

# On·Spec

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing  
SUMMER 1997

\$4.95

## FICTION:

Jan Lars JENSEN  
Erik Jon SPIGEL  
Diane L. WALTON  
Ursula PFLUG  
Derryl MURPHY  
and many more!

## NONFICTION: Mr. SCIENCE!



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## ON SPEC

### The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

Vol. 9, No. 2, #29

Summer 1997

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<i>The ON SPEC Editorial Collective:</i>	Barry Hammond, Susan MacGregor, Hazel Sangster Jena Snyder, and Diane L. Walton
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Please send all mail (letters, queries, submissions, and subscriptions) to ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph/fax: (403) 413-0215. All submissions must include self-addressed, stamped envelope. Manuscripts without SASEs will not be returned. We do not consider previously published manuscripts, faxed, or emailed submissions. All submissions must be in competition format: no author name should appear on manuscript. Enclose cover letter including name, address, story/poem title, phone number, and word or line count (6,000 words max. for fiction; 100 lines max. for poetry). All nonfiction is commissioned. All art is commissioned; send b&w samples Attn: Art Director. We buy First North American Serial Rights only; copyright remains with the author or artist. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without the author's or artist's consent.

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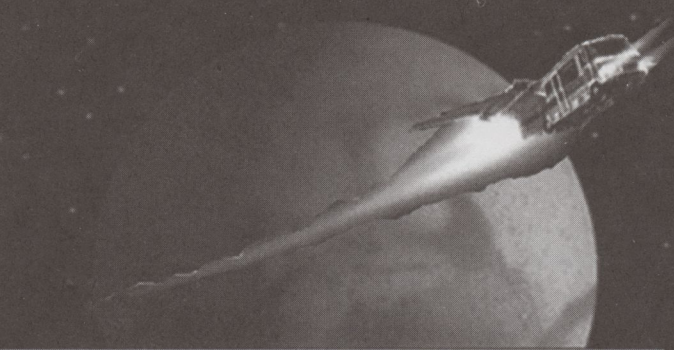
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## COVER

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Science Fiction & Fantasy Convention



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# ON this issue

## The bigger they are...

Susan MacGregor, Editor

*I recently had lunch with one of our contributing writers to ON SPEC. To save him embarrassment I won't mention his name, but he has a list of publishing credits that would satisfy most any writer, and he's a name in both Canadian mainstream literary and science fiction circles. To say the least, when he called me in response to a letter I'd sent him and suggested we meet, I was pleased that he wanted to see me. Compared to his writing credits, my own were practically negligible.*

I wasn't sure of what to expect. As well as being flattered, I was also a little apprehensive in meeting him. He'd discover that he wasn't dealing with a writing equal, my successes weren't on par with his, and that the meeting might be a waste of his time.

I think most of us have felt like this at some time or another. I think there's also a tendency for us to place ourselves in a kind of literary pecking order—so and so's been published in this magazine or that journal, is represented by that agent, or has seven books under his belt with two forthcoming in the fall. He also has this many degrees attached to his last name. Even who hangs out with whom adds up to an arbitrary worth.

When I met Mr. X at his office, he was quiet and unassuming. I think I was a bit late, for I had the impression he was concerned I wouldn't show! The illustration that accompanied his ON SPEC story hung nicely framed over his desk.

"Where would you like to go for lunch?" he asked.

I suggested we find some place in HUB, the Housing Union Building on the U of A Campus.

"All right," he said. "I thought we might go to the Faculty Club, but if you like, HUB is fine."

Yow, I thought. He figured I was important enough to be wined and dined at the Faculty Club. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough cash to cover lunch there, and there was no way I was letting him pay for me. We settled on borscht and perogies at The Patria.

Over lunch, he spoke briefly about his new book; he was currently revamping it. We also talked about the editorial and writing projects I was working on. Pretty soon, we spoke of things other than writing: his learning how to swim and my attempts at climbing, both efforts designed to get us over our fears of water and heights. He spoke about his other creative outlets: his photography and learning to play the piano. I told

him I figured people were more interesting the more diverse they were. After lunch, he walked me part-way back to the office where I was temporarily working, while I raved about Phoenix, Arizona. He'd mentioned that his wife wanted to move to the States, but he wasn't sure. I caught him smiling as I told him about saguaro and the desert in bloom, the scent of orange blossoms and sage and the sulfur which seems to permeate the soil, the monsoon season the locals refer to in July, and finally, the epiphany of being confronted with the Grand Canyon for the very first time.

"We could meet for lunch again," he suggested.

"That would be great," I said. Lunch had been fine. I found myself smiling all the way back to work. Mr. X had struck a note. Actually, he'd struck a whole *arpeggio* of them.

As a writer, I'm impressed with intelligence and talent. As an editor, I'm impressed with literary credits. But as a human being, I'm *really* impressed when I meet someone who has all three, but isn't attached to them. That person is interested in me simply because I'm a fellow denizen of the planet. We breathe the same air and share the same bit of terra firma at the same point in time. That we've both evolved to the point that we now stand here at all, is amazing. To top all that, we both write. Hey, great. A bonus.

In my mind, Mr. X is an exceptional writer and an enlightened human being. I'd say being human is as important to him as being a success. Too often, I've met writers who spend much of their time in judgment of others ability and their own. They resent the attempts of neophytes to break into the business and criticize wherever they see fault. It's as if by pointing out others' inferiority, they raise their own status. Others have difficulty in accepting rejection of any kind

and forget that the choice of a manuscript may be based on personal taste as much as anything. At *ON SPEC*, we've received hate mail from people who have an inflated sense of their own importance. I've also met other people who are definitely into establishing their idea of pecking order. If I wasn't an editor, they'd have nothing to do with me. In some cases, they still don't.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the biggest names are also the most generous. It would be easy to say they can afford to be. But I don't think that's it at all. They're just gifted in recognizing the commonality of the writing experience and the need that pushes us all to do it. Even more touching are those writers who are not big names but who still act in thoughtful and kindly ways. Their humility and gratitude are touching. I'm glad to say we receive more letters, even from rejected writers, saying "Thank you, I really appreciated your criticisms," than from those who mouth insults, make threats, or sling hate.

As writers, I think it's in our nature to understand ourselves, to delve into our motivations and desires, and be ruthlessly honest with ourselves in doing so. Part of that is to recognize why we criticize at all. We need to refrain from hostile criticisms which may be a cloak for hidden insecurities, self-righteousness, or ill-placed superiority. There's no need to be small-minded or act from a paradigm of scarcity when opportunities await as wide as the breadth of this country. Time, concerted effort, and a little encouragement are all that are needed.

If my experience with Mr. X has any effect at all, I hope it's to encourage all of us to be more generous and accommodating to those who are up-and-coming, to encourage the risk-takers, and to applaud those who have already made it. As an editor, this approach is crucial. As a writer, I wish it were mandatory. As

fellow artists, we're all in this life together, suffering under the same muse or demon, call it what you will.

### Thanks...

...and on behalf of all of us, I'd like to offer Derryl Murphy a huge thank you for his supportive editorial in the last SF Canada *Communiqué*. We are attempting to do what we can to build our subscription base, and we appreciate those people who recognize how much their financial support is valued.

### Speaking of which...

...we've also received some interesting subscription campaign-related mail. If anyone out there knows who might have returned our subscription drive letter with the decapitated alien heads from our Examine Us brochure, please let him know we take his response as a "no, I don't want to subscribe" quite seriously! We'd drop him from our subscription list if we could, but we don't know who he is. And to the person who sent back the letter crammed with the sexy lingerie ads—thanks! Unfortunately, Jena and I have been fighting over the order form ever since.

You gotta laugh. Who ever figured subscription campaigns could be so much fun?

### Readership survey

Out of the 600 surveys sent to our subscribers, we've received about 300 back to date. This is a terrific return, as most magazines consider a response of 10% to be good. Thanks to all of you who took the time to respond. Much of this information will be used to create packages which we hope will attract corporate sponsors and advertisers. Let me emphasize once again, that *ON SPEC* will not release any names to be used elsewhere.

What you told us about yourselves:

Most of you are male (65%) as compared to the fairer sex (35%). Considering that as editors, Hazel, Jena, Diane, and myself represent 80% of our Editorial Collective (Barry is our anything-but-token male), we feel this balances adequately! The majority of you are between 25 and 45 years of age (68%), and most of you are married or living with a significant other (60%). Some of you write (23% published, and 21% unpublished). You're also well educated (78%) with technical school certificates, university Bachelor degrees, or higher credentials.

What you said about the magazine:

Most of you have been reading *ON SPEC* for two years or more (75%); most of you joined during a previous subscription campaign. The features which you read the most are the fiction, the cartoon, Rob Sawyer's "ON Writing" column, "Ask Mr. Science" and the editorial. Poetry and "ON Cons" were the least read. You may have noticed that we've since dropped "ON Cons."

Interestingly enough, "Ask Mr. Science" is the most contentious feature in the magazine. You either love "Ask Mr. Science" ("We want more!!") or hate it ("You think this is funny??"). Personally, I love it, as do the rest of us at *ON SPEC*, so Mr. Science stays. Sorry to those of you who are groaning in the wings. One of the perks of being an editor is that occasionally, you get to throw your weight around.

Our cover illustrations averaged an 8 out of 10 (10 being the best), and interior art averaged 7 out of 10. Overall, you gave the magazine an 8 out of 10 which we consider to be a very good score.

Of particular interest to us was how you felt we could improve *ON SPEC*. Overall, you seem to like what you see, and many of you had some very complimentary things to pass along. Mostly, you wanted more, more fiction (both longer

and shorter pieces), more stories per issue, longer in-depth "ON Writing" articles by Robert Sawyer (and possibly other contributors) more art (although some of you suggested less), an increased magazine size, and more issues per year. Some of you wanted more color; enhanced interior art and more intense, dramatic color on the covers. Unfortunately, the cost of priting color on the inside of the magazine is prohibitive; you'll have to be satisfied (until one of us wins the lottery) with black and white interior illustrations. On the plus side, we are planning to expand the magazine to 112 pages from 96, which means you'll be getting at least one more long or two short stories per issue.

Although some of you don't care for our two-column format, most of you love it, so it stays. Jena, our Production Editor, agrees that a ragged right margin and a larger typeface would improve readability, but if we do that, we'd have to publish one less story than we do now. Given a choice, I think you'll agree that the format we're using is the most efficient and economical.

Other specific suggestions included more first story features by previously-unpublished writers (we've incorporated a new multi-part question on our Author Checklist: "Is this your first sale? First professional sale? First publication?" so we can feature new writers), more hard SF, more horror, more fantasy (we buy the

best of what we get, with no preference to genre), the additions of "Letters to the Editor" (we would if we got any...), "Interviews with Writers," and "Q & A" columns related to hard science and science fiction. Given that what all of you want is "MORE STORIES!" those features may have to wait until we can really expand our page count, but we'll see.

It's great to be in demand, part of what others want *more* of.

And we'd love to do more. Unfortunately, as Hazel said in one of our last editorials, were subservient to two demons—time and hard cash. And, as Derryl pointed out in his excellent editorial in *Comminuqué*, we're going to need all the extra help we can get. For those of you who are already loyal subscribers, thank you. If you also happen to encourage those who don't yet subscribe, or to donate, or to volunteer, we're even more in your debt.

I started this editorial talking about being impressed with writers who were not only talented and intelligent, but who gave of themselves in non-obvious ways. They were successful at being people, as much as anything. After weighing some of the weird mail against the warm responses in the readership survey, I guess there are more of you generous types out there, readers and writers both, than I originally thought. That's good to know, and it's good to know you. •

### About our cover artist:

JEFF DOTEN is a painter who works primarily in acrylics. In addition to current work doing private commissions and teaching a Science Fiction and Fantasy Illustration class, his work has been featured in a number of galleries, conventions and publications. It is his intention to further his interest in illustration in the book and magazine market.



# Look What You're Missing!

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 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 2, No. 1** (#3) Spring/90 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 2, No. 2** (#4) Fall/90 *SOLD OUT*
- **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 *SOLD OUT*
- **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 Springett.
- **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 Girczyc, 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 Skaife, 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  
 Derryl 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 Girczyc. *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 Renault.
- **Vol. 6, No. 4** (#19) Winter/94 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 7, No. 1** (#20) Spring/95  
*Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy.* Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakober, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. *Art Feature:* Peter Francis. *Nonfiction:* Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. *Cover:* Adrian Kleinbergen.
- **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. Sclisizzi, 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.
- **Vol. 8, No. 4** (#27) Winter/96  
 Heather Fraser, Kate Riedel, Preston Hapon, Michael Mirolla, Wayne Santos, Jocko, Allan Lawson, Peter Koems, Derek Kingston Fairbridge. *Nonfiction:* Robert J. Sawyer. *Art Feature and Cover:* Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 9, No. 1** (#28) Spring/97  
 fiona heath, Edo van Belkom & David Nickle, Steve Zipp, Darren Latta, Derryl Murphy, Michael Stokes, Anna Mioduchowska, Marianne O. Nielsen, Kate Riedel. *Nonfiction:* Robert Runté, Peter Watts, Robert J. Sawyer. *Cover:* Robert Pasternak.



# Fully Functional Bliss

by Jan Lars Jensen

illustration by Richard Leggatt

*Lucas held the orchid before him like a charm, obscuring his view as the cab sped along Highway One; how many years had gone by since he'd bought Sarah flowers? Too many, of course. They had both been missing out. The bloom of the orchid was big enough to swallow a dove. He could probably fit the bloom over Sarah's left breast, and in the idleness of highway travel he wondered if he had the moxie to do so.*

Weeks ago, Sarah had informed him that their relationship was losing its sense of purpose. It came with breakfast: french toast, champagne in orange juice, and their relationship was losing its sense of purpose. Buying her an airport flower was really only a token of his response, showing he was the sort of man who could surprise her with an orchid, home two days early from his trip without telling her, taking a cab from the airport rather than calling for a ride so his return would be a complete surprise. There is still verve and romance to Lucas Halliday: a message he hoped she would assemble from many pieces.

The cab arrived at the building. Lucas leapt out before it settled to a complete stop. Get inside, he thought. Forget about Windsor.

The cab honked and followed him up the concourse, advising him to key his payment authorization into the dashboard. If he hadn't turned back, he might not have noticed the plumber's truck parked nearby.

Curious.

Inside, he almost called out his return. A grimy blue jacket hung from the coat-stand and greeted Lucas with the same smiling crescent wrench logo he'd seen emblazoned on the truck outside.

There's a plumber here?

He glanced around but saw nobody. Then heard a noise, strange and unexpected. "Sarah...?" His throat tightened over her name.

Someone had moaned. A man.

Her office was empty but the smell of burned coffee suggested her presence. Her little Brunhaus coffee-maker had been left on, drips of mocha java vaporizing as they hit the empty hotplate. Lucas unplugged it and paused; another deep moan from somewhere in the suite, a very personal sound, intense pleasure blurring into heavy breathing. *Huh-huh-huh-huh-huh*. Lucas felt his whole body tighten as if preparing for a blow, but he was struck only by implications of the noise.

His early return would be more of a surprise than anticipated.

Lucas tossed the orchid into a waste basket. But stopped himself from slipping into a real rage: calmness, calmness, taking off his overcoat in a series of neat motions—*huh-huh-huh-huh*—hanging it precisely on the back of a chair. The breathing was getting faster. A husky voice said, *oh God, yeah*, and was punctuated by a squeal of flesh over tile. Someone was having a good time. On the floor, it sounded like. Lucas rolled up his sleeves.

The noises came from the kitchen. Pale light glimmered behind the door.

Lucas took a deep breath. Removed his watch. Then walked over and almost kicked the door off its hinges.

"What the fuck is going on in here?!"

Sarah dropped her coffee, spilling it over the floor. "You're not supposed to be home already!"

She stood about four feet away from the plumber, watching him from behind. Both were fully dressed. Drywall was strewn over the floor as a large segment had been cut away to reveal the glistening pipes behind. The plumber, working on his knees, leaned partway inside the dark, dripping space, his flashlight beam angled into lengths of gray

metal. His heavy breathing continued. "Oh yes," he said to the pipes. "Yesss."

Sarah said, "We had a pipe burst—" "Why is *he* fixing it?!"

"I ... I ..."

Lucas didn't wait for her answer. He grabbed the plumber by the tool belt and hauled him backward, noticing with revulsion that the man had provisions for a plastic diaper sewn into his coveralls. The plumber rolled over, tools sliding from fat hands as he blinked at Sarah and Lucas. The first he'd noticed anyone in the room, apparently. With his fat hands he swatted Lucas like a beached walrus knocking back a seal, not bothering to get up but flailing at his attacker, frenzied, so Lucas lost his grip and was knocked off balance, tripping over a chair and hitting his head as he fell. The plumber clambered back to the wall and resumed work immediately. "Uhhh," he said, tightening a bracket. "Oh yesss." The heavy breathing also returned.

"*Huh-huh-huh-huh*."

Lucas pulled himself up and grabbed a long socket wrench off the floor, gripping it with both hands, targeting the plumber's head. Sarah shouted "*No!*" and slammed against him.

"Stop, stop," she said. "It's my fault—I asked him to come!"

Lucas stared at her with disbelief. He threw down the wrench so it struck the plumber's calf. The man didn't react. Just pressed his face against the pipes as his eyes narrowed with delight, not even looking at the screwdriver he held but registering pleasure with each turn. "Oh yes. Yesss..."

Sarah pulled Lucas out of the kitchen. He shook her off and they sat on the divan, spaced well apart, not saying a word to one another. Lucas ordered the entertainment console to play some

Stravinsky. "Loud," he added, but sheer volume couldn't block out the plumber's noise. "I'm getting there..." he started shouting, "oh yes, I'm almost done!" His tone suggested the excitement was getting too big to contain. Lucas stared at a detail in the Turkish carpet, preferring its hand-woven geometry over Sarah's red face.

Eventually they heard the plumber reach his finale.

"Oh yes, that's it ... YES! DONE! Done..."

Heaviness slumping to the floor.

A moment of silence. Then the clink of tools being replaced in a toolbox.

The plumber emerged from the kitchen with a dreamy grin.

"Finished," he said, walking toward the door.

"Here," Lucas said.

He thrust out the check he'd written.

"What's that?"

"Payment. Twelve hundred dollars. I hope that covers your bill."

"Oh no," said the plumber. "I couldn't."

"Take it," Lucas said through clenched teeth.

"I don't want it."

"Take it, or I'll call our security service."

Reluctantly the plumber walked over. It pleased Lucas to see the other man wince as he took the check, but his satisfaction was undermined knowing he'd probably find it later, crumpled into a ball and thrown in the shrubs outside.

They were alone.

The rest of the afternoon reminded Lucas of the day his father died. There was nothing to do but pass time with menial tasks, which they performed separately, Sarah giving him a conspicuously large berth and never saying a word. He unpacked his suitcase by

shaking it over a laundry basket. He didn't want to touch the clothes he'd worn in Windsor. If they'd had an open fireplace he might have tossed them in. He showered, scrubbing vigorously, and afterward went back to the kitchen door and watched Sarah sweep up the crumbled drywall.

"Did you like it?" he said, pushing through.

"What?"

"Watching him."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Lucas."

"Answer me."

"It was curiosity! Innocent curiosity. You think I can listen to you day after day, and not start wondering about them, wanting to see one for myself?"

"*In our own home,*" he said, with renewed incredulity. "Well, wait a year, Sarah. Then you'll be able to indulge your curiosity just looking out the window."

She dumped the drywall into the garbage. "The world is coming to an end, right? Just because some sickos are messing with their heads. People have been doing that since the 1960s, Lucas! I bet hippies seemed like a real threat to the status quo, too."

When she turned around again he leaned toward her, took hold of her blouse with his fingertips. One after another he fastened the top buttons, until the blouse was closed up to her neck. She tried to stare him down but there was this deadness to his gaze. He smoothed her collar, using too much strength.

"Do you know where I've been?"

She said nothing.

She knew.

Windsor. Lucas and a dozen other senior bureaucrats. Sitting inside a pair of vans owned by the federal government, accompanied by a couple of CISC

agents in an unmarked sedan. They had driven slowly up and down streets, staring out the window. People would approach the van whenever it stopped for a light or even if it only slowed down. Can I wash your windows? Can I do your taxes? Can I cut your hair? They would jog alongside the van for as long as possible, even if nobody acknowledged their presence. But most of the locals ignored them. They just walked briskly down the sidewalk staring straight ahead, intent on getting someplace their services were required. Outside, Lucas could hear cries of passion echoing off buildings. It was background noise, filler, a background beat of heavy breathing and the cries of people reaching their climax. Oh God, oh yes, oh fuck. And the air, the air had a smell, like inside some warm organic space—a greenhouse, or a high school shower. The vans rolled past couriers and garbage men and a pastry chef, all just doing their jobs, construction crews and a meter maid and cops, their eyes focused on their work and the intense state of rapture that only their work could render.

*Huh huh huh.*

"It won't get that bad," Sarah said. "They won't take hold west of Ontario. Ever."

"You're missing the point!"

"Is there a point?"

He got his coat and dug out his wallet. If the apartment had a fireplace he might have thrown them into the flames, too. But it didn't, so he just started pulling them out and letting them float to the floor, petals of an abandoned flower.

"Money," he said with each bill. "Money. Money. Money."

He had about a hundred dollars to go when the phone rang.

"You gonna answer that?" Sarah said.

