end of the final paragraph. And in North America, terminal punctuation (periods, exclamation marks, and question marks) go inside the final close-quotation mark: “This is punctuated correctly.”

Get your speech-attribution tags in as early as possible. There’s nothing more frustrating than not knowing whose dialogue you’re reading. Slip the tag in after the first completed clause in the sentence: “You know,” said Juan, “when the sky is that shade of blue it reminds me of my childhood back in Mexico.” And when alternating lines of dialogue, make sure you identify speakers at least every five or six exchanges; it’s very easy for the reader to get lost otherwise.

Finally, much real dialogue goes unfinished. When a character is

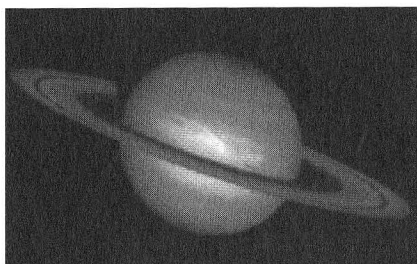
interrupted or cut off abruptly, end the dialogue with an em-dash (which you type in manuscript as two hyphens); when he or she trails off without completing the thought, end the dialogue with ellipsis points (three periods). Real dialogue also tends to be peppered with asides:

“We went to Toronto—boy, I hate that city—and found...”

Get your characters talking at least halfway like real people, and you'll find that the readers are talking, too: they'll be saying favorable things about your work. •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's latest novel is *Starplex*, which the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* calls “a rumination on several very deep questions, including: Where did we come from? Where are we going? And the deepest of the deep, Is there a God? Sawyer's novels—intelligent, literate, and immensely readable explorations of the biggest ideas there are—prove that science fiction is now literature.” Rob's *The Terminal Experiment* won the Nebula Award, the Aurora Award, and the HOMer Award, and was a finalist for the Hugo Award. His eighth novel, *Frameshift*, will be a May 1997 hardcover from Tor, and his ninth, *Illegal Alien*, will be a November 1997 hardcover from Ace. Two more recent awards for Rob include Le Grand Prix de l'imaginaire: Best Foreign Short Story for “You See But You Do Not Observe,” originally published in North America in the anthology *Sherlock Holmes in Orbit* edited by Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, February 1995), and published in France as “Vous voyez et vous n'observez pas” in *Yellow Submarine* issue 119; he was also awarded the quarter-million peseta (\$2,600CDN) UPC Science Fiction Award: “Special Mention” given by the Universitat Politecnica de Catalunya for his novella entitled “Helix,” which will appear, in a different form, as a portion of his novel *Frameshift*. Visit Rob's World Wide Web home page at:

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Canadian Convention Calendar

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

- MAR 21-23 - EARTHSTATION (Edmonton, AB)

Coast Terrace Inn, Edmonton, AB. Memb. till Dec. 31/96 \$20. Guests TBA. Info: Box 771, MPC, Edmonton, AB T5J 2L4 or (403) 455-9315 or SFcon@oanet.com

- APR 11-13 - FILKONTARIO 7 (Toronto, ON)

Hotel: TBA. GoH: Talis Kimberely. SF Song Writing contest too. Memb. \$30. till Oct. 31/96. No address given.

- MAY 16-18 - KEYCON 97 (Winnipeg, MB)

Crown Plaza Hotel, Winnipeg. GoH: Kevin J. Anderson, Margaret Weis, Art GoH: Ruth Thompson. Fan GoH: DDI. Memb.: \$25 to Oct.31/96. Info: OPO Box 3178, Winnipeg, MB, R3C 4E7.

- MAY 23-25 - WIZARDS CHALLENGE (Regina, SK)

Regina Inn, Regina. GoH: Games Workshop. Info: Mind Games, 2101 Broad St., Regina, SK S4P 1Y6.

- MAY 23-25 - V-CON 22 (Vancouver, BC)

Hotel Info: TBA. GoH: Steven Brust. Theme: Music in SF. Memb: \$20. Info: PO Box 74664, Vancouver, BC V6K 4N4.

- JUNE 14-17 - AD ASTRA 17 (Toronto, ON)

Hotel: TBA. GoH: Steven Brust. Memb: \$25 till Dec. 31/96. Info: Box 7276, Station A, Toronto, ON M5W 1X9.