He kept pulling out bills. The phone rang again. "Fine," she said, stomping toward it.

Lucas said, "Don't touch it."

She stopped, and it rang twice more before the message came on, Sarah's voice: "We can't come to the phone right now, but if you please leave your name, number, and time of call..." But whoever was calling didn't want to leave a message. They'd already hung up, there was only a moment of dial tone. Lucas bent down and collected the bills, arranging them in his wallet so they faced the same direction. He was sorry. He'd spend them tomorrow: another token effort.

"The economy is vastly interconnected," he said quietly. "To maintain our standard of living, we need everyone contributing to the same system, everyone using the same currency. Now these people out east, and people like your plumber, they've chosen their own way to reward work. The more people indulge in it, the better off they all become. While the rest of us..."

He riffled through the bills in his wallet.

"Poorer and poorer," Sarah said.

He nodded.

"Lucas?"

Yeah?"

"Who was that, trying to call?"

He shook his head. "Enough for one day. Economics is boring, remember? Let's just..."

"...talk about something else?"

Normally he didn't advocate denial but at the moment, looking up into the moon of her face, he found the prospect so attractive he went to the trash can and rescued the orchid. "I'm home," he told her. Sarah kissed his cheek, his neck, then found a bud vase to hold the oversized blossom. They ordered in Japa-

nese food, tipping the delivery girl extravagantly, then ate out of the simple origami cranes the dinner had come packed in. Afterward they stretched across the sofa and Sarah massaged his back, his legs, pulled the knot of his robe loose—but before they could progress any further the phone rang again and they stopped what they were doing, waiting for a message. Again there was none. The dial tone killed the mood, and Lucas was sorry about that but couldn't summon the verve to get back on track; part of him feared he would remember Windsor while they were fucking. Sarah said it was okay, gave him a dry kiss and told him she was going to bed.

"I'm going to stay up awhile with the geisha," he said. Meaning the complimentary sake that came with the meal, in a geisha-shaped bottle.

Television helps turn off your mind, he'd read somewhere. Their set could project six channels at once so Lucas selected six inane-looking programs and let them play out silently in the air before him, all at once. More television, less mind.

It worked for about as long as it took him to drain the geisha to her hips, then the channel playing in the upper right switched to something televangelical, a preacher hollering mutely at the camera, red-faced, looking like he was ready to cry or punch somebody in the face. Or both.

Lucas thought of the plumber. If there was a sublime plumber operating locally then there had to be other followers as well; their system only worked if they had a reasonable pool of sublime services to draw from. Maybe the sake was making him paranoid but suddenly Lucas wondered if the plumber might mention this building to his peers.

Maybe one of them was outside, right now, clipping hedges by moonlight with his pants undone, or pressed against a window, cleaning it with slow, gentle strokes.

"Security camera, outside."

The television blinked away the programs to a black-and-white view of the outer grounds. Nothing. A loose page of newspaper floated down the street and while Lucas watched, the phone rang again.

This time he picked up.

"You abandoned us, just when things were heating up."

It was Louis Meso, from the Ministry of Finance. He sounded drunk, too.

"I had this urge to go home," Lucas said. "Try to save my marriage."

Meso said, "The Deputy PM left with a bloody nose tonight."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"There was a fist fight on the hill. Cooper mixed it up with one of those flunkies from the U.S. Treasury Department. The one who rode in the van with you guys. Anyway, things couldn't have gone worse. The Americans made their intentions clear. They're going into Quebec and Ontario. A friendly force, they're calling it."

"Jesus Christ."

"They say they can't let us pull them down."

"Economically, or morally?"

"Both? Hard to say what scares them more. Now the PM's office is soliciting eleventh-hour opinions. What do you think? Can we do anything to stop them?"

But Lucas was silent, at first flabbergasted, then, noticing something curious in the projections still cycling before him.

The security system had switched

from the view outside the building to views within the apartment. He saw himself, looking pale and ghostly in the living room. Then the empty kitchen. And the bedroom, also empty.

The bedroom, empty?

The sheets and afghan lay in a twist over the bed but Sarah was gone. Maybe she was in the bathroom. But his skin felt slick and cold, and he covered the phone's mouthpiece as he said, "Security, Sarah's office."

The projection was blank. Nothing at all. Like someone had thrown something over the camera.

Maybe her robe.

"Security," Lucas said again, his mouth dry, "Sarah's office, thermal-im-

aging."

This yielded a picture: an outline of heat sitting before the computer, and he could tell she was trying to type, but her throat and chest were flushed red, so hot, and her head was rolling back, slowly, lolling, her back arched, body movements he recognized from another life, the one where their passion for each other could rival this display.

*Sarah was working late tonight.*

"Lucas? Lucas?"

Meso was still on the line.

"What do you say, Lucas? What should we tell the PM's office?"

He could barely speak at all. "Let the goddamn Marines come do their worst." •

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# Minor Metamorphosis

Barry Butson

I first noticed the towel rack  
in the bathroom. It had always  
been parallel, but now seemed tilted  
slightly on the ceramic tile wall.  
I stared from my perch  
and wondered why I had never noticed.

Then, as I walked to work, the sidewalk  
was not level. It tilted towards the road.

I could barely keep my balance.  
When I arrived, I checked the soles  
of my shoes; they were badly worn  
on one side.

When I looked in the mirror  
to comb my hair, my glasses  
were cock-eyed  
because one ear had dropped two  
notches  
down my head.

I left work and went to a doctor.  
He discovered my heart had slipped  
to the far side of my chest cavity.  
And my penis curled sideways  
like a trigger finger.  
As usual, the doctor was puzzled.

He sent me home to bed,  
but I rolled right out.  
Couldn't even stop the rum  
in a glass I was holding  
from flowing over the rim.

The tv screen was on an angle  
and when I looked out the window  
the trees were slanted like missiles  
waiting for launch.

My philosophy was tilting too:  
Reading the newspaper's biased lines,  
I was cursing welfare recipient's,  
praising belt-tightening politicians.  
I was cheering reports of executions,  
tuition fee increases, the closing down  
of libraries. I couldn't stop  
myself; my brain was tilting  
to the right.

When I took a bath,  
the water sloshed high to one side.  
I was half-wet, half-dry.

When I crawled out, I flew naked  
through the bathroom door,  
for the continents had begun  
their steep slide into the seas. •

Barry Butson has published his work in many of the literary journals in Canada, the U.S.A., England, Wales, and Australia. He is a high school teacher in Ontario.



96

A small rectangular box with a dashed border, containing the number '96' at the top and a stylized lightning bolt symbol below it.

# The Covenant with the Bees

Erik Jon Spigel

*illustrated by Ronn Sutton*

*"No, wait; don't kill! Don't kill!" Moholai said, waving his hands urgently at me. As for me, I was scared. I'm allergic. I can die from the next bite, something I didn't know when I came here, when Happy Doc, our grinning medic, frowned, and said, "Lieutenant Weinberg, the Army's made a grave mistake sending you out here." I remembered the way he said "grave," sounding like he'd just dug one. Seems I got an insect-bite allergy; Doc says "potentiated by prolonged exposure to alien parasites in the Asian theatre." All's I know is I spent the last two years in the Pacific, getting bit by enough of those little chiggers to give me a good case of the shakes every time I see one.*

The object of all this recollection was a bee that had flown into the command tent when the Akalahi hunter had stopped by for a visit, and forgot to close the bug-netting behind him.

"Don't kill, Saul. I make it away." He insisted.

I'm trying to be brave, meanwhile—me, Saul Weinberg, decorated with a purple heart after my experiences in the jungle—decked out in the best tropical fatigues Uncle Sam can afford, carrying an army-issue pistol on my belt with a full clip, enough to mince a thousand-pound, nine-foot tiger. But right now, like I say, I'm backing away from a one-inch bee which is more of a threat than a corps of tigers, even if I were armed only with a slingshot and a handful of spitballs.

"Like this, Saul," my reluctant bodyguard intervenes.

He holds out his hand and makes a peculiar bubbling sound, like what my daughter would make while peeing on a guest. The bee, its wings twitching and buzzing dangerously, still nonchalantly lights on Moholai's finger. The Akalahi opens the

curtain of the tent and shoos the little beastie off. And so it goes, with a bee's contentment tucked under its little wings.

"See?" The native says with a broad smile. "Always remember the covenant with the bees."

Charlie Martin, our chief engineer, picked out that phrase and it stuck. The natives really took to it; they understood little else about us which maybe was just as well, seeing as we were going to blow up their island and all (mother, it wasn't my idea).

We got here about six weeks ago, after eight weeks of security clearance, after four weeks of briefing about the new A-bomb, after two weeks of being told that no one really knew what we were looking for in a test site; the last one was a desert. So we came down here, floated in over a couple of days, with a few of every kind of specialist the military could trust. That meant a lot of engineers, a couple of geologists, one civilian physicist, a medic, four army nurses, and a whole mess of grunts under the command of Captain Bill Hanlon.

Charlie Martin and his engineers built us a beauty of a camp in practically no time. Inside of a week we had a command tent, a hut for the Captain, a pre-fabricated wonder of an infirmary-slash-commissary-slash-officers' club, and a dozen shit-shacks. We had tents, too, but mostly we lay outside, what with it being the tropics and all. This didn't cause a problem with the nurses because their names were John Sykes, Andy Burns, Mitch Hayden, and Tommy Walker. They were frontline medics during the war drafted into nurses to help us out. Lucky us.

I was next in command after Captain

Hanlon. We got along; he didn't mind a little discipline lapse every now and again, long as the work got done. I spent most of my time coordinating bundles of this and that to be moved here and there. Mostly, I just tried to keep everyone busy, and as cool as possible during the midday heat.

We were ordered to have as little contact with the natives as possible. We had a translator, guy from Manoa by the name of Richard Ho, who was supposed to be some specialist from the University. But the natives didn't have any kind of orders, so they found us.

Richard had been dealing with them on his own so far, but a few of them started getting curious. We were trying to win our way into their hearts, so they'd trust us when we told them we were going to have to get them off the island. I don't know; maybe the Pentagon boys believed all those Hollywood pics where the white man comes to the tropical island and the natives think he's God or something. At any rate, the natives told Richard they wanted to meet the "grubs" who were making a "hive" on their beach.

Now, we thought it was an insult and all, until we found out how much the natives worshipped insects. They just took one look at our white skin, and the way the geologists were chopping through the volcanic rock with the engineers and made a little joke at our expense. Richard thought it was a good idea that we arrange a formal meeting, maybe to try to work up some kind of trade agreement. I really think he thought he could *buy* the island from the natives. Naturally, we wouldn't tell them what we were going to do with it.

So we were invited to a little do in the small collection of thatched huts that passed for Manhattan in these parts.

We were watching eight Akalahi men, six in a circle, two in the middle of the circle, doing a dance. The six guys on the outside did a kind of timestep: Two steps left, three steps right, then three steps left, two steps right. Every fourth time, they took four steps left. The two guys in the middle did this figure-eight around each other, hunched over so their butts stuck out. Damned if these guys weren't shaking their fannies enough to put ripples in their cheeks.

"That's the *bee-dance*," Richard said. "The dancers in the middle are using their hands to communicate some important event that happened today, or something from the tribe's history. The direction they turn—clockwise or counterclockwise with respect to each other—gives the direction of the location of the event with respect to the sun at noon. The speed of the dancers tells how far away the event occurred. It's really quite amazing; they must have watched honey bees do that for years when one of them figured it out."

I figured Richard was talking more for himself than for me; I really didn't follow most of what he said, but I could see a bit of a pattern to the dance. Hell, I didn't need to be a damn specialist to know that I liked it.

Charlie spent the whole time whistling appreciation for the way the village was put together.

"I tell you, Saul, this ain't no house of cards here. I asked Richard to ask one of the natives how they build them; the guy just smiled and began to shake the hell out of one of the walls. I'm sitting there and thinking, 'Oh great; we just asked the village idiot how they build the city and the guy's gonna tear it apart.' Well, the hut swayed a bit, and a couple of leaves frayed, but the thing stayed up."

I nodded. "So how *do* they build them?"

Charlie just snorted. "Monsoon-proof. Get it? 'How do you build your huts?' And he answers, 'Monsoon-proof.' "

That got Charlie hooked. He's a lovable old fart. Career man, pushing fifty. Thinks too much to be a soldier. Or an engineer, for that matter. But he does his job, and a damn sight better than most of the drones I worked with during the war. Charlie just started spending more and more of his off time with the villagers and eventually even learned a bit of their language. In return, they learned a bit of ours, and that got the ball rolling. Before too long, we were one big happy family, and never a day did go by that we didn't see some of them, or they came by to see some of us. We found out they didn't have last names, and they found out our first names, except for Captain Hanlon, who was in command so he was "King Bill." Richard said they didn't have a status or caste society, just an occasional leader who they called "King"; right now, it was King Olokomohai. After the rainy season, if King Olokomohai was tired of being King, the honor would be given to someone else, usually the person who least wanted it. The King's main duty was to christen all the newborns so that none of them would have the same name. After a few seasons, this kind of thing would tax even the most limber imagination; as it was, few names ever meant anything, but were just strung-together Akalahi nonsense syllables.

We also found out one other thing early on, again courtesy of Charlie.

"Saul, did you happen to notice anything about the village?" he asked me one day.

"After the monsoon-proof bunga-

lows?"

"It's nothing to do with architecture, Saul. Let me put it this way: how many times you been bit since you was here?"

"Bit by what?"

"Bugs. How many bug-bites you got?"

"I got a swelling, couple of hours after we landed. Doc says it's an allergy, and could get worse. No trouble since then."

Charlie nodded.

"Come with me for a walk, tomorrow. Through the village."

The next morning, we're strolling down Main Street with one of the Akalahi, who's introduced to me as "Moholai." We're walking back and forth for about an hour, doing absolutely nothing but walking, until Moholai and me are exchanging looks like, "Why the heck is this old man walking us up and down the shopping district?" when Moholai suddenly breaks off his look and goes dashing up a few yards on the path.

Charlie saunters over to me and whispers, "Now watch."

I'm watching.

Moholai is bending over, face twisted in an unreadable expression. I think he's in pain.

"What's wrong?" I ask Charlie.

"Look down," he tells me.

I have to move a little closer. By now, Moholai's strutted off the path and into a nearby bush. I look down and see a bee. A dead bee. I look back at Charlie.

He nods.

"There's bound to be a few of them every day. The village was built on an old honey route, I figure, and a few of the bees haven't learned it straight. So they come flying right into a hut or something; something that shouldn't be there. Or they wait until too late to fly

back and the sun shifts, so they get their directions mixed up. At any rate, I can count on seeing this at least once each day."

Meanwhile, Moholai comes back, pushing past us without even giving us a second thought—as if we were some obstacle that shouldn't be there—and gently pushes the bee-corpse onto a leaf. Then just as delicately, carries the leaf into the bush.

Charlie says, "We'll follow him."

We're in deep jungle now. It gets thick really fast once you leave the village. And we come to a small clearing. It's a natural clearing; there's no trace of man here. Except King Olokomohai's there, sitting patiently in the shade of a big palm. There's little piles of leaves strewn everywhere about. Olokomohai's naked, and nods at Moholai. Moholai nods back.

Charlie stops me from going any further with his arm. He looks at me and puts a finger in front of his lips: *No talking, period*. Then he shakes his head, and turns back to where Moholai and King Olokomohai are.

Moholai is buck naked too. He tenderly puts the bee's body in his palm, and places the leaf in one of the piles near the King. His head is bent over the dead bee as he walks past Olokomohai and further into the bush.

"They're like Buddhists," Charlie tells me later. "They told me they have this kind of agreement, this covenant with the bees. They think of their village as a kind of intrusion on the island, and told me that they've got this bargain worked out. Only it's nothing official, see? They just couldn't feel good when natural jungle creatures came to harm in their man-made city so they started carrying the corpses into the bush. They felt the jungle creatures just deserved to die, if

they had to die, in their natural environment; hell, they didn't get any say in whether a wall was going to be in their way, did they? So the big ones—you know there's a couple of big cats on this island? There are—learned and just gave the village plenty of space. But every now and again, some of the little ones forget and stumble in, and usually die."

"So they got that ritual, right?" I asked.

Charlie nodded.

"I was wondering what old Olokomohai did during the days myself," he said. "Ever notice how we never see him around? Well, he just sits there, and makes sure no man-made thing goes beyond that point, not even words. The Akalahi even take a different route each time to get there, so there won't even be a well-worn path to disturb the natural jungle."

He paused. Then, he added, "Do you notice about the village? There's plenty of food, fresh fruit, just sitting out. Notice there's no bugs on it? Nothing swarming about? Notice how you never get bit when you're there? Hell, Saul, there ain't even an Akalahi word for 'sting.'"

He finished, and sat back, satisfied.

"And you think this has something to do with this bargain with the bees."

Charlie gave me a thumbs-up. It occurs to me at this point that he buys all this like Gospel.

"You believe this, Charlie?"

"You tell me when you've seen one of those guys afraid of something on this island. And look next time when they're on the beach with us. A stinger will come flying right up and still give the natives a miss, even if they do land on a few of our boys."

And the more I paid attention to it, the more I saw that he was right. Still, I told Captain Hanlon about the big cats, and

saw to it that our field teams always had a man with a rifle around. Hell, we'd just been through a *World War*; it was too soon for us to be thinking about a covenant with tigers.

It was bound to happen sooner or later.

Jack Fulbright, our company shore-wolf, eventually got to noticing the indigenous grass-skirts and figured, what with boys being boys and even the nurses being boys, nobody would object to a little pink "peace-offering" once in awhile.

All it got him was a sprained wrist—here, at least, the women knew what to do with a wolf—and three days of peeling potatoes, courtesy of Captain Hanlon. (Me? I'm a married man, happy with the woman I've got and my daughter, my little woman-to-be. That doesn't stop some guys, but it does me. That's just how I am.) It *did* improve relations with the natives, at least between our men and the native men, who stopped by a lot more after the incident to commiserate with poor Jack, and exchange that universal men's look: the one that says, "can't live with them, etc." I guess the natives figured we were more like them than they'd thought, after all.

Charlie, on the other hand, had got himself an entourage. Richard had by now given up any hope of buying the island and spent most of his time crabbing to the off-duty crews how there was nothing to do—which got him more than a few dirty looks from the engineers—since Charlie seemed to have taken over his job. It was true; the natives were barely superficially friendly to Richard, but positively glowed whenever Charlie was around, so Captain Hanlon had given him the unofficial duty of Akalahi liaison.

Which brings me back to Charlie's

harem. Akalahi men are responsible for knocking up at least three of their women, which Richard interpreted for us as a “means to increase the viability of the tribe,” whatever the hell that meant. Except it’s the women who chose the men. None of them had ever seen a grub with grey hair before, and he became something of a celebrity to them.

Poor Charlie! Some of his old buddies said he’d rather dismantle and reassemble a DC-3 than try to make conversation with a woman.\* Now it suddenly becomes a matter of international relations for him to impregnate three girls who’d get him ten years back home if he just brushed past them on the bus.

It’s not that Charlie didn’t *like* women, he was just, well, *shy*. Never could figure out what he was supposed to say. Maybe that was why he read so much.

He came to Captain Hanlon and me when we were in the command tent, trying to figure out where to send the next blasting team.

“Uh, sir,” he began.

“Yes, Lieutenant. At ease.”

“Sir, I have a problem.”

“Please continue, Lieutenant.”

“It’s about my unofficial post as Akalahi liaison.”

“Yes...?”

“Well, sir, I’m not exactly sure how to put this. The King, that is, um, King Olokomohai, has told me that there’s been some, uh, insult to the Akalahi, sir.”

“I see. Well, we must do whatever is necessary to rectify the situation, Lieutenant. What is the nature of the grievance?”

“It seems, sir, that, well... Shoot, sir; I just can’t say it.”

Charlie was looking pretty embar-

assed. The joke was, Olokomohai had already been here for a chat, King-to-King, so to speak, so Captain Hanlon already knew what Charlie was there for. It’d be a truly strong man who could keep from laughing at that point, and I started paying pretty close attention to the map, so Charlie wouldn’t see my face turn red as I tried not to choke.

“That is unacceptable, Lieutenant. You interrupt a meeting between myself and my second-in-command with some news that could jeopardize our mission here, and you can’t tell me what that news is?”

Even I can see the Captain’s eyes watering. And the last “is” he said had two syllables.

But Charlie was just staring at his boots.

He sighed.

“Sir, can I speak freely?”

“Of course, Lieutenant.”

“Well, sir. It seems that it’s been decided that I’m married to three women and my conjugal duty is to, uh, produce offspring by these women. I add, sir, that I in no way encouraged these relations. However I must also add that refusing this, uh, honor severely injures the women who have ... who have ... *chosen* me and may hurt them when they remarry as is their option to do so every season.”

“Understood, Lieutenant. This is the United States Army, Lieutenant, and we are judged by our chivalry and our decorum in the face of every novel onslaught. Now I can’t promise you a promotion or a Purple Heart, but I can promise you that the sacrifices you make here today will not go unremembered. Now, go out and do your duty.”

“Yes, sir!”

Charlie gave his snappiest dress salute, gouging deep bootprints into the



sandy floor of the tent.

Captain Hanlon and I lasted all of about five seconds after Charlie ran from the tent, shouting after the three island girls:

“He said it’s okay! He said it’s okay!”

That night we were initiated into another Akalahi ritual. Moholai came and got a bunch of us—me, Captain Hanlon, Jack Fulbright, Tommy Walker, Mitch Hayden, Eugene Simmons (Charlie’s second), and two others—and brought us to a group of seven men outside one of the huts in the village. I recognized King Olokomohai and Moholai, but the rest were new to me. Still they nodded as we sat down, as if we were all old friends.

King Olokomohai smiled conspiratorially and leaned over as we sat.

“Charlie,” he whispered, and shook his head at the hut.

“In there?” Jack Fulbright asked, incredulously. Then, “With the women?”

There were a few low chuckles from the Akalahi men.

“Make man,” Moholai said. “Charlie make man.”

Captain Hanlon looked at me quite as dumbfounded as Jack Fulbright sounded, and I leaned over to him.

“I think I understand, sir. The first time a man ... you know ... it gets presided over by the king and a bunch of the guy’s friends.”

“Charlie’s no virgin,” Eugene Simmons said.

“Apparently he is here,” the Captain responded.

Soon, we started hearing a muffled rustling from inside the hut, and we saw a periodic bulge in one or the other of the walls.

“Monsoon-proof?” I said.

The Akalahi thought this was a great

joke, and a few slipped and laughed aloud, catching a stern glance from King Olokomohai.

Then the natives began to sip something from a coconut shell. And then one of us—Jack Fulbright, I guessed—produced a bottle and we started trading sips.

Moholai looked at us hopefully.

Tommy Walker handed him the bottle.

Moholai took a good long pull from it, then quickly ripped the bottle away. His face, even in the dim light, was in a pretty sad way. He spat out the whiskey and went stomping off. This brought a few snickers from our boys.

“Probably going to puke in the palm trees,” Jack Fulbright remarked.

But Moholai returned, with an armload of opened coconut shells.

“Drink?” he offered.

So I took one of the shells, just to be polite.

I took a swig, expecting coconut milk, getting liquid gold, instead.

I took another swig.

Jack Fulbright grabbed one of the shells, seeing the look on my face.

“What is it?” he asked. “Weinberg?”

But then he took a sip and was in love. I could tell by the look in his eye. It made up for being five thousand miles from home, for male nurses, for Charlie getting it while he trained to be a Pope, and it made up for more. I don’t think he’d ever take another drop from that crude oil we call whiskey again.

Moholai looked very pleased.

“Good. Mmmm,” he said, rubbing his stomach.

“Yeah. No shit.” Fulbright drained his coconut the way a man three weeks in the desert would drain a canteen.

“Hey, Lieutenant; ask him why we never had this stuff before.”

I was the next best at Akalahi-ese after Charlie and Richard, so I was translator tonight. I gave the best sense I could to Moholai, and passed along what he told me: "He says, basically, that he didn't know until tonight that we drank alcoholic beverages, and didn't want to corrupt us by passing them out at a party."

Even Hanlon laughed at that. Then, leaning over to me, "What else do we do in this ritual?"

I asked Moholai.

"It seems, sir, that we're doing it."

"You mean we just stay here all night until Charlie does it with those three women?" Simmons asked.

I nodded.

Simmons laughed. "So while we're getting hung over, the Lieutenant's gotta pray he's well enough hu—"

"Simmons!" Hanlon cut him off.

"Sir!"

Shortly after that, we heard a rather feral shriek from the tent. The Akalahi men just laughed and said, in chorus, "Uha!" which meant "One!"

The Akalahi only name the numbers one and two. After that, far as they're concerned, it's infinity. But by the time Charlie got that far, we were pretty much that far gone, ourselves.

I remember the last days on the island very clearly. Charlie strutted around for a while, a bit sore but very proud. And he seemed more outgoing, easier on his men. Now that one of the boys from our "village" had become a man in the Akalahi village, the natives considered us more than just neighbors. We were family, for true. We were trusted.

And it dawned on us all over again why we were there. What we were going to do to these people. What we were going to do to their home, which we

were starting to think of as ours, too.

Captain Hanlon gave me the duty of explaining it to the natives. Charlie'd be better at it, we both knew, but it would just be too cruel to make him do it.

So I explained it, over and over again, to King Olokomohai, then to Moholai, then to anyone else who'd listen, that we had to move them, but the answer was always the same. The island? No, sir; not the island. Why do we want to move? Because you'll all die if you don't.

But King Olokomohai just shook his head and kept saying, "Never forget the covenant with the bees."

Finally, I just gave up. Figured my translating was no good. Captain Hanlon was forced to ask Charlie to do it, and, slack-legged and water-eyed, he did. But he, too, got the same response:

"Never forget the covenant with the bees."

Captain Hanlon sighed.

"It puts us in the awkward position of having to do it by force," he said.

There wasn't much left to do, after that. We sent a coded transmission to the mainland informing them of the situation, and all we had left was a couple of tests to do. Hanlon said those could wait until tomorrow, and gave the rest of us the day off.

No one felt like going into the village. I decided to go for a swim, which sometimes clears my head.

Charlie was already down at the beach, a Dodgers cap pulled roughly over his steel-colored hair.

"Hiya, Charles!" I said, trying to sound cheerful. "What's on your mind besides Brooklyn?"

"Hello, Saul. Just thinking, is all."

He paused.

"You know, Saul, I've been in the service for going on thirty years. That's

long enough to remember two World Wars, even if I only fought in one of 'em. And you know, I just can't shake this feeling. I mean, I hadn't thought about it much, but now ... here..."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, isn't this kind of place we were fighting to protect? Isn't this the sort of thing we wanted *not* to become a war zone?"

"Ain't a war zone, Charlie. Just a test site."

"You really believe that?"

I looked away. "It's not like we're leaving them here. We're shipping them stateside. They'll have jobs, and homes, and an—"

"And mortgages, and bills, and headaches. And they won't be 'people,' stateside. They'll be 'nips' or 'yellow-men'; guys a lot of folks think we should have gotten rid of. And may still try to."

"That's not an army problem," I muttered, not really believing it.

"Hell, Saul. My second-in-command—Sergeant Simmons—he's twice the engineer I ever was. But they won't promote him on account of he's colored."

I nodded, vaguely ashamed. "Or until there's an all-black engineer's corps..."

"'Cause we can't have a colored man in charge of a white man," Charlie finished. "And you, *Lieutenant* Weinberg; you got medals, education, and better qualifications than most colonels—"

"Don't forget my Tyrone Power good looks."

"Look, all I'm trying to say is it ain't a perfect world. And that sticks with me, sometimes."

I sat next to him for a long time in silence. We both watched the waves roll back and forth in the moonlight, spilling silence over the beach.

I knew what Charlie was saying. We

didn't *need* another bomb test. Surely the world would be no better or worse off for it. Maybe better off, after all, at least for not destroying this little piece of Eden. Charlie didn't like it, I didn't like it; even Captain Hanlon didn't want to have to do it. Finally, we all felt a little like we were dropping a turd in our own living rooms; weren't we Akalahi now, after all?

Charlie was killed the next day.

He was helping one of the geologists lay a small charge to test the seismic profile of the island. The charge went off too damn close to Charlie Martin. The concussion killed him pretty quick. He looked okay on the outside, but the Doc said inside he wasn't much of anything that could be called human. All crumbled bone and disintegrated organs.

Captain Hanlon had him wrapped for return home; we still hadn't received word from there, but we were expecting it soon. No one knew if Charlie had any family there.

Hanlon and I decided to get stinking drunk. It was too much, too close. Leaving here, and losing Charlie. Some of us cried openly; Jack Fulbright sniffed and kept his face down for the whole day. Bill Hanlon and I tried to get drunk.

"You know, Charles Martin saw me through my first drunk," Hanlon said as he poured. "God, that seems like a long time ago. I was a corporal. It was in London. I was an overly bred, pampered East-coast boy, dragged kicking and screaming into the Service. Here was Charlie, not much with the ladies, but damned if he didn't know every watering hole in Western Europe."

I smiled.

"I discovered scotch," he went on. "Charlie just kept buying it, and I just

kept drinking it."

He raised his glass. "To Lieutenant Charles Martin."

I touched my glass to his and we drank.

"He saw me through my first hang-over, too. Life seemed like it was going to last forever, back then. What the hell did we know? Once the war was over, I thought, that was it. No more war, no more death. Just the long slide into retirement. Damn."

We drank in silence after that. I was remembering my Charlie, the Charlie who took a few in the gut for me one night from an overzealous enlisted man who didn't like taking orders from a Jew. And I remembered the Charlie with three wives and probably three children who were growing up fatherless. And homeless.

Later, we heard Eugene Simmons' voice shouting outside.

"Don't you get it, you idiots? We're blowing it *all* up! All of you are gonna end up like Charlie! Don't any of you give a damn?"

Bill Hanlon sighed and became Captain Hanlon.

"What's the problem here, Sergeant?" He asked.

But we knew.

King Olokomohai had come with four other Akalahi, Moholai among them. They bore a large travois made of thatched leaves.

"Charlie," the King said, gesturing to the leaf-stretcher.

Simmons was livid.

"I'm trying to tell them, sir, that Lieutenant Martin is dead, sir. They want to take him away on a stretcher, sir. But I told them I'm not going to let them tinker with Charlie's mortal remains, no way, sir."

"That will be all, Sergeant."

Simmons stopped, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"Good night, Sergeant," Captain Hanlon said.

Eugene Simmons took a deep breath, looked once at the natives, then went off.

"Charlie," King Olokomohai said again, again gesturing at the travois.

"What do you think, Saul?"

"I think they mean to bury him here, sir. On the island. They really believe he's one of them now."

And then it hit me.

"Captain," I began. "Trust them. And when we leave the main path in the village, say nothing. Remain absolutely quiet. Words are man-made things, and no man-made things must enter the jungle. Just do as I do."

"What are you talking about, Lieutenant?"

I gave him a sad smile.

"The covenant with the bees," I said.

So we bore the naked body of Charlie Martin on its leafy stretcher off the village path and into the jungle. We stripped at the clearing, and lifted Charlie in our naked hands. We brought him deeper into the jungle, all of us quiet as if asleep, and placed his body in a place that I knew no human being had touched before.

The next morning, we finally received a call from home. The test was canceled, they said. No explanation. A carrier was already on its way to pick us up.

A general on one of the boats told us to burn all our maps and orders, that the powers that be ordered that all information pertaining to the island and the proposed test were to be destroyed, lest that information "fall into the hands of the Godless Communists."

And we said our goodbyes and took off, our boats making a line down the Pacific like the white line down the middle of a highway. We waved to the natives, who assembled on the beach to dance their goodbye dance and the tail-

shaking that told us the way to the sun. We were a mixture of sad and happy, because, even though we were leaving, we knew also that we were going home.

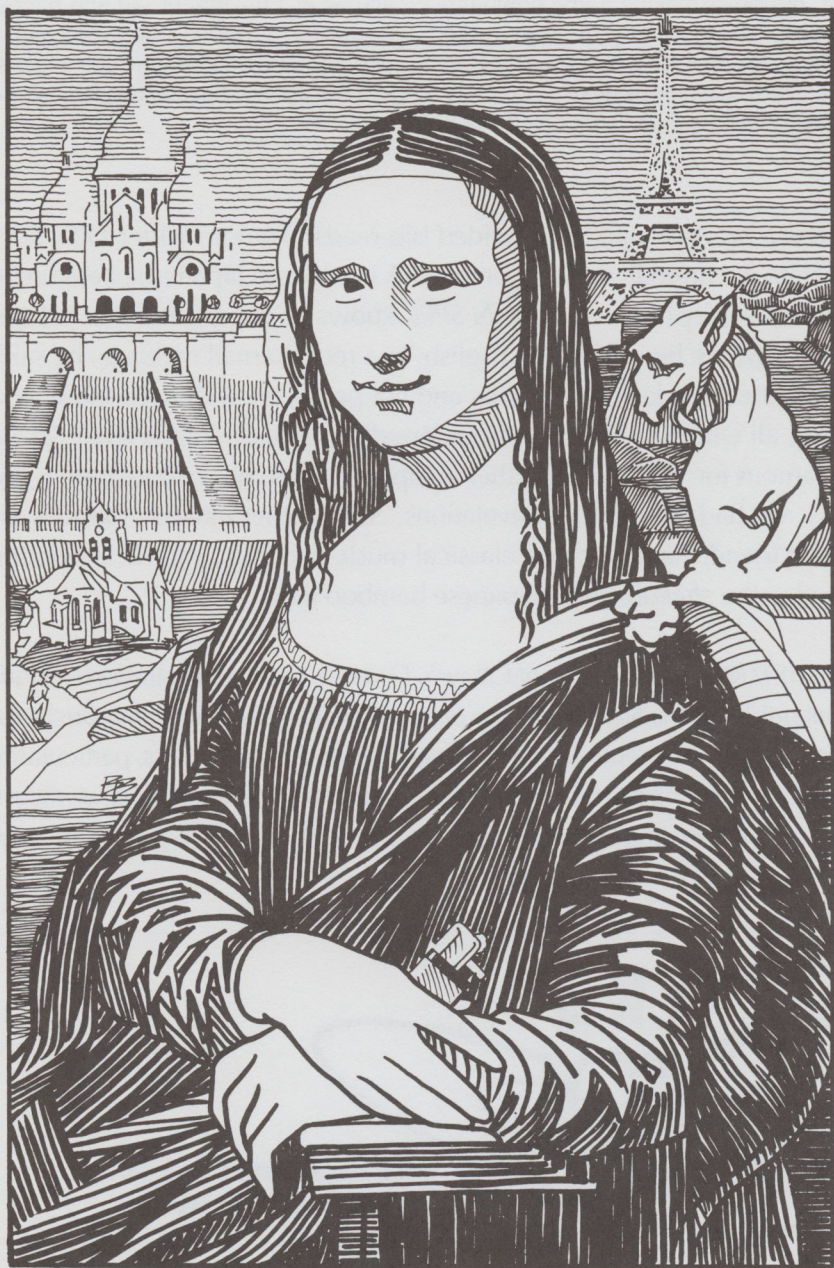
Like all the bees returning to the hive. •

**AUTHOR:** Although his provided bio reads "Toronto writer ERIK JON SPIGEL is currently working on his MA in Modern Japanese Literature at the University of Toronto," *ON SPEC* knows he can be found in Sakata, Japan, where he is teaching English. In a recent email message, he said, "I went out to do some errands and got pelted on with rain, snow, and sleet, all within the span of about forty-five minutes. This is what Sakata is famous for: the worst weather in Japan. Yesterday, we had Spring. Today, we had the Book of Revelations." Erik's other interests (besides his good friend, Yuko) include classical music and jazz, and he is learning to play the *shakuhachi*, a Japanese bamboo flute.

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# Mona

Cathleen Thom

*illustrated by Robert Boerboom*

*I spend a lot of time in Mona's room. Maybe she likes me; maybe the spirit of Leonardo reaches out over the centuries to play havoc with that little whiteboard schedule in the staff room and sticks my name under hers. Personally, I think it's just that one of the managers knows I went to art school back in Montreal and thinks I might appreciate it. I prefer to consider it a subtle form of torture. She's got personality, Mona does, I won't deny that, but she doesn't deserve to be a postcard industry.*

I leaned in the corner and fiddled with my radio, one eye on the vast cluster of tourists around Mona's glass case, waving and pointing and telling each other Da Vinci jokes. Sometimes they try and tell me Da Vinci jokes, usually with very silly Parisian accents, which is nice of them, but I've heard every one a thousand times over.

The painting over my left shoulder grunted, watching the people laugh and whisper and move on. "It's not an art gallery; it's a bloody tourist trap. A circus! And poor Mona, the star attraction."

I held the radio over my mouth and agreed. The wonderful thing about being a security guard is the walkie-talkie; you can have conversations with the art without being looked at strangely, and you can make it look like you're doing your job at the same time. "Of course," I added thoughtfully. "She never stops smiling."

"She's got a secret." The painting agreed, lowering its voice to a whisper. "She knows how to get out of here." It paused, waiting for my reaction. I had none. "Well, aren't you going to ask me how?" It continued, slightly impatiently.

I held the radio over my mouth again. "If you tell me, I might try to stop her." I pointed out. "I'm the security, remember? I keep you guys in here."

"Oh," the painting paused. "Right." Sometimes I wonder how something so beautiful and old could at the same time be so ridiculously unintelligent. I put down my

radio and one of the tourists' kids toddled up to me with a knock-knock joke.

After a while the crowds trickled away, and we began shutting down for the night, giving way to the more professional security: forbidding young men and women with flashlights and guns and dark hats that shadowed their faces.

I went back to my apartment, ate half a baguette and slept for a few hours, vaguely awaiting a phone call. Selene wants to go clubbing or something and has decided that I am her next victim. Much as I enjoy being dragged all over town by someone who needs an ugly, Canadian artistic-type friend to make her look good, I wasn't sure I could deal with anyone tonight. All day I deal with people, all night I deal with people, and not one of them knows my name. Of course, everyone knows Mona's name, and look what happened to her.

The doorbell woke me up; I stumbled sleepily to the door in a T-shirt and boxers, reluctantly yanked it open and blinked. Selene thrust past me and hurried to my closet, talking faster than the speed of light. I have no idea what she said, nor, I suspect, does she. She simply needs to fill that horrible silence around her, and does so with efficiency.

By the time I turned around and followed her to my room, she had half my clothes laid out on the bed like so many crumpled Christmas ornaments. I paused in the doorway and admired them for a moment as they graced my spare white sheets, then the image was shattered by Selene's hands. They ordered and organized and rearranged, following some hidden map laid out in her head. Then she began shoving them against me, colors flashing around my face until I was half buried and she had

run out of clothes. I let the mess fall to my feet and stared at it curiously, thinking; where did she find that shirt? I'd lost it years ago. How many years had I been in this apartment?

My bewilderment has never made Selene's running commentary pause before, nor did it now. "Do you ever wash your clothes? God. This thing smells like it spent the last century in a museum. Don't you ever wear red? No jewelry either, I should take you shopping. This weekend I'll take you shopping ... um ... meet me at Café Riopelle; three o'clock on Saturday. Oh—perfect!" She threw a few masses of cloth at me and told me to put them on.

I headed for the bathroom, absently greeting the squat clay bowl which held soap and the like. It grunted back at me vaguely, its usual reaction. Primitive art generally doesn't have much to say.

Nothing beats Paris nightlife. I meandered down some dim street, hemmed in by the starving creators whose work my own successors are fated to watch over. Yet they seemed obscurely pleased with their misery, philosophizing about it all, ignoring the words of their own work. I nodded as I passed their sculptures, exchanged a word of greeting or two as we entered club after painting-lined club. At last Selene spotted her mark, a rather grim looking individual with long hair and mud-stained boots.

We sidled over to him and Selene coyly asked if the seat beside him was taken. He turned his attention from the band in the corner, circled by dancing people, and blinked at us. Of course it wasn't. Why the hell would he drag anyone to *this*? He indicated the surroundings with a bizarre hand gesture, followed by a rude one at the



overly made-up singer. She responded in kind without missing a beat.

Selene pressed herself very close to the man and whispered; "I bet a man like you never bothered with life insurance." I'm never certain how I manage to keep a straight face when she does that, but it's certainly a more unique approach than the usual door-to-door. I watched her launch into her sales pitch and turned my attention to the band on stage. They were all in black, with STOP NUCLEAR TESTING T-shirts and heavily embroidered shoes.

The woman at the microphone was singing about whales, and sort of reminded me of Mona. Perhaps it was simply the soft lighting, but the more I looked at her, the more I was struck by the resemblance. Then she was singing about trees. Suddenly she drew in all her breath with an electric, stilled shriek and screamed into the microphone. "BURN ME—" The following lines were so soft as to be indistinguishable. I think she'd only yelled that line to get everyone's attention.

The man with mud on his boots was by now quite flummoxed. He'd been sitting in a bar, minding his own business, when a beautiful woman had sidled up to him and was currently attempting to sell him life insurance. Now what? He asked my name, which was in itself a bit of a shock. Generally I'm the backup; whenever someone comes on to her, Selene pretends to be a lesbian. It's a bit old, and it doesn't do much for her sex life, but all she cares about is life insurance.

"I'm Lenore." I replied eventually. "In the security division at the Louvre. You?" Bad one. What was I doing?

"Jacob." He offered me a relatively clean hand with a bit of grime under the nails. "I make beds for the fallen."

I reluctantly shook his hand, puzzling over the remark. "You're a gravedigger?" I guessed after a moment, not really watching his expression. Selene told me later that his eyes had lit up; perhaps I was the first person to solve his riddle. It seemed somehow Shakespearean that a gravedigger would speak in riddles. "It always seemed to me like a very philosophical profession." I added inane, at his encouraging smile. "Conversing with Hamlet and all."

"Not at all." Jacob laughed sharply. "People get that impression, but you never think when you're on the job. You just stick your shovel in the earth and listen to old Lenny babble about last night's game. It's really quite mind-numbing."

"Perhaps you should be considering life insurance!" Selene interjected brightly, as I sat back and considered the phrase "mind-numbing." "Tell your supervisor! Tell the guys at work! In fact, my organization has recently come up with a plan particularly well suited to a man of your—"

I interrupted her hurriedly. "Have you ever been to the Louvre? It's just like that. You wander around and just blank out, talk to the paintings for a while..." Selene was glaring at me. First, I'd stolen her spotlight, and now I was going on about talking paintings.

"I've never been." He leaned forward. "But I can hear the earth."