- JUL 18-20 - TORONTO TREK 11 (Toronto, ON)

International Plaza Hotel, Toronto, ON. GoH: TBA. Info: Suite 0116, Box 187, 65 Front St. West, Toronto, ON M5J 1E6 or (416) 699-4666 or <http://www.io.org/~kcozens/ttrek>

- JULY 18-20 - CONVERSION XIV (Calgary, AB)

Carriage House Inn, Calgary, AB. GoH: Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson. Info: PO Box 1088, Station M, Calgary, AB T2P 2K9 or (403) 259-3938 or Garyf@nucleus.com

Send details of Canadian conventions/author reading dates at least 5 months in advance: Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6). Information here courtesy CONTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter: 321 Portage Ave., Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

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For details on how to order back issues of *ON SPEC*, see the order form on page 95-96.

- **Vol. 1, No. 1** (#1) Spring/89 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 1, No. 2** (#2) Fall/89
Eileen Kernaghan, Leslie Gadallah, Paula Johanson, Drake Dresen, Trevor Murphy, E.C. Bell, Tor Åge Bringsvæld, Clélie Rich, Richard Davies, Coralie Adams, Janet Elliot Waters, Jena Snyder, & Spider Robinson. Cover: Robert Pasternak.
- **Vol. 2, No. 1** (#3) Spring/90 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 2, No. 2** (#4) Fall/90
Edo van Belkom, Bruce Taylor, Susan MacGregor, Sandy Robertson, Beth Goobic, Anna Mioduchowska, Sandra Hunter, Catherine Girczyk, Alice Major, & Cheryl Merkel. *Aurora-winning cover*: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
- **Vol. 2, No. 3** (#5) Winter/90
Theme: Youth Writing & Art – Nicole Luiken, Peter Tupper, Keynyn Brysse, Cory Doctorow, Rhonda Whittaker, Christine Gertz, Cairo & X, Jeb Gaudet, Marissa Kochanski, & Monica Hughes. Cover: Deven Kumar.
- **Vol. 3, No. 1** (#6) Spring/91
Richard deMeulles, Herbert Steinhouse, Sally McBride, Humberto da Silva, M.J. Murphy, Edith Van Beek, Leslie Gadallah, Barry Hammond, Catherine MacLeod, & Michael Skeet. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
- **Vol. 3, No. 2** (#7) Fall/91
Keith Scott, Alice Major, J. Nelson, Jena Snyder, Barry Hammond, Cheryl Merkel, Anna Mioduchowska, Dot Foster, Diane Walton, & Brent Buckner. Cover: Martin Springen.
- **Vol. 3, No. 3** (#8) Winter/91 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 4, No. 1** (#9) Spring/92
Hugh A.D. Spencer, Alice Major, Steve Stanton, David Nickle, Inge Israel, J. Nelson, Susan MacGregor, & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Tim Hammell.
- **Vol. 4, No. 2** (#10) Fall/92
Wesley Herbert, Michael Teasdale, Lyn McConchie, Sally McBride, Bruce Taylor, M.A.C. Farrant, Donna Farley, Amber Hayward, Lorina J. Stephens, Alice Major. Guest Editorial: Lorna Toolis & Michael Skeet. Art Features: Martin Springett, Tim Hammell. *Aurora-winning cover*: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
- **Vol. 4, No. 3** (#11) Winter/92
J.R. Martel, Cheryl Merkel, Preston Hapon, Jason Kapalka, Linda Smith, Catherine Girczyk, Robert Baillie, Sean Stewart (excerpt from *Nobody's Son*), Tim Hammell. Cover: Marc Holmes.
- **Vol. 5, No. 1** (#12) Spring/93
Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spigel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaiie, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
- **Vol. 5, No. 2** (#13) Summer/93
Robert J. Sawyer, Jason Kapalka, Bill Wren, Marian L. Hughes, Alison Baird, Bruce Barber, Nicholas de Kruyff, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Barry Hammond, Colleen Anderson, Tim Hammell. Cover: Rob Alexander.
- **Vol. 5, No. 3** (#14) Fall/93
Leslie Gadallah, Jason Kapalka, Dan Knight, Bruce Byfield, Alison Baird, Robert Boyczuk, Keith Scott, Preston Hapon, Rand Nicholson, David Nickle & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Robert Boerboom.
- **Vol. 5, No. 4** (#15) Winter/93
Deryll Murphy, Catherine MacLeod, T. Robert Szekely, Robert Boyczuk, Ivan Dorin, Luke O'Grady, M.A.C. Farrant, A.R. King, Wesley Herbert, Dave Duncan (excerpt from *The Stricken Field*). Cover: Robert Pasternak.
- **Vol. 6, No. 1** (#16) Spring/94
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.
- **Vol. 6, No. 2** (#17) Summer/94
Peter Watts, Harold Côté, Karin Lowachee, Bonnie Blake, Kate Riedel, Wesley Herbert, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Brian Burke, Jocko, Catherine Girczyk. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 6, No. 3** (#18) Fall/94
Charles de Lint, Mary E. Choo, Lesley Choyce, Marianne O. Nielsen, Braulio Tavares, Rudy Kremberg, Michael Teasdale, Michael Stokes, Spider Robinson, Alice Major, Jocko, Barry Hammond, Art Feature: George Barr. Cover: Tim Hammell and Peter Renaull.
- **Vol. 6, No. 4** (#19) Winter/94
W.P. Kinsella, Alex Link, Keith Scott, Alison Baird, Marcel G. Gagné, Christopher Brayshaw, Brian Panhuyzen, Roma Quapp, William Southey, Jocko. Art Feature: Robert Pasternak. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 7, No. 1** (#20) Spring/95
Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakober, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darlyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. Art Feature: Peter Francis. Nonfiction: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
- **Vol. 7, No. 2** (#21) Summer/95
Heather Spears, Brent Hayward, Mary Soon Lee, Jason Kapalka, Erik Jon Spigel, Bruce Barber, Karen Keeley Wiebe, Jan Lars Jensen, Sandra Kasturi, Kirsten Oulton. Art Feature: W.B. Johnston. Nonfiction: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: W.B. Johnston.
- **Vol. 7, No. 3** (#22) Fall/95
Tanya Huff, Jason Kapalka, Jamie Findlay, Susan MacGregor, Erik Jon Spigel, J.B. Scisizzi, Laurie Channer, K.V. Skene, Sandra Kasturi. Art Feature: Tim Hammell. Nonfiction: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
- **Vol. 7, No. 4** (#23) Winter/95
Tanya Huff, Alison Baird, Keith Scott, David Miller, Lorina J. Stephens, Joy Hewitt Mann, David Hull, Sandra Kasturi, Barbara Colebrook Peace. Nonfiction: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Sylvie Nadeau.
- **Vol. 8, No. 1** (#24) Spring/96
Theme: Cross-genre. David Nickle, Michael Skeet, Steve Zipp, Preston Hapon, D.G. Valdron, Ven Begamudré, Colleen Anderson, Leah Silverman. Nonfiction: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: James Beveridge.
- **Vol. 8, No. 2** (#25) Summer/96
Yves Meynard, Tanya Huff, Nicholas de Kruyff, Rebecca M. Senese, Michael Teasdale, Erik Jon Spigel, Leslie Gadallah, Sandra Kasturi, Derek Fairbridge. Nonfiction: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: George Barr.
- **Vol. 8, No. 3** (#26) Fall/96
Tanya Huff, Pamela Sweeney Jackson, Brent Hayward, David Keck, Dan Rubin, Jody Ivanic, Ian V. Worling, Andrew Gray, Fiona Moore. Nonfiction: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Kenneth Scott.