Selene stood up. "Excuse me." She mumbled something about the parking meter, or the washroom, or some sort of excuse to get out of the club. "Bye, Sel," I called after her, and began telling Jacob about Mona's room. Selene wasn't likely to come back.

He began telling me about Duchamp putting a moustache and goatee on a

copy of Mona. So I told him of Dali, who'd thickened her eyebrows, added a thick Dali moustache and his own ugly hands, clutching masses of money. Their points were the same; some art is so precious it becomes cheap.

We talked until dawn, when the bouncers kicked us out with the groupies and the drunken old men. Then I went home to sleep, silently thanking the skies that my shift didn't start until the afternoon. We parted with the exchange of numbers and addresses, and many vague promises of staying in touch.

I got up around eleven, dressed, went to work with shampoo traces in my hair and slouched in the corner of the room with the green wallpaper—which has nothing at all good in it—all day. Occasionally I wandered around, but I studiously avoided Mona's room, even though one of the paintings saw me pass by and called so loudly I jumped. No one else heard, it seemed. What is wrong with these tourists?

I kept thinking of the singer in the club, who'd looked like Mona. I kept thinking of how she'd yelled "BURN ME!" Why did I keep thinking about that? Anyone normal would have gone over every moment with the guy, but he was just a guy, just a gravedigger. He was no treasure, no picture to keep in a locket and take out at lunch break for the purpose of admiration. Just a guy.

After work I went to the drugstore and bought a lighter, a green one with an ugly little cartoon on the side, but it was long enough to peep out of my fist at both ends, and the flame came so easily it was amazing. I toyed with it on the walk home, and dreamed of fire.

"And where were you last night, Lenore?" The paintings teased lightly.

"Shut up, you," I grumbled, missing

my sleep and not bothering to even pretend I was talking to something animate. A few of the tourists gave me odd looks, but Americans never appreciate art.

"You should see a psychoanalyst," one of the paintings remarked. I blinked, stared at it. Pointillism.

"Why?" I asked, belatedly holding the radio over my face.

The millions of dots stared innocently at me. "Because you're crazy," they pointed out. "You talk to art, and go clubbing with a woman who sells insurance."

I never expected to be criticized by art, though it's happened often enough the other way around. I guess that just proves my old theory that you can never trust pointillism. "Leave her alone," Mona interrupted softly. Mona spoke so rarely that she had everyone's attention immediately. Mona was quite used to being stared at, so it didn't faze her. I can't look at Mona anymore, all I see is the woman in the club, who had her face. We waited for a few more moments, but Mona had nothing more to say. She smiled politely at the tourists. Watching her then, I think I began to understand her secret.

So maybe I do need a shrink. But what do I say to her? Art talks to me. They'd give me a few questionnaires, shove ink blots in my face and chuck me in a rubber room. No fuss, no muss, and I'd never see Jacob again.

"Excuse me?" I looked down at the earnest face of a young tourist. "Do you know the way to Mona's room?" It took me a moment to recognize Jacob, dressed as he was in American tourist garb and with a completely shaven face.

"What are you—" I stopped talking and started laughing. "Shouldn't you be digging graves?"

Jacob shrugged. "Nope, I'm a tour

guide now. Just familiarizing myself with the territory."

"You seem to have been through a number of odd professions," I said inanely, suddenly aware that all of the paintings in the room were focusing on me. The air was full of whispers.

"Oh, I've been everything. I've run rickshaws, sold door to door typewriters, walked iguanas, taught art classes, built cabinets, dug graves. I worked in a ribbon factory once." I considered all this with a sort of betrayed removal. I'd seen Jacob as a gravedigger, defined him as one. Now, suddenly, he came with a whole new set of classifications. He must be judged, not as a moderately bored gravedigger, but as an accomplished drifter.

Having safely redefined him, I put that aside and concentrated on the conversation again. He was still listing jobs: "...ostrich-breeder; in Prague I delivered widgets; in Ireland I wound up reviewing cookbooks for the Galway Star; and now I lead a bunch of camera happy bermuda shorts-wearers through the most famous gallery in France."

"It happens." One of the sculptures nearly shrugged. I blinked at it, startled, and Jacob gave me a curious look.

He followed my gaze but found nothing of great interest. "What are you staring at?" He asked after a moment.

I took a murderously deep breath and let it out through my teeth. "Does—does art ... speak to you?" I asked suddenly, dangerously, circling around in my own thoughts. "I mean literally. Communicate, make conversation, discuss the weather, gossip about the sculpture and so forth. Do you ever get that?"

He considered the question seriously. "No, but my sister always used to. We had a copy of a Michelangelo statue in our living room, and she used to have

the most bizarre conversations with that thing. They'd discuss Plato and Robertson Davies and socioeconomics." His eyelids lowered slightly. "She died, three years ago—taken by the sea."

I wasn't certain what to say. "Oh," I managed softly, and stared at the sculpture some more. "I wish I'd known her." Well, it was better than "I'm sorry."

My radio crackled angrily and I flipped a switch, letting one of the other guards' voices flood through. "Lenore?" It crackled uncertainly. I made a positive noise. "Lenore, there's an emergency down on floor three; can you take over two more rooms?"

"Um, yeah. Sure." I crackled back, smiled apologetically at Jacob and turned to begin my impromptu patrol. Jacob grabbed my shoulder as I was about to leave. "Which are the ones that talk?" he whispered urgently.

I blinked, taken aback. "A—all of them, I guess. I never really composed a list." He was still looking to me for direction, so I pointed him to a thin statue in the corner. "Try her."

Jacob made his way through the crowd until he reached the statue, swept his cap off in a bow and asked; "How do, milady?" I could hear the statue screaming with laughter as Jacob introduced himself, but he could hear nothing, and returned to me quite disappointed. "It didn't work," he announced, crestfallen.

"I noticed," I agreed, glad that he hadn't pretended to understand the statue. "Well, I've never heard of anyone else who has, except your sister. Maybe if you worked on it..." I knew that wouldn't do any good, but he seemed to brighten at the prospect, and one never knows.

He suddenly glared at Mona. "Ever ask her why she smiles?" he wondered,

frowning. I blinked, realizing that I hadn't.

"It's a very sad smile," murmured one of the statues. "But she won't tell us why. You could try anyway."

So I went and asked Mona why she smiles. "I'm dreaming," she replied serenely. Her voice was like several voices, synthesized together and echoing through my head. "I'm remembering him."

"Who him? What?" Of course, now that she'd had her little moment, she would tell me no more. Jacob was looking at me expectantly. "She's dreaming of him." I announced dryly. "Anybody know who 'him' is?" I looked around at all the art in the room, but they all stuttered and mumbled and made noncommittal noises. "Apparently not," I said aloud, for Jacob's benefit. He shrugged and sighed. "So when do you start tour guiding?" I asked him instead.

Jacob glanced at his watch. "Uh, two minutes." He stared almost comically at the timepiece. "Gotta go!" he muttered suddenly, and zipped off.

"Bye," I said, watching his diminishing back. Does he want to be closer to me or the art? Maybe he's just sick of gravedigging. With a shrug I turned and began patrolling the other rooms.

I saw him again later, leading a group of gawkers up the staircase. They were all afraid to touch the banister, for fear that that, too, was art. He winked at me as he passed, and I'm afraid I could not help but smile. We met for coffee when our shifts ended, and wound up talking about Mona again. I'm not sure if she's his obsession or mine.

"She does have a tale," he asserted with utmost confidence.

"Ah, she has several. Leonardo was an eccentric genius if ever there was one. He devised machines to do every-

thing for him, depended on fickle patrons for most of his money, and I've heard he didn't think much of Michelangelo either."

Jacob smiled and sipped his coffee. "Michelangelo was such an egomaniac. But why not? Half of Italy was at his feet."

I sighed. "But why couldn't the bastard be happy about it? All his stuff was so depressing! Rape and murder and grief."

"If I had no images to follow your words, I might consider that more sensationalist than depressing. You make Michelangelo sound like a newspaper," Jacob replied thoughtfully.

"Artist, egomaniac, media sensation, Michelangelo could be any one of those things, but he could never have painted Mona. Not and still have her be Mona," I concluded, and ordered more cappuccino.

"Why not? They had the same calibre of training, the same calibre of patrons; who's to say in some parallel universe there's not another Mona, as done by Michelangelo, and there's not another security guard in another Louvre who's discussing it with another me right now?"

"I gave up vast metaphysical questions about the same time I gave up LSD. The simple reason is that Michelangelo's paintings were never alive. They were too perfect, most of the time. Or too full of him. Leonardo rarely finished his pieces; I think he was afraid of giving them life. Too much responsibility. At least when you have kids there's two of you to take the rap for someone else's existence. To create life on your own..." I stopped; Jacob got my point.

"You think Mona's alive?"

"She talks to me, doesn't she?"

"So do the rest." Jacob shrugged, and

shortly after, my capuccino arrived. "The Michelangelos, the Marc Chagalls, the Emily Carrs."

"Not on the same plane of existence," I disagreed, suddenly incapable of voicing my impressions. "A lot of painters fall in love with their works; God knows I made some stuff I was convinced I could marry when I was younger, but Leonardo, he was such an incredible guy, I think..." Then the words left, and I was reduced to mindless head-shaking for several moments.

"You think *she* loved him, too," Jacob concluded softly, releasing me from the dizzying gesture. I nodded. He stared at

me. "You're nuts," he said finally. "Maybe that's why I agree with you."

I leaned back, unable to believe it. "That must be tearing her apart," I managed at length, lost in the image of Mona's face. "He's mortal; she's eternal, or as near as our specialists can get."

Jacob looked almost sad. "I wish we could do something." (*The singer's face, uncannily familiar. BURN ME!*) Leonardo spent years on that painting. She doesn't deserve to be a postcard industry. There was a deep pause, in which Jacob sipped coffee and I fingered the green lighter in my pocket. •

**AUTHOR:** CATHLEEN THOM has previously been published in *Transversions* and a handful of student anthologies. She lives in Victoria where she paints, writes, consumes vast amounts of coffee and avoids her house. Writing alternates between marvellous, disconcerting, and bloody hard.

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# Bleedingheart

by Alex Link

*illustrated by Peter Francis*

## ACT I

*Suddenly, the way blood wells up from a wound, he had become legend.*

Like the now-forgotten folk demons of their forebears, he was said to have risen from the depthless black waters fringing the north country. Some called him the Indian scourge, born of vengeful dark magics, born of elixirs refined from burial site flowers, born of the juices of Jesuits boiled alive until their skin skimmed the water like scalded milk; the theater manager told in careful detail of how the accused had fed himself upon newborn livestock while still a young thing, wrapping his famously powerful hands about the windpipe of a lamb and gorging even yet while it flailed moaning and wet with obstetric blood, tangled in a placental web. Eventually, as with any maturing beast, his tastes had grown sophisticated. He would slink into houses like plague. He would draw his one special claw refined to the finesse of a jeweller's blade across the exposed backs of the sleeping in a deft, infernal surgery disguised as the caress of an evening breeze. Bend low with shoulders arched, arms and legs straddling the body spiderlike, and gently lap up the blood that blushes up, as a cat does milk. The wound so fine it goes unnoticed. The victim for a time pre-occupied by a half-remembered dream, erotic and bizarre, casting a gloomy pall upon all he sees.

Well, a rabid dog, so they say, cannot choose but bite.

When the mob arrived to observe the arrest, he just stood there slackly, a little bewildered, watched on by the stone eyes of memorial seraphim and Jesuses, and by the granite eyes of people who had come along to witness, firsthand, justice dynamic. They hungered for resistance, knives and hammers shifting in their impatient hands.

"Put 'em behind your back," said the deputy, shaking, in a bleating calf's voice. He licked his lips, his fingers rattling the cuffs. He could say no more, his mouth too dry or its musculature too unwilling.

"Give those here, Vern," said the sheriff, and he grabbed them, glaring. His dark eyes widened somewhat as he approached the prisoner.

"Turn around." The sheriff's wrinkled, meaty hands worked to fix the steel loops. The prisoner's wrists were no thicker than the butt ends of a pair of pool cues.

The group began to shout and jeer as the beast was tugged down the graveyard's gravel path, through the ironwork gates, and into town. Many of the townspeople followed along: greasy men who loitered around the butcher shop all day where waxy fowl hung head-down in the window, frozen in mid-plunge to the underworld; the blacksmith and his boys, soot-covered and sweaty itinerants of hell; the boys from the tanyard with their skin orange-tinted and odorous like it was itself fresh leather. Only by the halfhearted efforts of sheriff and deputy did the prisoner reach the square unmolested, the sheriff repeating with calm disinterested authority, "Now, people. Hey now. Let's not make this any uglier than it already is."

Some of them laughed. They surged in a resplendently dun wave of work livery and unwashed beards and bad teeth.

The hand of the developing lynch mob was increasingly hesitant, what with the steady diluent pour of numbers into its body, and then the appearance of the bereaved himself. Figures had shambled from the alleyways: beggars and street vendors sensing opportunity. A busker in bright rags struck up his fiddle and improvised a festive, manic score. Herds of bodies spilled from the banks and offices like insensible beasts into an abattoir, leaving their doors swinging open behind them. They stam-

ped into the square, blinking stupidly in the bright sunlight.

The prisoner was dragged through the eye of the assembled to a platform before the town hall which had served as the site for the previous month's electoral debates. The deputy was composed once more, now that they were on the stage, and he began to pick out his friends in the crowd and nod to them. Someone reached up and handed the sheriff his hat. He had lost it a few blocks back and his bald scalp shone, a white ball stitched with scars above his tan face.

Everyone knew the story. He had received the wounds while serving in the mounted police. A band of Indians, the specific nation never ascertained, had been discovered illegally hunting bison and his company had been ordered to drive them across the border, which was easier all around than trying to take them into custody. The natives had stood their ground, and in the ensuing skirmish the sheriff had ducked a knife swing aimed for his throat a little too late. The Indian youth had then tried to cave the sheriff's skull in with a rock before he was himself impaled upon a spear that one of the sheriff's more seasoned comrades had kept as a trophy from a previous, similar confrontation. He used it in melee, as he said, "to make it a fair fight". The sheriff and the youth had lain there a long time, arm in arm and bleeding into the dust while the sun above clouded over, as he told it, like a father ashamed.

A man appeared on stage at the corner opposite from the prisoner, and the crowd cried out. It was their Mayor. The Mayor's gold-glinting smile burned below his short black hair and dark eyes in a slightly ugly and therefore all the



more endearing twist. After the tragedy, he'd broken down publicly, and the townspeople called him the only honest politician they knew of in the Dominion. Reverend Toolan dedicated two sermons to the tragedy, likening the Mayor to Job. In the next election they promptly remarried him to the town.

He led a pale boy by the hand, whose eyes were wider and more profound than a doll's and which drank everything in. The child wore his Sunday best, hair flat and slick like it was sewn to his skull. He stood perfectly still. The Mayor adjusted his hairpiece, cleared his throat and spoke, raising his eyes from the ground where they seemed to look long into the earth for the unknown place of his late wife's burial. "My charges. My friends," he said, "Timmy and I wish to thank you for your compassion for two forlorn, bedraggled gentlemen: thank you for grieving with us for his mother, and my beloved, Agatha. The world will never see such a gem of a woman as she was again. How bittersweet to be so proud of our citizens in such a tragic hour. We will do what we must for justice, and for her memory. Indeed, for all our memories."

The Mayor raised his left hand in salute while his right hand moved to the boy's back. The Mayor's face was frozen in solemnity as Timmy called out a wispy, half-heard "Thank you." It was drowned out by voices sympathetic yet impatient for justice.

The prisoner was led instead to the town's brick-shaped and brick-colored jailhouse. Only when he was safely locked away from the crowd did the sheriff announce the necessity of a trial. A speedy, nominal one, granted, but a trial nonetheless. "I'll not have my town become a goddamned zoo just because

that freak finally went and done what we all knew he would, someday," he said to the deputy, loud enough for those nearby to hear. "Vern, keep an eye on things." And he made his way through the labyrinth of people, horses and automobiles to his own car and left.

The jail cell was only a little more lavish than his own room. An unsupported, pitted mattress crowded the floor space from its corner. A chair and small table had been furnished by the deputy in a whimsical moment of sympathy for he, too, had been an orphan. It had been crammed in the opposite corner, the only place it would fit. A bare light bulb hung on a wire from the ceiling, and a calendar, two years out of date and bearing the logo of a now-defunct bakery, adorned the wall. The settling sun bathed it in orange and red as it glared in through the small window. Outside in twos and threes people had begun to trickle on home, as if in unspoken agreement that they should wait until tomorrow.

In the evening air the intoxicating scent of apple blossoms infected everything. The prisoner shared his cell with no one, which was unusual. Typically, a Saturday night a handful of men not to be entrusted with their own care would crowd this space, befuddled with drink, perhaps, or mad in uncertain love, or lust. They would languish in that room turned sanitarium, nursing a black eye or a bruised heart while she carried on with a rival somewhere outside, beyond their ken, and so beyond their standing. But tonight the place stood reserved for one lone inmate, for his safety perhaps, and certainly for theirs.

Though it lay choking in the dead heat of summer, there was an autumnal air about the town, the kind of anxious

festivity that defiantly preceded the sleepy winter snows. It was ravenous for distraction, for even the tired circuses and carnivals that lurched drunkenly into town with the migratory regularity of ungainly geese. They would trundle through the Square in a blare of horns and hooting animals to set up wearily on the edge of town. An assortment of half-bit parlor tricks would be trotted out to the congregation, amidst much tuneless fanfare and behind jaded smiles: bearded ladies, fat men, bald and barbell-moustached bare-chested men bending pig iron; sorry dishevelled bears tottering on two legs, their matted fur teeming with lice; a woman who could saw logs and fire a gun; soothsayers, card readers, astrologers. And of course there were the freak shows: men without eyelids or with extra limbs or digits, perhaps webbed. Quadriplegics, miracles of survival. A cyclops. A scantily clad woman so beautiful she struck herself blind by gazing into the mirror and any looking upon her must be pure of heart or they, too, would pay for the vision with their sight. A boy with wheels for feet. A girl with skin made of gold.

Every such show had a man-beast. Half boy or girl or man or woman or human leaseways and half monkey or dog or goat or tiger. None, of course, was ever any match for the prisoner, Prince of Freaks. At his desk downstairs the deputy examined his prisoner via the mirror placed on the wall atop the stairs, reflecting a full view of the cell and its condemned occupant; the mirror having been brought from his apartment and placed there for just that purpose. That prisoner was the stuff of stories, he mused, its feral complexion a study in shame and resignation. Perhaps he

should write an article for the local tribune. Here was a Monster: the thing that dragged maids into caves, that ravished virgins in the nuptial bed, that shoved plump children into ovens, that tortured little squealing things; that raged through the woods howling at heaven in accusation of its own abomination of being, a jack-o'-lantern outrage that held court in some sylvan limbo where no citizen ever trod; more than a monster, he was monstrous, a well sunk into some wisely abandoned branch of mammalian evolution. His yellow eyes floated in the gloom like twin fireflies, their coffin-shaped pupils having broadened to the size of twin tombs. They said his claws were retractable. They said a hair had appeared on his body for each prayer said to the devil, and a wart for every blasphemy. They said his blood could scald.

But the deputy, along with the others, hated this most of all: he hated the probing intelligence in the creature's eyes. Its heavy-lidded cunning unsettled him. Its perpetual declaration of humanity appalled. It was this alone that had stayed the hand that would have snapped the prisoner's neck when he had been first discovered.

It had been only a few years ago. He had been found by Reverend Alba in a stand of cedars just outside town, a puny, mewling thing hours old squirming in the mud of the branch's bank. For reasons that few could now fathom in retrospect, the Reverend took the thing in. Rumor of course followed it around, grew about it like fog about a marsh. Eventually two tales of its origin became rooted enough in the town's campfire, midnight storytelling to be taken for fact. One said that he was the bastard child of a rapine nameless Métis and Claire-

Lou, known throughout town for all the wrong reasons, the daughter of the town junk dealer. She did, after all, die soon after the thing's discovery. Others said he was the unacknowledged desecratory spawn of the Reverend and a nameless woman or perhaps Claire-Lou, and they looked to Claire-Lou's death and to Alba's eventual emigration to the United States as proof enough.

The prisoner could remember growing to adulthood in only a handful of years. Could remember the grudging conditional acceptance the body of the populace had granted him, as it might the scar left by an umbilical cord or the blotch of a grotesque birthmark. There were rules. He was to remain unseen. He was to become simply a story, a thing glimpsed at dawn and twilight as he slunk to and from the only work he was ever seen fit to perform. He was to live in the graveyard shed, where what little sunlight squeezed in illuminated sections of wall where he had etched the names of the cemetery's dead with his long black claws. He was forbidden to leave the cemetery grounds, where he would toil through the night digging three-by-three by four-foot holes, laying the foundations of their grave markers. He could remember the groundskeeper admonishing his guttural complaints, exhorting him to be grateful to have been given his life and to have his basic needs attended. The groundskeeper, himself given a choice between prison for the rape of two young sisters or the warding of the town's *enfant terrible*, felt that he could somehow relate.

The riches of living free, however, haunted the prisoner. At night their music threw the tavern casements wide with its own ebullience and the smoke of their comfortable fires stalked him on

his hill while he turned down the beds of their final rest. He did not need to see them to envision the careless tangles of amorous arms taken lazily for granted, the bodies sheltered from the moon's pointed blade by the down of slaughtered geese and the roofs of wood dragged from the forest's blackest corners. By day, when he peeped through the warped clapboards of his shed, it was worse still. Color, light, sound. Excruciating beauty, picked out by vagrant eddies of loving, cruel, pimping sunlight.

He had always known, with the wisdom of the damned and monstrous, that accusation was inevitable in its coming. And so it did. And here he was, squatting on his mattress, rooting through his wiry hair, watching the moonlight rewrite the shadows gathered about him, waiting.

It was, he thought, a strange sort of deliverance.

## ACT II

It was a new day but still there was little to separate jailhouse and cemetery, for him. Again bars opposed light and twilight, human and beast. Only shadow and desire bridged the impassable gap.

The morning discovered to his double-eclipse eyes a small body of loiterers across the street. Most were derelicts and shiftless men of shady means standing about in soiled waistcoats and shirt sleeves, suspenders dangling, sweating beer. They spoke little amongst themselves, smoking, occasionally departing to return with fresh cigarettes. The sunlight began to crawl along the cracks of their faces and peer into the abysses between their teeth, and some would amble off and return with news-

papers, the headlines big and black and triumphant.

The morning sat still and cool. Anticipation was in the air, along with a promise of inexpiable ugliness. Through the held breath of the town and with the aid of his peculiarly sensitive pointed, scabrous ears he could hear the men in the dust of the street below.

"Says here he's a verifiable monster," said one.

"Don't need to read that for proof. Everybody's seen him," said another, the local theatre manager.

"How anybody could've let him live long enough to kill a body, let alone even clothe and feed him, I believe is beyond any reasonable reckoning."

"No doubt sir, no doubt." He took off his twenty-dollar spectacles, rubbed the lenses with his shirt, replaced them and looked around. "Do you suppose it will happen today?"

"To have let him live to feel the sun rise upon that abomination called a face is in itself an unconscionable crime against nature."

"So he is not a thing of nature?"

"Isn't that what the word 'monster' means?"

"I don't know. What else could it mean?"

"Well. Nothing like him was ever begot of nature. I'm telling you, it all demands retribution, and the Mayor has a lot of family, and the deceased, old bitch that she was, had a lot of friends."

"Though you'd hardly know why," said the manager. "No, don't laugh. Really, anybody stupid enough to go wandering out in the middle of the night anywhere within reach of that thing's (and here he pointed at the jailhouse with his stubbled chin) claws damn well deserves the throttling she got. What did

she expect? A handshake? Don't laugh, I said! I swear, stupid people just kill themselves. Otherwise you'd call them tragic heroes, like as not."

"That's what they're calling her in the tribune. Heroine, at least."

"Sure, but they'd say that about a drowned drunk if they thought he'd fall struggled to breathe. Like as not she didn't even know enough to do that, if he ever loosened his grasp. I swear, if there was justice in this life things would be so that we could revive her so as to kill her ourselves for her imbecility. And anyone out at that time of night, especially a woman alone, could not have been up to anything honest."

Some of them thought about that for a bit and one, an unwashed bank clerk, asked the manager "Strangulation, you say? I thought the body was still missing."

"Not what I heard. Besides, how else would he do it? No blood on his spade and—yes yes hold your objections—I say *and* you've seen his hands."

"Everybody has. But then those claws—"

Indeed everybody had seen him. Men and women had gathered, in his first working months, about the graveyard in the hopes of a glimpse of him skulking about. Others waited until twilight, dashing away squealing like adolescents when he emerged. Children dared each other to clamber up the hill and crouch low by the fence, in the weeds and the shadow of cedars, and watch his labored digging, his breath coming in sobs through his twisted lungs. His strange eyes always picked them out, though he never let on any more. Once, he had offered in his strangled voice to share his midnight meal of fruit and nuts with one such spy

who had instantly peed herself and fled, returning with a mob that left him nearly lynched. Not a one had had the courage to cross the fence while the moon yet reigned among the stars, making them trespassers on his ground. They marched away, embarrassed by their own fear, disgraced that darkness could rout them.

He wore his clothes like an organ-grinder's monkey. They were unnatural to his body, and hung there like the disguise of an inept spy. It was sharply grotesque. They were given to him not from charity but from a need to cover his shame. Toward this purpose some people of the town would donate the clothing, overalls and such, the largest of their sons had outgrown or worn out. The garments they sent always sagged on him; he was not really all that big. Now and again the mortician would send an extra set of clothes given him by a recent widow with that unmentionable purpose in mind, and so he became a bizarre sort of ghost. A slightly stooped hairy creature seen at dusk, dressed in a dead man's clothes. Sometimes he stood a hideous parody of the human, looking ridiculous in a suit and tie in the graveyard like a demoniac mourner or the devil come to feast on the freshly dead. Other times he seemed chillingly at ease in the cobbler's apron or work boots or denim and cotton and cap of the man whose grave he was digging. Through no fault of his own, many came to see him as a ghostly clown, aping the dead. The macabre joke was passed around town that he willed the deaths of men who wore silks or who had just purchased new work clothes.

After some time the small group that idled half-interestedly across the street in the shade of the barbershop awning

began to swell. Young rude men, who paced behind their caged expressions like restless zoo lions, sat tense within their skins. Young women, eyes wide as fishes', afraid of overlooking details. Schoolchildren let out early because they were too unruly with the town's muted, excited hum and because their teachers were afraid to be the ones to whom the story would be repeated over and again because they had been the only ones not there. Eventually the thickening crowd grew to be larger than the throng that had gathered to watch the town Jew who some years ago had raved and raced about the streets chasing passersby with an antique blunderbuss until the sheriff had gunned him down, drooling and eyes blasting the whole town at once with their mad, huge encompassings like twin observatories. Many had applauded, their debts instantly dissolved, their shamelessly falsified anecdotes corroborated and placed beyond dispute in a single flash.

The crowd was certainly larger than the rather paltry mob that had assembled to examine the Chinese boys as they bustled into town and out again with supplies purchased for their workers—oats and bandages, mostly—as they toiled across the country leaving parallel slats and unmarked graves and iron rails as they went, spikes driven into the soil to embed tracks in a surgical scar that spanned the country, stitching the land crosswise shut.

Eventually, and perhaps out of a sense of obligation, the Mayor arrived, pale and silent Timmy trailing behind. The Mayor seemed haggard and unslept, his hair tousled like a little boy's, fringing his flat hairpiece. The street vendors intuitively doubled the urgency of their barking, then doubled

it again. The smell of roasting meat wafted into the prisoner's cell, and as many of the townsfolk milled and exchanged gossip, others became drunk in the nearby taverns, or from hip flasks, or on the schnapps sold off the carts that now completely blocked off one end of the street. The square was loud with chatter and flies. Boys sold newspapers, shaking them in the air like a flock of startled birds.

For a time, at least, the prisoner was forgotten. The beleaguered stillwagons dispensed their half-blinding half-poison brewed with incantations and heirloom recipes more closely guarded than, it was said, the secrets of the Chinese Emperor. The stuff was concocted in stills camouflaged amidst twigs and leaves, concealed in makeshift lean-tos or under the shadowy lee of boulders up in the hills fringing the town.

No one, not even the Mayor, noticed Timmy whisper in the ear of the sheriff as the three of them posed for yet another *Tribune* cover photo, this one to be jubilantly victorious where those preceding had been alternately posed in shocked, bereaved, and enraged tableaux.

The resultant, however, was not quite so. Tellers of the tale would, in future, claim to have been able to read anything but victory and redemption in any of all three faces.

The Mayor wore a smile sure enough. The longer one gazed at it, and the teller would encourage strangers to the tale to do so, the longer one gazed at it the more diabolical his expression grew. The Mayor's face became simian, the eyes feline, the composure altogether predatory. It was not grief that bent him into a somewhat stooping posture, but the awkwardness with which

the beast went about on two legs.

Timmy was a pallid mannequin. A hollow-eyed boy too young, too diaphanous, too empty of history to really be called human. He was a vessel for damning words, and for the legacy of his father. In him was the promise of a man, and a promise of doom. A non-being around which everything pivoted the way a tornado has a tiny, hollow core.

And the sheriff? The sheriff wore the expression of one who awakens on a July morning to find frost blackening the flowers and snow blighting the fields, hatchlings dead in the nest with the shock that a world so newly discovered could turn so quickly so cold.

He made a sharp motion to the deputy with his thumb. Some minutes later, their automobile crept away unnoticed.

Amidst the ceaseless babble of voices, men were erecting a gallows on the stage, singing in time to the fall of their hammers. Even so, others campaigned for crueller, more appropriate forms of execution: crucifixion, a slow pressing to death under sharp and heavy bricks, garrotting, drawing and quartering, stoning, drowning, burning at the stake.

"We are obligated," said the Mayor quietly, reasonably, as he regarded the carpenters and as the reporters foraged. "It is our bitter duty not to allow his existence to go unpunished. Justice is our responsibility. Are dragons not vanquished in books of old? Perversions of nature not destroyed? Monsters not slain? Every reasonable voice in our culture from the Greek poets through the ages to our own young land make one demand: protect order. Protect stability. Punish deviants and punish the wicked. Punish them who flout what we

have achieved, what we *are*, as a people." Young and eager reporters scribbled on note pads like chickens scratching in dust.

Some in the crowd, having realized that the building of the gibbet would take longer than expected, went home to lunch while others stood in line to buy fried yams, peppered sausages, fruit, waffle cones. Cookfire grease shimmered the air, weighted the stench that rose from a nearby alley that had become an impromptu latrine. Music streamed from nooks and alcoves about the square to blend nonsensically in its center.

The crowd continued to grow as people from the furthest reaches of the county and those whose business that morning simply could not be put off began to arrive. Cars and carriages teemed in the side streets and back alleys.

The prisoner stood at his window. Now that the assembled were distracted by the builders and their own appetites he could do so without fear of being pelted with stones and drained bottles and bottles filled with drunkards' piss. Any who did observe him wondered if he was even aware of his fate. If he was, or if he cared, it did not show. The theatre manager interrupted his train of thought, for he had since last night been devising a script to document these events, to follow the prisoner's gaze. It was up. A solitary cloud crossed the sun, and he watched it as if nothing at all were happening in the square. The theatre manager noticed this, and he noticed how in any city, here or in London which he had visited once, all one had to do was look at the sky, especially at night, and with that the whole place, all of the buildings, the monuments, would

fall away. Blue spotted with a twin pair of wheeling hawks that circled the sun like mysterious satellites, it made everything seem much smaller: town, crowd, prisoner, retribution. He drew his eyes back to the prisoner, but he was no longer at the window.

The stray cloud drew a cool shadow slowly across the square. The gathered grew impatient, their appetite for food sated, for drink increased only the cellars were exhausted, the liquor nearly all gone, or rather, successfully transported from bottle to gut. The carts stood empty, and the dry taverns began closing one by one, as if the cloud's shadow were in fact twilight.

In that slow wink of daylight the sheriff had returned.

### ACT III

It was fortunate, the townspeople agreed afterward, that the gallows had been large enough to accommodate two.

The sheriff's return had spurred the crowd to action. They rushed now acting as one body to get it done, while the deputy raced about with his arms over his head, his bleating voice soundless in the tumult. First up the stairs was the bank clerk who, smiling and panting, unlocked the door with the keys he had snatched from the deputy's desk as others gathered behind him. The prisoner stepped toward the open door and then, reading the man's expression, backed into a corner where, with caution and after many approaches, he was soundly clubbed with a paperweight and a chair and dragged by the legs down the stairs and through the jailhouse gate where a man began to urinate on him before being shoved aside. Hands grasped at him from all sides like the villi of some

enormous gullet and, windingly, he was dragged amidst a shower of spit and stones to stage and scaffold. Still senseless, moaning between his gagging mass of teeth, he was bound quickly, half thrown toward the waiting noose.

A group of men, the local priest among them, had pulled the loop over his head and one hand out of that many had nudged it so that the knot was behind his head, where it could not break his neck and the ring of rope would strangle him slowly, as he shook and shat himself before their approving eyes. The Mayor appeared, stepping forward to make a commemorative and what he thought quite touching speech while some cast about for a hood for the creature.

"My dear, dear friends," he began, "your compassion moves me beyond words. Let us be merciful and do this thing quickly, showing to the world that our justice is swift and even and that we tolerate—" and then sheriff and deputy were on stage.

The Mayor faltered, Timmy backed away, and the sheriff stepped forward. His hand rested lightly on his pistol, his badge glinted brightly in the afternoon, eggshell sun. The crowd had been murmuringly attentive to the Mayor, but now it was completely still. The prisoner stood gazing at the ground with his cunning, inexcusable eyes, perfectly still but for his heaving chest that labored out of fear or perhaps outrage none could say. All was silence but for a drover calling for his stock. He had been herding his pigs through town as he did regularly, somehow unaware of the spectacle on stage. The crowd had spooked them and now, as he raced about town to gather them on the unoccupied side of the town hall, other truant swine nudged mischievously among the assembled.

The sheriff spoke. The first thing he did was point at the prisoner and say, "This thing didn't kill nobody I know of. It's innocent in the eyes of the law." The voice of the crowd rose and faltered like an ocean swell while he pushed the truth through the nadirs of their amazement. The little boy had somehow braved threat and promise to inform the sheriff of what had really happened. "You can probably guess," said the sheriff.

The deputy, shaken, hair tousled and shirt half open, took possession of the Mayor. The sheriff told of Agatha's bludgeoned body found exactly where Timmy had said it would be—in a shallow grave under the Mayor's own back porch. He had killed her in a drunken rage over a suspected adulterous liaison and the child had witnessed it all. The Mayor had threatened him to silence when he discovered that the boy had been hiding in a closet all the while, witness to his mother's murder.

The crowd seethed. It howled. Acting of one mind and of one heart it seized the Mayor with only nominal opposition from sheriff and deputy—how could it be more? A few sought, in a besotted fervor, for a cow. Someone had suggested slitting the beast's belly open and stuffing the bound Mayor in it as it lay before them, slowly dying. But he was hanged without hesitation, the rope slack about his throat just long enough for him to spit out defiant words, like bullets: "I do what I must. Just like you." He hung unmasked, bulging eyes strafing the populace which avoided in unison the gaze of the legendary evil eye. He swung and slowly died, his limbs marionette crazy, his bleeding eyes ultimately an unwavering lighthouse beam.

A brief maelstrom of people swirled in the centre of the crowd, and while it



lasted others began moving the way ripples spread across a pond in order to take part or to watch. Timmy had been found hiding among the pigs where they waited for the swineherd and been carried forth by a group of men and women. He was tossed into the crowd where he was kicked to death, some crying out how evil begot evil, others simply crying out.

All eyes turned to the prisoner, nearly forgotten. No one moved, briefly. The jagged teeth crowding his maw prevented all but the most guttural speech, and he grunted out something unintelligible, his feral complexion a study in shame and resignation, his pupils slitted to narrow shadowy windows into a long dormant madness.

Of course, they hanged him just the same.

In years to come people would talk of how he and Agatha had been coupling in unthinkable ways among the resting places of the dead, in freshly dug graves, and that the Mayor had been a misunderstood martyr. Some even told it how, in a mad bitterness engendered by his condition, the creature had orchestrated everything, bringing about the death of Dunsany's royal family and his own sham tragedy.

However unthinkable, it had been his plan from the beginning, they insisted, in just the way some daughters became whores who, under cover of night and closed doors, seduced their fathers or drove mortal men to rape with their damnable beauty and subtle lechery. Like the Indian, he was uncivilizable, harsh bullet mercy was preferable to the disgrace of his being alive. The very heart hanging in the prisoner's breast, beating in all its violation and strangeness, demanding a place among them, insisted upon his sacrifice.

He was hanged and rope strung his body to the gallows, but whether it swung his body about in a spinning pendulous arc or whether the gallows, the stage, the whole town hung suspended from the fulcrum of his body was not immediately discernible through the heat-struck and drunken eyes of the crowd.

They dispersed quickly and went home to begin work, to realign, to forget. The bodies were not removed for two days. Man and beast hung in the square like meat for sale, the sun so ablaze that it left no corner unexposed, no fissure even thin as nerves unexplored. Pedestrians stepped carefully around the dead boy as if he were panhandling, eyes averted from him and, in that sun, from each other.

The sheriff resumed his duties, and order was restored. The murderer was buried in the jailhouse yard, along with his accursed offspring, the monster tossed into a pit and swiftly covered over by armed men in the safe, full light of a cloudless day which some even supplemented with lanterns anyway, deep in the forest where he would be more quickly forgotten, and where he most certainly belonged.

## EPILOGUE

Summer passed into autumn. Harvests, carnivals, Thanksgiving, Hallowe'en.

Only the bravest or most foolhardy of souls ever ventured into that part of the woods now, and of some few claimed that the desecrated ground condemned to be his burial place had been disturbed.

Autumn waned into winter. The ground froze, the town slept restlessly, occasionally roused by a bloodless sun that visited ever less and slunk at the lip

of the horizon. Hungry lean things prowled the woods and the moon stalked about its star-littered pen.

And the town continued as ever though it withdrew, dwindling, ever further from becoming anything quite grown, quite human. For its children began to vanish, only to reappear in the

oddest of places. Sleepwise in gullies, say, or stuffed into schoolroom desks folded as only dolls will bend, buried in silos with their skin liquor-soaked in granary ferment. Their little bodies lay ashen, their blameless hearts torn out clean. •

*AUTHOR:* ALEX LINK lives in Toronto. This is his second piece to appear in *ON SPEC* (his first, "Parthenogenesis in Apartment 707," can be found in Winter 1994), and his third in print.

*ARTIST:* Peter Francis lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with wife Luisa and an insane cat. He has been exhibiting his work at conventions for over ten years and has contributed to several magazines.



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# Catastrophe Theory

Claudio Ierulli

There are fossils trapped  
in the layers of human skin,  
between the crevices  
there is a path leading inevitably back  
to Darwin and Cuvier,  
finches, dinosaurs  
and the destruction of all known life.  
The great mammoth rises  
from the Paris basin  
holding the mysterious  
architecture of species:  
"You will not change  
nor will you rise  
rather you will end  
for others to begin,  
continuums of survival  
are far above your head."  
There is no repose  
from the stresses of evolution  
and the black holes of Darwin's eyes;  
all catastrophic transformations—  
like the reduction of character  
into fragments of partial instinct,  
tactics of persuasion, aggression  
poses—  
are inscribed by biological protocols.  
To violate the threat  
between intellect and brute  
your theory states:  
"Speciation is evolution.  
The economics of Nature  
will validate my best  
and salvage the rest

to benefit the future."  
But incidences of catastrophe  
coincide with personal failures,  
and the decimation of Nature  
stings the crack in my mind,  
an itemized mind  
epitomized by lack  
of evolutionary purpose,  
by chance.  
I have no moment to prepare  
for what could descend  
from my geological destiny.  
Locked in adaptive mode  
there is nowhere to go  
and little hope that I will grow.  
All I see is a scorched field  
a devastated land  
like the surface of the moon.  
The vigor of species  
in reproduction,  
where is their reward  
for strength and intelligence?  
I'm told there's a force  
a random, unreasoning calamity  
whirling through the universe  
to destroy all life,  
and I am on the path  
that leads eventually back  
to Cuvier  
underneath the Paris basin,  
and as catastrophic as the theory rings,  
the reality is trapped  
in the layers of human skin. •

Claudio Ierulli lives and writes in Toronto, Ontario.



# This Industrial City

Brian Panhuyzen

*illustrated by Kurt Reichel*

*At the heart of this industrial city my lover lives in an apartment full of plants and animals. She is Jezaya or Jez. We lie in the moist soil with the golden eyes of jungle cats watching our fused bodies. We remain joined for hours at a time, our mingling loins cool in the pauses between lovemaking, then heating as we become aroused again. When we separate my body mourns the loss; I shiver in the pulsing subway light as the train propels me home. When I sleep I clutch my pillow and dream of her mouth and belly and hands.*

I enslave steel. I receive it as liquid, when it's playful and lively. It screams as it cools when it realizes that I have tricked it into new shapes. There was a time when my dreams were full of steel, flowing in white hot rivers or exploding beneath my forge hammers. The steel would speak to me in sleep, describing its plan for revenge. Knives and hammers, bullets and bludgeons, how the steel would depict the mangling of my flesh!

But Jezaya has chased the metal from my nights. And when I close my eyes at the cascade of pouring iron the shells of my eyelids are the color of Jezaya's lips.

My best friend Anz is sore. He thinks that I love Jez and that she is bad. "You'll kill yourself soon enough," he warns when he sees my faraway eyes. I don't blame him because I know he loves boys. How can he understand the smoothness of a woman's back or the way her breasts hang down like fruit to suck?

I met her at the supermarket. Anz is the mortal enemy of cliché and this makes him even madder so he won't even let me tell this story. In this store the stunted vegetables are so green it hurts your eyes, and they are always wet. Above them is a sprinkler, and every minute or two water comes out. The mist is fine and cool and

lasts ten seconds. Jez was arched back, her head resting in the romaine lettuce, her mouth opening and closing like a fish's as the spray wetted her tongue and face and hair and throat.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked.

Her eyes were closed because of the spray but then it stopped and she looked up at me. "Food here is sacred. They honor it with this rain. I'm taking some rain."

I would have walked away but stayed because she was so pretty, especially with beads of water in her eyelashes.

She stood and dried her face with her sleeve. As we strolled the aisles she caressed the apples, brought peaches to her face and breathed their scent, rolled a grapefruit against her cheek. When we left the produce section she said, "Life is everywhere. Even in the jars and cans. Steel can't keep it in." I turned to face her and she was smiling as she put tins of catfood into her cart.