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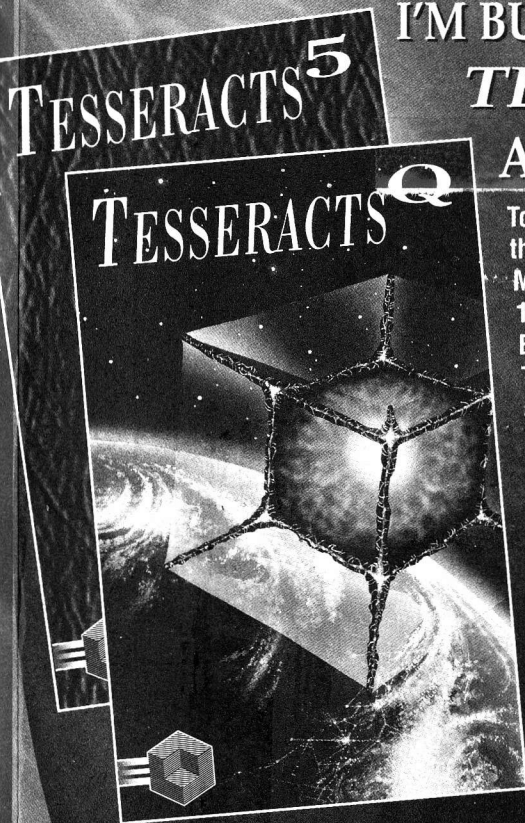
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