I didn't know how to make her stay and when we parted there was hurt in my gut the size of a melon. For weeks I came back at the same time and almost wept each time the vegetables received their shower.

I was in such distress that I took to wandering through the city's smoggy core. I was passing the gurgling spires of the chemical plant when I noticed a patch of green on the cobblestones, electric green in the sepia landscape. I approached the little garden of fern and grass and was almost brained by a falling shrub.

"I didn't see you," a voice called from above. "I was pruning extra plants. That's where I throw them." I stared and stared, her pale face among the pipes and coils of the apartment building, the muddy sky writhing beyond. When she recognized me she held up her open

palm, freezing me to the spot. She ducked her head in the window and a minute later jogged from the building's entrance. When she reached me she was panting. She crouched with a hand on each knee and looked up at me.

"I am Graf," I said, holding out my hand and instead of shaking it she pressed her cheek to it like a friendly dog. Her skin was so soft I wanted to cry. When she caught her breath she asked me if I liked plants. I nodded, which I also would have done had she asked if I liked snot.

She pointed at her apartment and asked, "Would you like to see? I have a forest up there. With cats and birds too."

So I came and saw the jungle and petted the cats and chased the birds. The scent of watermelon filled the air and I licked the thick leaves and pressed my cheek to bark.

"How can they grow?" I asked, agog. "This is not an airtight space like the fruit and vegetable biodomes. Outside air kills plants."

She smiled and sniffed and sniffed and smiled. I sniffed too but could only smell watermelons even though there were no watermelons.

And then we were kissing and now she is mine and I am hers.

Only one thing: now I know that love can kill. It killed Anz. I shouldn't really accuse love because it was me that killed Anz. I killed Anz.

Here's what happened:

In my own room at the steel mill I make steel things that are "one-of-a-kind" custom objects for big companies, usually to be put in a one-of-a-kind machine, or to fix a one-of-a-kind problem. I can ask for any kind of steel—carbon steel, alloyed with eight percent molybdenum, for example—in any state. By state I mean the states of mat-

ter, which are liquid, solid, and gas. Yes, I can even ask for the steel as a gas. Usually I don't.

I often need the steel to be molten, to pour into molds, and that's when Anz helps me. He is the plant's metallurgist. On the day that I killed him he arrived at my workshop already annoyed.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

"Better late than never," I replied, knowing that the cliché would make him gnaw his gums and growl.

He gnawed his gums and growled then took out a note pad and flipped through it thoughtfully before tapping it against his chin. "You wanted a chromium alloy at a near-transitive state, right?" I nodded. From the superheated core of the blast furnaces an insulated pipeline would carry my molten metal to my workshop. "And you wanted it at exactly two fifteen p.m. In fact, you have written in this box, 'precise timing is imperative.'" Again I nodded. "Well, I'm ten minutes late. It's 2:25 p.m. The control room released your metal at 2:15." I gawked. I pawed at my wrist, seeking the watch which I knew was half-buried in the soil of Jez's jungle. "Your superheated alloy has been sitting in this pipe," he pointed at the thick conduit above his head, "for eleven minutes. Do you know what happens to the insulating layer of these lines when..."

At this point, what I suddenly remembered could happen in such a situation happened. A stream of solar-bright liquid metal, as thick as a stream of piss, lanced out of the pipe like a thunderbolt. Both he and I shielded our eyes from the astonishing glare. It lasted a second; Anz and I stood looking at each other, blinking away the spots. Then from deep within his chest came an inhuman sound, the voice of something being killed. He sank to his knees, his hands

pressing at a pinhole surrounded by charred cloth and flesh, in his upper chest. He fell forward on his face, revealing in the middle of his back the exit wound of the stream. It was from this fist-sized hole, which was plated in brilliant chrome, that the sound had come.

Anz began to shake and I ran to my workbench to hit the crisis alarm. Klaxons sounded throughout the plant and I rushed back to his side and turned him over and held his head in my lap. His breathing was shallow and fast. When he spoke he drooled chrome and blood.

"This hurts," he gurgled.

"Anz, I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"Your ... fault," he gasped.

"I know! I know!"

"Put me down."

"I want to hold you. I'm here and I want to hold you."

"Put me down! Can't die in your arms. Cliché." And then he died in my arms.

People want to say things to comfort you, like, "I'm sure he didn't feel any pain." But I know he did. Astonishing pain. Then they tell me that he's in a better place now, but I know that this is the only place. It is better to think that his soul has perished, for an afterlife would preserve the memory of his own death. The past exists only as memory; to destroy memory is to destroy the past. Now his anguish is only a half-thing, because I remember it, and when I am dead it will be a no-thing.

Of course, no one calls it my fault. Only Anz knew the circumstances of the chrome leak; to others, including the red-face managers of the plant, it was the deficiency in safety standards that killed him. A few days later a new pressure release valve is installed, patent pending. Incompetence, mother of in-

vention.

For my crime, I get a holiday. "Take a week, but still get paid!" the main red-face tells me. It is bad that they let me take a week off, bad for two reasons: 1) it leaves me with nothing to do all day but think about how I killed my friend Anz because I was thinking about being with Jez, and 2) it lets me be with Jez, rewarding my incompetence by fulfilling the desire that was its cause.

I lie naked on the moss and peat, among the green fronds of tropical flora, breathing the hot moist air, while cats chase exotic birds and spiders weave tapestries of silk and light. Sometimes I weep, for Anz who had once been interested in plants but abandoned them, like most people, because their cultivation had become futile, who would have cackled with joy in this place. Through the delirium of sorrow Jez appears above me, explaining that she has to go to work, which is across the street in the chemical plant. She is part of a project to create new fertilizers against the pollution. They are close to a breakthrough and they need her every day.

"These plants grow because of this fertilizer?" I ask as she looks down at me through the ferns and breadfruit.

She nods. "An early version. Now a thousandfold stronger. You go to sleep now."

I roll over and press my face into the floor of moss. When I look up again she is replaced by a brilliant yellow cockatiel perched on a banyan branch. The BB eye stares down at me as I whistle softly, imitating his song. Watching my performance he fails to notice the miniature jaguar, her black fur eating up the light, before he is crushed beneath the swift paw. The branch yields to their weight and both tumble to the floor. As the bird fans his lemon wings and rises

out of the underbrush the cat's sable paws clap around his body while fangs compress on his neck. He shudders and shrieks, then is still. The cat eats all but one arthritic claw, which falls to the soil and is soon the destination of a highway of ants.

When I awaken, my eyelids crusted with sleep and grief, Jez is straddling me. I reach up and stroke her shoulders and breasts, leaving smudges of soil on her pearl skin. She takes me inside her and licks away the tears boiling in my eyes. Then she whispers in my ear, "A thing you can do. We need a special part made. For the plant ... sss ... ahhh." At this moment she rocks backwards and takes me deep.

The next day I go back to my workshop in the steel mill with plans for a special part for the chemical factory, a ridged oval torus, six centimeters thick and eight wide, fluted core three centimeters across, and a bracket of sixteen holes for mounting screws. From the specifications of necessary tolerances, I select a vanadium-steel blend which flows into my workshop an hour later, while I am finishing the clay molds. I pour it immediately and leave it to cool overnight. The next day I take it out and I check every dimension, file and sand away excess metal, and subject it to pressures six times its expected tolerance. I have no idea what it is.

When I bring it home to Jez she holds it like a rare gem, puts it down and circles it several times, strokes and rubs its buffed finish. The next morning before leaving for work she wraps it carefully in banana leaves and tucks it into her satchel.

"You did a good job," she tells me from within our embrace, "I can see that it's perfect. Go to work today."

I go, and work hard to catch up for



my absence, relishing the work as I fashion coils and pipes and brackets and axles of every dimension. I give to each job my complete focus, savoring precision, laughing when two interlocking parts rotate and locked into place with a melodic click.

I leave that day an hour late but anxious to see Jez to tell her about this small victory over sorrow. As I am walking home towards her apartment I am oblivious to the industrial city, until someone, a young boy of maybe six, asks me, "What do you make of that, mister?" I look up from my daze and see an inverted mountain of black, its peak against the horizon and its base obscuring the sky.

"A fire," I answer, and continue towards it, for it is in the direction I am walking. I summon concern, and project it around Jez like a vanadium shell. There are a dozen factories in her neighborhood, most making chemicals. Then I pass some of these plants and it becomes clear that the source of the blooming pall is her factory, and I can see that the cloud also engulfs her apartment building which stands across the street. I don't discover that I am running until the fire engines and fire men are suddenly rushing at me, a pair of them snatching my arms and lifting me off of the ground so my feet spin uselessly above the pavement.

"You can't go in there, fella. You'll be killed like the rest of 'em," one of them says, his smile mockingly white against his sooty face.

"But my...." I say.

"You know someone in there?" the other asks.

I give a shallow nod, then the first puts his arm around me and leads me away, saying, "I think we have some chocolate, right, Ace?"

"Right, Chief, in the truck," the other replies and with firm pressure he walks me toward a small red van. The pavement is slick and a fine rain is falling, then I notice that it is the spray from a dozen booms which launch water at the smoldering chemical plant. The air smells of smoke and watermelon and I sit on the truck's bumper and gnaw chocolate.

The fire kills two hundred and eighteen people and in the days following, the papers show photographs of each. Jez's picture is black and white and she is not looking at the camera but at something else; she is even laughing at it, maybe someone telling a joke or making a face.

The fire's cause is investigated and I feel a brick of dread drop in my stomach when I see, among other recovered pieces, the steel and vanadium torus constructed by me. No, it didn't cause the fire, but the plant's designers cannot identify it and some of the investigators theorize that it is responsible for sending the chemical-laden cloud so high into the sky. And although evidence suggests that the fire may have been the result of sabotage, the final consensus points to faulty safety devices. New ones are designed.

It has been raining for days. I am wandering the streets of the industrial city, watching my feet as they shoot out ahead, land on the ground, and pivot under the weight of my body. This happens over and over, with precision and speed, a thousand times, and somehow it propels me forward.

But then I notice, just beyond my feet, a curious thing. Tendrils of green, with tear-shaped leaves and tiny white flowers, are growing from the fissures and cracks in the pavement. As I walk further they become denser; in some places the

green stalks are splitting the asphalt, making the holes wider. Soon there are branches, as thick as my wrist, erupting where before was flawless pavement. I'm so surprised by this green that I do not realize that my feet have stopped their moving. I look up and discover that I'm on the street between the chemical plant and Jez's building. The plant is a charred ruin, its great stacks and pipelines twisted and ruptured. The street itself is coming apart too, but not from the fire. It is the greenness, the plants, that are busting the concrete and steel. Then I turn to look up at the apartment building.

Where the building once stood is now a tower of vegetation of roughly the same height and width. It is made of giant green fronds, violet and yellow flowers an arm's span across, thick

cables of vine and wood. In some places these cables pierce into what little can be seen of the apartment's original structure. The plants are consuming it. I watch carefully and can actually see the leaves expanding and the flowers opening. I become aware of a low rustle, the sound of things growing. Weeds are rising slowly around my feet. The world is transforming.

Then, in the building's shaggy mass, I note a different kind of movement, the flutter of bird wings. An orange canary dodges away from the jaguar which has leapt after him. The jaguar watches for a moment from her perch on a thick branch, then licks her paw.

On the city, and across half the continent, a watermelon-scented rain continues to fall. •

*AUTHOR:* BRIAN PANHUYZEN has published stories in *Blood & Aphorisms*, *The Malahat Review*, *Open Letter*, *ink magazine*, and *Quarry*, plus this is his second story in *ON SPEC* (the first, "Artificial Sweeteners," was in Winter 1994). Brian and Natalee Caple run a small press, Tortoiseshell & Black, which publishes chapbooks and broadsides. Tortoiseshell & Black has just released *Straunge Wunder*, a perfect-bound book of surrealist poems by Steve Venright.

*ARTIST:* KURT REICHEL is an Invermere B.C. artist.

A S K .

M R .

S C I E N C E !

#### **A question received by e-mail:**

**Q**: What causes bad breath?

**A**: It is rare when a professional group has the right idea but, in this case, the dentists have been right all along. They were correct that bacterial action is responsible for bad breath, but the actual mechanism has not been understood until recently. Bacteria are subject to wide mood swings, though being rather simple creatures, they have but two: happy and mean. When they are happy there is no problem. But when they run out of food they become mean and start producing large quantities of unpleasant gasses inside their guts. This bacterial flatulence is what we perceive as bad breath. This condition can easily be prevented by eating more of their favorite food, chocolate chip cookies.

#### **"Confectionally Confused" asks by e-mail:**

**Q**: Does saliva have anything to do with the shrinking of lollipops?

**A**: Only indirectly. Lollipop substance is made of long, highly polarized molecules which have a very great desire to separate into charged ions. Saliva facilitates this separation and provides a transport medium which allows them to escape from their former bondage. That these ions are strongly and deliciously flavored is a fortunate coincidence.

#### **Ms. DM, of Gibson's Landing, BC, asks:**

**Q**: How much helium do I have to inhale to make myself 4.54 kilograms (ten pounds) lighter on my Weight Watchers' weigh-in? Would it help if I make myself taller and get farther away from gravity?

**A**: In order to accomplish this goal, you must inhale sufficient helium to enlarge your body enough to displace in excess of 4.54 kg (ten pounds) of air. This amount of air occupies a rather large volume. Even if you succeed in accomplishing this feat, you will appear so much larger that your fellow Weight Watchers will not believe the reading on the scale.

It is always a help to make yourself taller and get farther away from a source of gravity. Remember, though, that to be effective you must raise your center of mass by building up your upper body at the expense of your lower. Balsa-wood elevator shoes will also help.

#### **USER asks by e-mail:**

**Q**: When and how did the first magnet get found?

**A**: Mankind has a habit of overdoing everything. And so it was in the beginning of the Iron Age, when suddenly almost everything was being made of iron. Persons struggling to walk in their new iron shoes found the task even more difficult when strange pieces of iron-bearing rock began sticking to their footwear. Thus were magnets discovered. •



# Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie

Diane L. Walton

*illustrated by Ronn Sutton*

*They hanged Shorty McConnell for murdering that big American fellow whose name nobody can quite remember. At the trial, Shorty claimed it was because the guy had cheated him at poker, but the judge wasn't too sympathetic. They'd found the fellow's fancy gold watch on Shorty when the Mounties caught him, and he couldn't exactly say it had been a gift. And he certainly couldn't say he won it. Shorty was a notoriously bad poker player. And if he'd been cheated—well—he should have known better.*

The hanging sure was quite the social event. People brought picnic lunches and lemonade, and every family seemed to have a long-lost relative or a visitor from out of town. Even newspaper reporters came from down east, where they didn't hang very many people, it seemed. It wasn't that we *wanted* Shorty to be hanged, but it was the first exciting thing to happen in Deep Coulee, in, well, years. And after such a long, hard winter everybody needed a little entertainment. We figured Shorty would understand.

Of course the ladies and children didn't sit and watch the actual hanging. They stayed around the corner and waited until Shorty had been properly boxed up. Even some of the men discretely turned their heads at the last split second before the trap door opened, and poor old Shorty's neck was snapped. It was over quick. The doc pronounced him dead, shook hands with the hangman, and then the undertaker took charge. I never could understand how a man could enjoy the work as much as he did.

Shorty would have just had a pauper's burial, except that Mary's girls from the

rented rooms over the saloon took up a silver collection, to pay for a decent funeral. They did it up fine, dressed all in black like a bunch of rich widows. A couple of them even got up to speak at the graveside, sniffing into silk handkerchiefs. They all said what a kind and generous man Shorty had been, even if he did put a bullet in the back of that American fellow. Lord knows, he spent enough of his money on them when he was alive. Shorty would have been right pleased at the kind of send-off the town gave him. Treated him better than he'd been treated when he was living.

Of course that was before we all knew that Shorty had no intentions to stay dead and decently buried.

I was sitting by the fire in my cabin enjoying a cup of coffee, a few nights after we buried Shorty, when there was a knock on the door. I live quite a ways out of town, and I hadn't heard any hoofbeats, so it took me by surprise. I glanced over at my useless old dog, Moses, who kept right on snoring, even when the knock was repeated louder. I reached for my gun. Dog must be going deaf. "Ain't nothin' in here worth stealin'!" I said, quite loudly. Maybe they'd go away and I hadn't wasted a perfectly good "who's there?"

"Let me in, Sarge. Please?"

Even through a thick wood door, I knew it was a voice I should not be hearing. Not in this world, anyhow. I took a long, slow drink of my coffee, wishing it was something stronger. "Sh-Shorty?"

Nobody ever calls me "Sarge" anymore, except the men who served under me in the army, and that was a long time ago. I've been retired for years. My men don't live in these parts. Except for Shorty. Who didn't live here anymore either.

"Yeah, it's me. Please open the door.

I need help!"

Old Moses had at last perked up an ear, and I noticed his nose was really quivering. He'd finally taken an interest in who (or what) was outside the door. With my trusty canine companion on the alert, I opened the door. Slowly. Carefully.

It was Shorty all right. The same Shorty we'd strung up in the town square three days before. He was covered in dirt from head to foot, and smelled like the devil, but it still looked like Shorty. I stood there. Staring. Not saying a word.

"Please let me come in, Sarge! You're the only one I figured would help me."

I stepped back, and watched as he sort of shuffled through the door. Mercifully, he avoided my comfortable old armchair by the fire, and instead, flopped down on a wood chair. "Flopped" was the only way to describe it. He looked like his bones weren't quite all attached to each other. I still didn't have the darndest notion what to say next. But someone had to start the ball rolling.

"Shorty," I said. "You're dead."

"Spect so," he replied, rather glumly.

"Shorty," I repeated, because I still didn't believe the evidence of my own eyes. "We buried you three days ago."

"Yeah, I reckon," was the response.

"Shorty," I tried once again. "You smell gawd-awful. Maybe you'd like to sort of freshen up?" I gestured toward the sink and the hand pump.

He gave me a look you can't describe. It was then I noticed the rope burns around his neck, and the kind of funny angle his head was sitting at on his shoulders.

"Sarge, how long have you known me?"

"Twenty years or more," I answered.

"In all that time, did you ever know me to take a bath?"

"My God, it really *is* you!" I was stunned. I thought, any yahoo could cover himself with dirt and call me "Sarge," to play a joke on an old fool like me, but only Shorty would know that he hated bathing more than most fellows hate their wives' relations. No wonder the girls at the saloon sprayed so much cheap perfume around the place. I was starting to wish I hadn't used up that bottle of Bay Rum.

"You mean the undertaker didn't even wash you after ... uh..."

"That's okay, Sarge," he saw my embarrassment. "You can talk about the hangin'. I don't remember much anyway. It was pretty quick. I'll have to tell William that he makes the best noose I've ever seen. And no, they didn't wash me before they put me in the box. And I did get some dirtier while I was digging myself out." He made a halfhearted attempt to brush off some of the dirt. "I think there was someone else buried just below me, and the worms had kind of rearranged things."

I shuddered, and made a dash for the brandy bottle. I did need more than coffee.

"So, let me get this straight," I said when I was ready to talk again. "You were in that coffin, buried for three days and then you dug yourself out? I thought the box was nailed shut."

"So it was," chuckled Shorty. "But someone buried my knife with me, so when I woke up, I pried off the lid and started scraping away at the dirt. It was still pretty loose."

"You ... 'woke up'?"

"Well, I can't think of any different words. One second I was dead and gone, and the next..." He shrugged his shoulders, and the head rolled a bit far-

ther than it had a right to.

"But ... how did you get enough air? Didn't you have problems breathing?" I was really having trouble with this. I'm not a religious man, but some things just are not right.

"Sarge," Shorty said gently, "feel my chest."

Now, feeling his chest was about as attractive an offer as feeling an angry grizzly bear, but I reached out and touched him lightly.

"Not that way ... *this* way!" And he grabbed my hand with his cold ones, and held it tight to his breast, like we were pledging our troth or something. "Feel anything?"

I shook my head. "Your heart's on the other side, Shorty," I said, gently. He quickly moved my limp hand to his left side. And we both waited. Finally, I shook my head and said, "Shorty, I don't feel a damn thing."

"Of course not! I'm dead. My heart isn't beating. I'm not breathing. Well, at least I don't need to breathe. Something must be working so I can suck in the air to talk to you, but hell, I can't explain it. Sarge, I'm scared."

I looked at him, and realized that this was a new problem that I'd need some time to solve. But at least I wouldn't have to feed it.

"It's getting late, and I think better after breakfast. Could you, uh, sleep in the barn, Shorty?"

Shorty nodded. "I don't know if I can sleep or not, but the barn's as good a place as any."

As things turned out the next few days, while I was thinking this through, the barn was *not* as good a place as any. The chickens stopped laying, the old cow dried up totally and the rooster was too scared to crow in the mornings. Shorty wasn't doing anything to scare

them, mind you. He was just—there. Animals don't like dead things any more than most people do.

We decided the best place for Shorty was an old shed I'd built years before on the edge of the property. The roof was still pretty good, and Shorty said the cold at night didn't really bother him, and it was far enough away from the animals so I'd be eating eggs again. During the day, I tried to stay busy with my chores, and I repaired more fencing in those four days than I had in the twelve months before.

When I'd done about as much thinking (and fencing) as I had a head for, I walked out to the shed to pay Shorty a visit. It pained me to see his face light up when he saw me coming.

"The way I see it," I told him, after inquiring about his health (force of habit), "is that your body just doesn't know it's *supposed* to be dead. So we'll have to bury it somewhere where it can't get out easily. Maybe then it will take the time to figure things out, and let you spend eternity in peace like you're supposed to." Shorty agreed that being dead was probably the best thing for him. All things considered.

I suggested to Shorty that we put him in the old mine. It had long since dried up, and there were lots of old tunnels that we could dynamite shut, and seal Shorty up for good.

He thought about that for a while, then nodded his head. I noticed it was getting looser, and wondered what I'd do if it fell off entirely. I couldn't see myself putting it back on, just so we could hold a friendly conversation.

My plan was good except that it meant taking someone else into my confidence. Someone who could get us some dynamite. The next day, I put Shorty in the back of my wagon, as far

from the horse as possible, covered him with an old blanket, and headed into town. On the way I had plenty of time for figuring out what I'd say to folks. Because I decided that I couldn't just let one person in on this. Shorty wasn't really a secret or anything I had to be ashamed of. It was the community who put Shorty in the ground in the first place. So I figured that the community should have a hand in getting him back there.

We went to the doctor first. Not being a medical man myself, I thought I'd better be good and sure that Shorty's non-beating heart wasn't just because I'd missed feeling it by a couple of inches. I'd be feeling pretty foolish if I'd blown up a fellow to kingdom come because I thought he ought to be dead.

Doc Cardwell was old, but he took it pretty well. With barely shaking hands, he held his stethoscope over Shorty's chest, listened for a minute, and then nodded slowly.

"I would have to say," he said, "that this man is still as dead as he was a week ago. How's the neck, Shorty?" he asked.

"It's been better," replied Shorty. He didn't nod or shake his head as much as he had those first few days.

"We certainly can't bury him again while he's walking and talking like this. It's not decent. Did you have any ideas?" asked the doctor.

I told him what I'd planned, and he agreed it had merit. So he backed me up when we went to the mine office and asked Leo if he'd do the job. We had to go through the whole rigmarole, with Leo listening through the doc's stethoscope to Shorty's chest. Next thing I knew, some more folks had walked in from the street, and wouldn't you just know it, pretty soon nearly everyone in town had given the chest a listen. They



all agreed Shorty was dead. And they agreed that if he was dead, he deserved to be properly buried. Again.

So we took Shorty out to the abandoned mine. He looked it over, held on to his head and slowly nodded his approval. This would be a good final resting place. He turned to the crowd and said, "Friends. You all know me as a man of few words." And he turned his back on us and shuffled into the darkness of the mine. We waited. In about five minutes, a muffled voice came out of the dark. "Spect this is far enough."

Leo did the honors, setting the charges and then motioning everyone to get far out of the way. The explosion was louder than most thunder and, when the dust cleared, we all saw that the tunnel entrance was decently blocked off with fallen rubble. Even Shorty's knife couldn't get through that stuff.

When the knock came on my door three nights later, old Moses stood up and wagged his tail. I smelled Shorty before I had the nerve to open the door and see him standing on the step. He was nearly white with rock dust, and his left leg wasn't completely attached anymore. I didn't even ask how he'd got out, or how he'd walked all the way from the mine. I just pointed in the direction of the shed, closed the front door and went straight for the bottle of brandy.

Next morning, I put Shorty in the back of the wagon, and took him to the Indian village. I should have done it first, because my old friend Looks-At-The-Sky is the local shaman. He talked with his dead ancestors a lot, so he was in a better position to know what was the right thing to do. The place, normally bustling with women and children at work, was strangely silent as I walked and Shorty dragged past the tepees and

abandoned fires. Some still had rabbits roasting on the un-turning spits, and getting burned on one side.

I found Lookie's tent without too much trouble and went in. Shorty stayed outside. The smell inside a tepee was bad enough, but I found it pleasant after a few days in Shorty's company.

Looks-at-the-sky was sitting, cross-legged in front of the fire.

"Where are all the people?" I asked.

"Gone," was his response. "They will return after the undead one has left."

"You know?"

"The ravens told me," he replied, simply.

"Then, did these smart ravens tell you what I'm supposed to do with him?" I asked, sarcastically.

"Go jump in the lake."

"Now, wait a minute, Lookie! We've known each other a long time, but you don't have no call talking to me like that when I need your help!"

"No," he replied calmly. "He must go to the spirit lake to be cleansed."

"I heard that!" Shorty's angry voice came from outside the tepee. "Ain't no way I'm taking a bath in that cold water. I'd rather burn in hell first."

That gave me another idea. I thanked Lookie for the suggestion, and took Shorty back home. Next night was the regular town hall meeting, and I presented my case.

"You all know about Shorty McConnell," I began. "This town just has to help me with disposing of him in a permanent way. Dynamite didn't work, so I suggest that we try burning him." The town council liked the idea.

We did such a good job with that bonfire. Shame it didn't work. Shorty looked so darn proud, sitting at the top of the stack of logs, in the old rocking chair someone had donated to the effort.

It was past dark by the time the flames had died down, and we all went home, figuring there wouldn't be enough of Shorty left to bury if we tried.

Three nights later, there wasn't even a knock on the door to let me know we'd failed again. The smell of charred meat was enough to turn even old Moses' stomach. I didn't open the door.

Next day, with Shorty sitting in the back of the wagon, or rather a blackened lump that used to be Shorty, I drove to town again. This was getting bad for my social life.

We got out of the wagon, and were going down the main street, just near the general store when Shorty suddenly stopped in his tracks. I suppose saying that he stopped dead in his tracks would be ... well ... I won't say it.

"What is it, Shorty?" I asked, not figuring what caused him to stare so.

"That's Irma! That's my old mule!" He pointed in the direction of the bank across the street.

"Well, Shorty. It could be. They probably confiscated all your belongings and sold what they could for court costs. You didn't leave any relations that we knew of."

He hardly heard me. "Lord, but I've missed old Irma! She was my best friend for years." And before I could stop him (not that I wanted to touch him, mind, but I didn't want him to cause a scene), he shambled across the street and approached the mule, crooning softly. The mule didn't think too much of this, and reared up, but the reins kept her from going too high. I was worried she'd kick Shorty, but he knew enough to approach her from the side. Next thing I knew, he'd grabbed hold of her saddle horn and was mounting the beast.

"Shorty! That mule doesn't belong to you anymore!" I shouted. "Do you want

to get hanged again for stealing her?"

"Sarge, she's mine and I can prove it!" he shouted with triumph in his voice. "Just watch me!"

Now you might think that a man two weeks dead, charred beyond recognition and riding a mule would be a sight to see. Well, it was. Shorty seemed to change, up there on that mule. He looked, well, almost dignified, sort of like a judge or a doctor or someone important. Irma kept trying to turn her head and look at what was on her back, and she backed up a couple of steps each time she did that. Shorty was too busy trying to calm her with whispered secrets in her ear, and he didn't notice the direction she was backing in. When Irma's hind end hit the watering trough, she did the only natural thing. She reared up and bucked old Shorty right off, and into the water.

There was a crowd gathered in the street by then, so we all saw what happened next. If it had been just me, I wouldn't have believed even the evidence before my own eyes. But there were plenty of witnesses. You know, all those years of not bathing had been Shorty's trademark. We used to joke with him about it, saying that it seemed like the dirt was the only thing keeping him held together.

It was more true than we'd thought. With a sort of *whumph!*, he fell into the watering trough. But he didn't struggle. He didn't flail around trying to grab onto the sides and pull himself out. He didn't even curse the mule who'd put him there. The only reason Shorty'd been able to come back from the grave at all was the dirt which held him together. The old Indian was right after all. Jumping in the lake would have been the right thing to do. When he fell into the trough—well—old Shorty just kind of

fell to pieces.

We gave all the bits of him that were left a proper burial the next day. Drained the water from the trough, nailed a lid on it, and buried Shorty's remains with it. Irma pulled the wagon carrying the

coffin.

Three nights later I sat, alone, with my bottle of brandy. At midnight, when all was still silent, I drank a toast to my old friend Shorty. May he rest in peace. At least he'd smell better now. •

*AUTHOR:* As a founding member of the *ON SPEC* Editorial Collective, Diane L. Walton devotes much of her time to reading other peoples' stories. This is Diane's second story to appear in *ON SPEC*; her previous story, "Best Damn Cheesecake in the Universe," appeared in our Fall 1991 issue. Other publications include "Objects in the Mirror..." (*Northern Frights 2*) and two stories broadcast on CBC Radio's *Alberta Anthology*.

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# ONCE

Ursula Pflug

*illustrated by Y.M. Whelan*

*Was it bioware, or drugs? Explosives or military secrets from the fragmented Soviet Union, peddled to you by disenfranchised scientists making barely enough money to live on?*

You never said much, although once you let me play on the phone, telling me what words to say to a woman in Prague, English words, and yet I didn't understand them. I'd heard you have those conversations too, with strangers in hotel bars where, while you'd talk you were always wary of the possible hidden mikes, the cochlear implants sitting three tables away. Words like come over, get across, bridgework, fragmentation, desire, disease. Only to you these words didn't mean what they meant to me but something else, something I never learned. The words could be scrambled to make sentences, their meanings encrypted. On the pay-phone you told me to ask: "Did desire get over into fragmentation or disease?"

And someone answered, "Afua will do bridgework on Friday, at two p.m."

I told you and you nodded.

I think you were seeing how far I'd go. I think you were thinking of taking me on, as an apprentice. Taking me into The Game, your game, and you had to see. If I'd obey orders without asking questions. If I'd trust you to keep me safe. If I'd say words without knowing what they meant.

You said you'd tell me later, over a drink. But you never did. I guess I didn't pass. It seems odd now; you could've just lied. You could've made something up if you didn't think I was ready. Didn't have it in me.

Sometimes I think you really didn't care whether you died, and sometimes I think you possessed a secret that kept you from harm.

Now, sometimes, I think I could've been shot just for knowing you. For being someone you loved. As a weapon.

Why did I choose to share that life with you, a life I had no understanding of? It was a glimpse into another world, one that worked by different rules. It was the closet anarchist in me, I suppose, that was attracted; you paid no heed to governments, to laws. You said you did it not because you believed in any of what you bought and

sold, particularly, but that you had an intense need to be free. You couldn't live by others' rules.

You paid my airfares, all over the world, for seven years.

A true romantic.

I live in Vancouver now, in a house with a garden in the east end. I have psilocybin mushrooms growing in my backyard, sprouting out of the manure I dig into my delphiniums to inspire them to greater heights. There are peonies too, and foxgloves and rhododendrons. In the mornings I sit in the yard, reading my mail. Mail has been important to me for as long as I can remember—those links made. I still prefer it to e-mail; the feel of paper, the sight of handwriting, the smell. I don't mean perfumed stationery, I mean the smell of my friends. Perhaps my nose has grown more sensitive, or perhaps it's my imagination, but I swear I can smell my friends sometimes, when I open their letters.

Actually I have a secret I don't share often; it was expensive, a frivolity: a few years ago I had my nose done. It was one of the first of the new implants that became available—and popular too. Although why should it be popular—so much less useful, after all, than a new language. Or improved vision. Or hearing.

It was important to people like you, who sometimes needed to be able to smell things. Things in glassine envelopes. Powders. Brown ones, white ones, pink.

In places where no labs were available, for chemical analysis, the nose could do a lot.

Me? I'm a gardener, and I love the smell of flowers, and wanted only to regain what I'd lost by smoking, and perhaps augment the original a little.

If I'd known I would smell my friends on their letters I might not have done it. Memory can be painful—and irresistible. It's hard to find people who will write handwritten letters any more—everyone wants to use e-mail, or at the very least, dash off a letter on their computer, fax it out. Handy for typos, the spellchecks and all.

But I? I feel we have hurtled much too quickly into the future. How can it be modern any more to use e-mail? Of course, there are people only buying their first PCs now. People in the Amazon, in the Andes, in Bangladesh.

We never thought of these people much, when we were having our information revolution. So intense, so fast.

But now they are saying things. We are hearing their voices at last. All over the Net we are hearing their voices now, at so many forums and conferences, so many users' groups.

They are changing the world, with the things they say.

Perceptually.

I on the other hand, feel someone must go the other way. I love books and handwriting. To me, now, this seems the very essence of modernity; to love these things, to use them.

Except for my implant, although I turn it off for weeks at a time. That is my secret. And you.

I eat mushrooms once every two years, in the fall. *Psilocybe cyanescens*: the small blue ones that grow in my yard, beneath the delphiniums. I have a native friend, a Haida artist who says they are very rare, very special. He comes to harvest them too, but we never eat them together, although we are very good friends. In the main, we have different things to see, different spirits whose shelter or intervention we need.

Spirits to catch.

Or to give thanks to.

Although once we did, just once:

It was deep summer and I had mushrooms I'd dried from the previous year. We ate them and sat and drank tea and talked and at last the house seemed too small around us, too enclosing, tight.

We went outside and walked along the road. We were in the country, at a place of his.

In the swamp alongside the road the bullfrogs sounded like nothing so much as jazz musicians, mournfully practising scales on their trombones and double basses. In the night sky there were shooting stars, and at our feet, in the bushes along the road, fireflies swarmed. It seemed as though they were a mirror for the shooting stars overhead; it must have been August, the Perseid meteor shower.

Sometimes nature rearranges itself into exquisite metaphors, as though exclusively for one's own benefit.

"As above, so below," I said. I used to practice Wiccan magic, when I was in my twenties, in between trips with you. It was the first religion I ever came across that meant anything to me. Since then, I have learned that it too is a shell, a husk, if a very beautiful one. Now I do things just with my mind, with my thoughts. Effect change in the world, in those around me.

My sculptor friend and I weren't saying very much, not having need to. It felt as though words would diminish the heightened sensory input, the amount of awe one could possibly contain at one moment, and I think he, like I, wanted to make himself large, be a receiver for just as much wonder as he possibly could. Awe of what? The profound intelligence of nature.

His name was Peter.

I won't give his last name, for obvi-

ous reasons.

The sacred plant is still illegal. Although genetic engineering isn't. And nuclear warheads. And the sale of children is practised daily.

I know this is something else you do, in passing, while you do your other work. Save children about to be bought, or sold. You told me, the first few years, when I still heard from you.

Because, you said, each of them might be your son.

"For every star, a soul," Peter said.

Destiny.

So beautiful one couldn't fairly put it into words.

I think that is the moment when everything changed, when I made a deep internal shift that altered everything, my whole future, and, if mine, possibly also the world's.

We think our choices are not so significant, and by and large we are right; they're not. Because we don't dare.

Perhaps I am only making the choice now; I don't want to give too much import to the plant. I pray that I am making the right choice.

You and I parted ways; I choosing a quieter path, one that allowed more time for reflection, for security. I chose a life where children were possible. Emotional security—you were never short of cash and parlayed it into investments, which, if you nurtured them well, would have bought you the possibility of early retirement. Unlike myself. I live on residuals from a CD-ROM game I wrote twenty years ago and regularly update—it proved much more successful than I would have expected.

It was a cross between a treasure hunt and those adventure novels they had for children where you could choose different courses of action, roaming backwards and forwards through the pages

of the book as though you were traveling the permutations of time.

The most interesting thing for me, in reading those books, which in themselves imitated the structure of games, is that I would become aware of the mathematics of probability, of possibility. Of how one small choice, seemingly infinitesimal, could influence much larger outcomes, outcomes that would change lives, countries, worlds.

Chaos theory, I know.

Destiny? What is destiny in the face of that?

Destiny was the name of my game. I called it *The Game*, too, in memory of you. *Destiny, The Game*. Perhaps you've heard of it.

I played trickster, writing it; it wasn't how many evil aliens you blasted that won or lost you the earth, but how much you trusted yourself, how you carved your own path through the forest of possibilities.

How you listened for your own destiny, or perhaps, how you smelled it out.

I loved writing it, perhaps more than I loved you. Anyway, it was different.

I thought it would be a little offside, find a cult audience among the artier game players, those who still liked to read literary novels, possibly to garden. Humanities people who had computers because they had to, for work. But not a game for hard-core nerds or testosterone-driven teenage boys. Nothing against them; I had one myself, and adored him more than, well, you, for starters.

Kids are like that. A deeper, stronger bond. No wonder the men wander ... off to wars, into space, across those fluid nightmare borders, into countries whose names are always changing ... dealing in ... what?

Strange, but I caught a wave. People

loved *Destiny*. How did I know there were so many others out there who thought like me?

Of course, I didn't know. I did the only thing I could (I have never been much good at anything else). I followed my heart, wrote the game I'd love to play.

I still play it.

In my life, not on the screen.

But who knows what you did? Who indeed, knows anything about you?

I remember Germany, the stairs of a house you had in Berlin, near Kathe Kollwitz Platz. You had something to do, somewhere to go, but at the end of our night in the clubs you lent me your canopy bed in the Persian-lined top-floor apartment you kept for yourself—even going so far as to climb the stairs with me, turn the sometimes recalcitrant key in the lock, because you knew the trick. We stroked each other's jackets, giving rise to a feeling that could only be described as painful. As though our lives were so dangerous we might really never see one another again.

As perhaps they were.

That is why I had the implant. Because I have never again lived as intensely as I lived with you. Because smell is the heart and root of memory. Because I have three things of yours. A Japanese money clip, with inlay of bamboo leaves. A Chinese carved ivory bracelet, in the shape of a dragon biting its tail. It is very old, from before the ban. A shoe. It is the shoe that fell off your foot, the last night we were together, when you had to run. That one took a lot of explaining. You disappeared into the night, as quickly, as soundlessly as a cat, but then, you'd always told me you could do that. At any moment. Of any day. Out of my life. After the first few years, no longer any mail. Maybe



that's why I have this mail thing. Sometimes my friends, when they write, ask me about you. But it frightens me, and I only write back to the ones who write in handwriting, on paper. Because then I can smell who they really are.

I don't touch your things, keep them in a bell jar. Ritually, once a year, I put my implant in; I take them out and I smell them.

And am with you again.

In Germany, that trip, we drank. Once a week, after all your meetings were done, we'd get a bottle and kill it. Of Irish whisky.

Do you remember the ceremony we always had to make of killing the bottle? Do you remember the time when, the bottle having reached its skeletal state, its life blood having drained into our own, that we gave it a funeral? Do you remember how, in order to show our appreciation, we stood it beside the Reichstag and filled it with flowers we'd picked in the garden? It was too dangerous, I think now. You did it for me, for us, so that for one night we could pretend we were living a life of frivolous romance, like all the others.

That was the one summer, of all the summers we spent together, when I felt you were truly in love with me. Or perhaps it was I with you. That was the summer our son was conceived. It was in June, when we still went out alone together. Later, in August, under showers of meteors, there was always Katrina. You worked with her. And perhaps more.

I didn't mind; we'd never owned one another, except now, she was always there and it hurt. It was after I told you I intended to keep the child. You became distant, withdrawn; you told me there was no place for a child in The Game, your game, a game of, above all else,

sleight-of-hand. Or sleight-of-body: the ability to appear and disappear, to change your name, your passport, even; once, you said, your fingerprints. A child would only attract attention, danger. Of course you were right, but I wanted the child. And so you inducted Katrina into the game, instead of me. Your other lover/apprentice. Sex bought loyalty, the promise of closed lips, you said, and also, you loved us both. It was quite obvious to me you did; it wasn't a lie, it was just by different rules.

And I settled down with my baby and twenty thousand dollars from you, with which I made a down payment on a rather ratty old house, which had, nevertheless, a large yard and an old perennial garden. Twenty thousand—a rather small parting gift, considering. Child support in advance; I knew I'd never see you again. I settled down and wrote computer games to make a living, and eventually, I lucked out with The Game. Which I realize belatedly, I copied from yours.

I too have a secret mission. To save us from rushing too quickly into the future. To remind those working with these new energies (for they are new, and transformative) that they were allowed into being for a reason; to be a mouthpiece for the Earth herself. Why I love games, working with computers; it returns us to a right-brained culture, a culture of pleasure and play. It reconnects us to the so-called primitive within ourselves ... connecting to the earth in a more direct, immediate way, bordering, at times, on the telepathic. To oversimplify: tribal peoples were right brained; an oral tradition is right brained. We cannot go backwards, and so we go forward into the past—our machines will give us back what we have lost.

Direct connection. As though, internally, in our subconscious, in our bodies, electronic media function less as a technology than print. Language that always distances. Now we tell stories, our own stories, by pushing keys on a keyboard, by reading images.

Paradox.

Information. The metaphor still holds; at bottom it's always information: code, arms, drugs, thoughts. That is all we are selling in the end: the thought-clothes we wear, readable by others as readily as changing fashions, whether we acknowledge it or not. And that is why I'm a witch and you're a renegade.

Witches always loved the Goddess first, the earth. We had no choice; it has always been she who gave us our power to read minds, to feel the energies of plants and trees and stones.

And most importantly, of people.

You, too, must have known that—how to read a stranger, to know whether she held betrayal or safe passage across the burning border. Which did I hold, for you?

Of course we all have those places inside ourselves. I'm always drawn to them; I've explored my own darkness with the diligence of a fetishist; how could I blame you for doing any less? Who's to say you learned any less about yourself than I did, following Persephone?

That's why I settled down, really: not to no longer be afraid for my life and yours; not to be solvent (you always had more money than me, than I made even after I wrote *Destiny*), not even to raise our child, quietly and alone, but to have time to dive.

What did you do?

Got your scuba licence, one more ticket to add to your list.

Funny haha, or funny peculiar?

As though we were two parts of a binary star, revolving always around one another; one exploring the inner world, one the outer.

Your son looks like you.

I hang my head in shame and cry for what we were not able to do, namely, raise him together.

For many years my children nurtured me as much as I nurtured them, if not more. Schedules and nursing, school lunches and whooping cough all served to cure me of the life of danger I'd lived with you, when I neglected my own life path so persistently it all but disappeared from the forest floor, obscured by scrub. My daughter, obviously, is not yours. She is Peter's, and is as unlike my son as you are from my sculptor friend. We too, did not manage to carve a life under the same roof although, unlike you, he lives on the same coast as me and spent a great deal of time with his daughter while she was growing up. She is seventeen; my son is twenty-two. She goes home every summer, to Masset, in the Queen Charlottes. She calls it home. She is becoming a carver, not a traditional thing for a woman to do. My son has no such root to ground him; he is restless, and I grow pensive, watching him. Thinking how he takes after you.

I no longer think so much about means, but about ends.

And I think it is how you lived that was more important than what you bought and sold.

Because you lived free. And that is what you sold; the idea of freedom, of self-direction.

I think also you were always careful not to kill anyone. You never forgot that every life was important.

Passwords can be stolen. On e-mail, how do I know anyone is who they say they are?

Although, why should I worry? What do I have to say about you?

Gossip, poetry. Your legacy is my game. As though we wrote it together, it's so informed by your life.

But perhaps you were so dangerous that even gossip about you could spread like wildfire, wreaking havoc. Sometimes I hear things on the Net. About a man called Helmut. He too, has stopped travelling. Does most of his work on computers now. Of course, that was only one of the many names you used.

Sometimes I leave messages for him, on news groups I know he might read, that I'm not supposed to know how to access, but there are a few things I did learn from you. Explosives experts, arms traders, drug manufacturers. Killers. Yes, of course there is a Net group for killers. Not that you ever were one. But you knew some.

I tell you about your son, how he loves The Game. He is blonde like you. I wonder, sometimes, if you aren't necessary? If some of what you do doesn't make peace, and not only war? It is a delicate equation, the witch's inner vision versus the outlaw's action. So much

now, can be done with viruses. With worms strategically placed to seek out key files in multinationals' systems.

Our son, too, knows his way around the Net ... he too, has made friends. He found your letters to me, from the old days. He guesses, not that they give much away. He drops your name, Helmut Schnabel ... he wants in; I can feel it. There are always those eager to induct new players into The Game, a game where skilled lives are necessary yet expendable. If he will go that way regardless, whether I want him to or not, I want him to have as good a teacher as I would've had. I want him to have you.

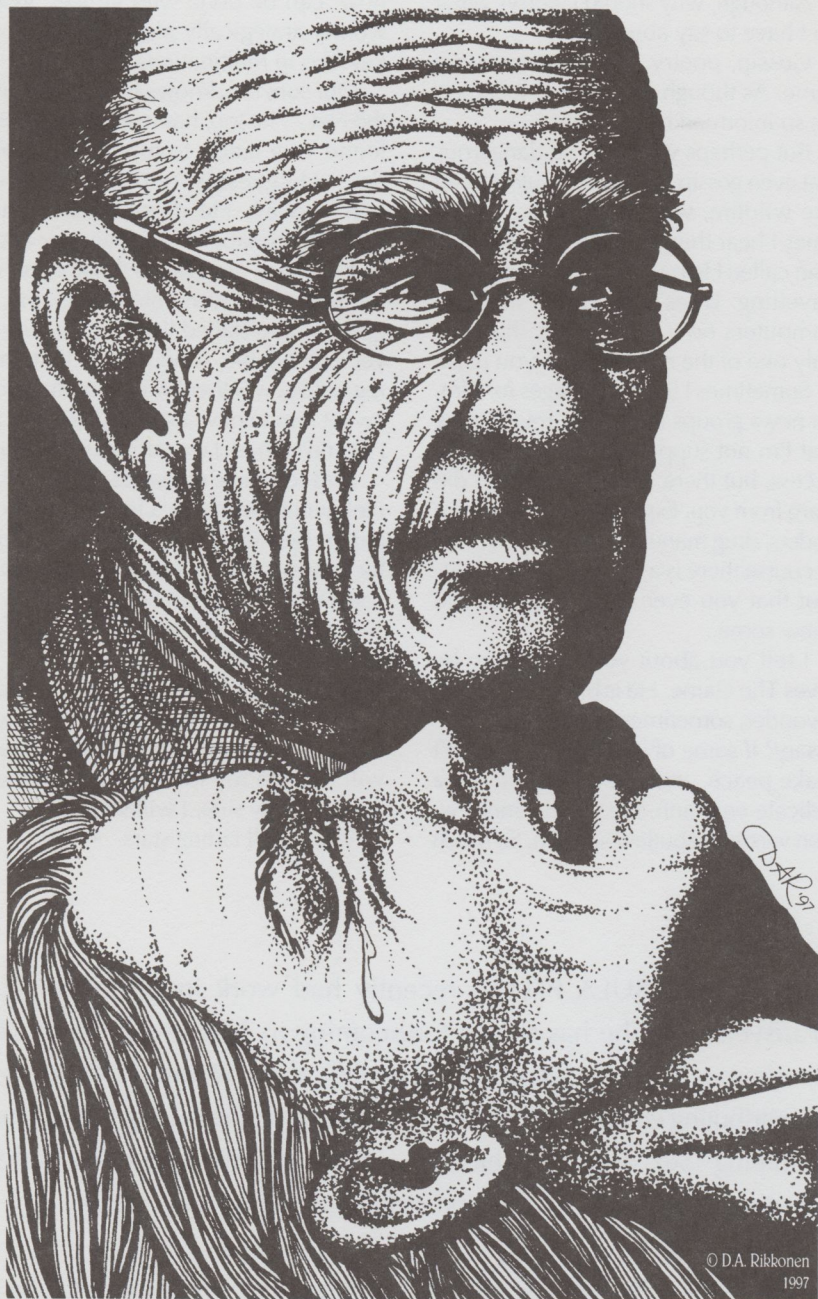
And so I leave messages, hinting. But I tell you to write me a letter, pencil on paper. Because I don't want an imposter to answer; I want someone who will care for his life as much as for their own. Someone who will teach him to play as safely as himself. A father.

And because, when the letter comes, I will take out the shoe, its smell strengthened one night by adrenaline. I will turn on my implant, and placing them side by side, I will know.

We are all falling stars. •

**AUTHOR:** URSULA PFLUG recently had work in *Leviathan* and *Transversions*. She has stories forthcoming in *BBR* (two) and in *The Peterborough Review* (all author-illustrated), and in *Room of One's Own*. A contributing editor at *The Peterborough Review*, she is guest editing their upcoming "Sex" issue. She has also written art reviews and has had SF narratives produced for stage and independent film and video.

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# Bringing Back Sarah

by Steven R. Laker

*illustrated by Dory A. Rikkonen*

*They brought Sarah back three days before my seventieth birthday. I sensed her return, the way you sometimes know a great or terrible thing has happened before you hear news of the event. There is no logic to the feeling, but still it persists. I slept poorly that night, drifting in and out of dreams about Sarah. When I awoke in the grey morning light I could smell her perfume all around. My heart beat a crazy rhythm and my hands were very cold. I felt almost young.*

My morning progressed uneventfully, as they all do now, and I began to doubt my convictions from the previous night. Snow had fallen while I slept, dusting the grass and hiding the dead leaves that I never found the energy to rake. Everything looked cold and sterile. I pulled on an extra sweater and promised myself I would turn up the heat just a little tomorrow, if the weather didn't break.

Sitting at my terminal, I called up the morning mail. Only one entry appeared, a letter from a Dr. Warren. I didn't recognize the name, and my eyes skipped to the originating address: the University of Waterloo. I drew in a startled breath.

My last days with Sarah had been spent at the University, where long hours in the lab stole away so much of my life with her.

A memory came to me, bright but slightly corrupted by time, like an old black-and-white film, recently colorized. I stood hunched over that smooth black capsule, imagining Sarah's face beneath the glossy surface. Voices called to me, telling me it was time to leave. But I stood there for a small eternity, wanting to break the seal and touch her, slap her awake, ask her why and hear an answer I could understand.

Someone grabbed my shoulders and took me away from Sarah out into the light, where my memory faded into the routine of the last forty years.

Breathing deeply, I called up the letter from Dr. Warren.

A man's voice, too young and too eager, played out from the computer.

"Dr. Russ? This is Dr. Warren from the University of Waterloo's Faculty of Medicine. If this is the same Dr. Russ who participated in a project with the University's Physics Department in 2005, please contact me. There have been ... developments. Thank you."

*Developments.* I rubbed a shaking hand over my face, feeling ill from the pounding of my heart.

I switched off the terminal and retreated outside, fighting off thought and emotion with a vigorous walk down the cold streets. Already, the snow had begun to turn to slush, plugging the storm drains and creating wide, frigid pools on the road. I walked two miles before returning to my house. Finally, after a hot bath and several cups of sugar-laced coffee, I returned Dr. Warren's call.

His face appeared on the screen; young, strong features, a good match to his voice. "Dr. Russ?"

I nodded vaguely, feeling old and stupid. "You left a message with me."

"Yes. Then you're Abraham Russ, formerly with the Department of Physics here?" I nodded again. Warren glanced away, suddenly uncomfortable. "You remember the Long Jump project, of course. You volunteered the body of your late wife for the venture." When I didn't answer he continued speaking, his words hurried. "I'm working on a parallel project in the Medical Department, practising reconstructive techniques on the subjects from the Long Jump. Your wife has responded to our treatments. I'd like an opportunity to discuss our work with you."

I couldn't concentrate. My mind circled around the phrase "my wife," orbiting the words from a great distance. Forty years had passed since Sarah's

death.

"I think it would be a good idea for you to come over here. Dr. Russ?"

I focused on the screen, hearing the nervous concern in his voice. "Yes. Yes, certainly. I'll be there by the morning." He thanked me and I broke the connection.

I left that evening, arriving at the university after a two hour shuttle trip from Vancouver. Air travel usually unnerves me, especially the thunderous near-orbit shuttle excursions. But this flight passed in a fog of memories, each remembrance igniting several others. Beneath all these thoughts, repeating endlessly like some unfathomable mantra was a single phrase. They brought her back. My God, they brought her back.

The campus looked very different from when I studied there. A woman at the gates directed me to the Faculty of Medicine, hidden within a maze of towering residences. I reached Dr. Warren's office just after midnight and knocked softly on the door, not expecting an answer. As I looked about for a place to wait through the night, the doctor opened the door. He smiled wearily and ushered me inside.

"I didn't expect you so soon. You were lucky to catch me here. I was just on my way back to the lab. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

I shook my head, staring awkwardly about the cluttered room, waiting for this stranger to tell me about his "developments."

He nodded and sat behind his desk, then rummaged through a drawer until he retrieved a data cube. He fed the cube into his computer and leaned back, studying the screen. "Do you remember the details of the Long Jump project, Dr. Russ?"

"Just Abe, please. I stopped thinking

of myself as a physicist a long time ago." I paused, searching the well of my memories. "Yes, I remember the project very clearly. My interests became very personal."

"Of course. You probably weren't informed of the retrievals over the last two years."

"No, I wasn't."

"It's the damn bureaucracy here. Once the trials started coming back, the department heads thought it would be wise to keep the details quiet, at least until we knew what we had."

"So the retrievals were successful?"

Dr. Warren smiled. "Oh, yes! We thought the first trial was a prank left by some clever student who'd discovered the history of the Long Jump venture. Then the second trial appeared in the booth, right in front of one of our maintenance people. The poor fellow nearly died of fright. We've monitored the booth constantly since then. Sixteen trials have been recovered, the latest being the body of Sarah Russ." The doctor turned from the screen and looked at me, his face guarded. "When you offered to commit your wife's remains to the project, what did you expect to gain?"

I closed my eyes, seeing Sarah's blank face as they lowered her into the coal-black capsule. "I don't know what I expected, what I wanted. My thoughts were addled at the time."

Dr. Warren nodded understanding. "Still, there are the conditions you insisted on. Specifically, that 'all available medical techniques available at the time of Sarah Russ' retrieval will be—' "

" '...will be employed towards her benefit,' " I finished. "Yes, I remember, of course. She passed away that night. The doctors told me her organs were still in excellent condition, and suggested

they be donated to people who could use them. I had a different idea. We needed complex organisms for the project and I felt my wife would be a suitable test subject. No more harm could come to her."

The doctor nodded again, still expressionless. "Still, the circumstances of her death complicate matters."

"By God, do you think I don't know that? I've had forty years to wonder what I would do if this day ever came. Forty years of Sarah haunting my dreams, despising me for doing this to her. Now you're asking me what I hope to gain." I hesitated, refusing to meet Dr. Warren's eyes. "I'm an old man, Doctor. I want only resolution now. And an end to bad dreams. Please do me the courtesy of explaining what's happening with the project."

He seemed about to press further, but instead turned slowly back to his computer. "Well, the physicists predicted the time of Sarah's arrival, based on data from the previous fifteen trials, and we had several doctors waiting near the booth. Details of her condition before the Jump were available. The drug Sarah took damaged her liver, and she'd been clinically dead for nearly an hour before she made the jump. But nanotechs have come a long way over the last decade in their ability to stimulate cell regeneration. Our efforts succeeded, and she's now recovering at the University Hospital." My eyes widened and he held up a hand. "Her condition is very serious, very unstable. To be frank, her prognosis is poor. But she is awake and aware, to some extent. We've only been able to repair some of the damage to her brain, and she's suffered considerable memory loss."

"Take me to her," I whispered. He hesitated, then nodded briskly and led

me outside, past the residences toward the bright lights of the hospital.

"She's sedated at this time of the night. You won't be able to speak to her." I ignored him, keeping silent as we boarded an elevator and ascended to the top floor. "This way." He led me down a long, deserted hallway and through a door marked "Security Zone: Identification Required."

Sarah lay in the room beyond, still young, still beautiful.

She was alive.

I stood in the doorway, unable to move, then turned and fled to the hallway. Dr. Warren followed me out. I started to tremble, first my hands, then my arms and legs. The doctor led me to a bench and sat down beside me. He waited patiently for my fit to pass. "You must be very tired. Why don't you come back in the morning?" I nodded weakly. "Have you a place to sleep?"

"The Aladdin. I've booked a room." He drove me to my hotel and I stumbled into bed, where my sleep was disturbed by a single, vivid dream. In the dream, I came home early from the lab that day forty years past, knowing something was wrong. Sarah lay on the bed, crying, the bottle of violet pills sitting untouched on the nightstand. I grabbed the pills and flushed them down the sink, then returned to work, satisfied. Coming home much later, I found her still on the bed, dying now. Violet pills covered the sheets, lay scattered on the carpeting in lurid constellations.

I woke up, trying to scream with no air in my lungs.

Dr. Warren met me in the hotel's lounge the next morning. I felt tired but in control, drawing strength from the watery sunlight and the chill air. "How long since she returned?" I asked, sipping at my third cup of coffee.

"Three days. The jump interval is just under forty years; 39 years and eight months longer than the first quantum. I hear they've begun trials on a third quantum, but such an experiment seems unrealistic. They predict the duration of that jump at just over sixteen thousand years."

"Does Sarah ... has she been told what happened to her?"

"We've tried to explain the rudiments of her situation, but I'm not sure how much she understands. I've said nothing about her death." He finished his juice and raised his eyebrows. "Are you ready to see her now?"

I smiled faintly. "Yes, thank you."

At the door to her room I stopped, my hand gripping the handle. "Will she know who I am? Look at me, so old."

"I've told her you're here. She's expecting you." He gestured at the door and I walked through.

She lay motionless, staring away from the door out at the sky. Fine silver wires traced geometric paths over her skin, providing telemetry for the countless surgical robots inside her body. A nurse, busily monitoring the banks of instruments along one wall of the room, barely glanced at us. Dr. Warren took my arm and led me towards the bed. Sarah turned her head as we approached, and I stared into her eyes. Bewildered pain clouded her delicate features and drained the color from her face. Her eyes shifted uncertainly in our direction, trying to focus.

"Hello, Sarah," I whispered.

"Abe?" She swept a hand in my direction, brushing aside an imaginary mist. "Oh, God! Abe! Where have you been?"

I sat on the bed and took her hand, caressing her fingers. Forty years crowded the space between us. The



moment seemed alien, unreal, like an unrehearsed play. Her hand was very warm.

"I'm here, sweetheart." She began to cry and I looked away, down at her small fingers.

She fell asleep without another word, exhausted by her tears. I held her hand for hours, until the nurse gently forced me from the room.

"My memories are so blurred, so distant." Sarah sat propped up in her bed, looking out at the falling snow. Her skin appeared very pale and her body too thin. I worried that her condition had deteriorated since I first saw her, three days past. "I don't understand what's happening, Abe. I feel deathly tired." She drew in a shaky breath. "But I'm selfish, keeping you here, away from your work. You go on, darling. Come see me tomorrow."

"There's nowhere I have to be, Sarah." I smiled down at her, knowing she couldn't see me. Sarah's lucidity rose in unpredictable bursts. She hadn't been this coherent since her resurrection. "Would you like some juice? A glass of water?"

She shook her head. A strained silence developed, gathering weight from the blank walls and the cold light. I stared at the wilting flowers on the table and tried to speak the question I'd asked myself a thousand, thousand times.

"Sarah," I began. But something was wrong. An urgent chime pulsed from the machines, and Sarah seemed to sag into the wrinkled sheets. Her eyes closed and her mouth hung open.

The nurse punched the call button, then quickly fed instructions to the machine.

I stared at my wife, urging her to breathe, willing her to come back to me.

She lay at the end of a vast tunnel, framed there by my unblinking eyes. The tunnel stretched into the distance, ending at the light that was Sarah. My hands tightened into fists, fingernails digging pale crescents into my palms. "Please!" I whispered, hearing the nurse as she frantically twisted dials and flipped switches. "Please don't let her go!" Tears filled my eyes, mercifully taking away my sight. "I need to talk to her."

Warren burst into the room with two other doctors and I was asked to wait outside.

They kept her alive.

When I saw her the next day, she looked very tired and couldn't speak, but she smiled when I called her name. Over the next two days her mind sharpened and we talked often. Small words, about the weather and the gossip Sarah heard from the nurses. I didn't ask any questions. I didn't even try.

Sarah's body didn't seem to be healing at all.

"I don't understand," I told the doctor, after staring at Sarah's sleeping form for most of an afternoon. "Her memory is improving daily, but she's become so weak."

"Yes, well, I warned you that she hasn't stabilized. Her death produced the equivalent of a massive stroke, and while we've had some success reversing the damage to her mind, her body is still in very poor shape. We can only wait." He frowned. "A great deal depends on Sarah. On her will to live."

I glanced up sharply. "She's said nothing of the suicide. I don't think she remembers."

Dr. Warren stared back, pensive. Finally, he rose from his desk and ushered me to the door, repeating, "We must

wait."

Sarah's health worsened. A week after my first look at her, she had withered and paled into the form of a sickly child. I stared at her all through my long visits, finally conceding she looked worse now than when death had taken her. What had I done?

On a quiet Sunday morning she remembered that day forty years ago, only weeks past to her.

"I'm sorry, Abe," she sighed, finding strength to cry. "I remember ... I remember now, but I can't recall the reasons."

I stood up in a rush, sending the cheap white chair crashing backwards onto the floor. "There were no reasons!" I hissed through clenched teeth. "No reasons!" I sagged backwards, fumbling to right the chair, the old familiar ache returning. Forty years was nothing, I knew. Time was a thief, too cruel to steal the pain along with the tired years. "I've spent forty years in a shadow, trying to imagine what you could possibly say to me, what reasons could justify this." I waved a hand about the room, encompassing her wasted form, my wretched soul, all the agonies that surrounded us. I was shouting now. "You took everything from me, Sarah! So tell me what you were thinking. Tell me your reasons. You owe me that."

Her tears flowed harder and her voice took on an edge I hadn't heard before. "Oh, yes I hurt you. I know that. But it's always about you, isn't it? When you were happy it was unthinkable that I could be unhappy. So you never heard me crying at night, never wondered why I didn't smile much any more. This despair, this awful emptiness inside me grew worse and worse. I couldn't stand it any longer, couldn't imagine waking

up day after day feeling that way. When I took those pills the best part of me was already dead, Abe. God, I tried to show you how I was feeling but you didn't see, and after a while I couldn't find the strength to try any more. Even now, you want to know why I took those pills so you can deal with your own feelings, not with mine."

"Jesus, Sarah. I love you. I want to help you."

She looked at me in silence for a long time, calm now, her tears finished. And for a moment I believe her vision cleared and she saw me as I was. "I know, Abe. I'm sorry. I'm so tired, I don't know what I'm saying anymore. Forgive me." Her eyes closed and I sat beside her, trying to think of something to say, some words of hope or encouragement. But my crippled heart offered no inspiration. Had I really been so blind to her feelings? Had I brought her back only to deny my own feelings of guilt, convince myself of my innocence?

"Sarah?" I whispered, unsure of what I wanted to say. But she had fallen into a restless sleep, her breathing shallow and strained.

Sarah never woke up.

She died that night, lost now even to the hand of science. I studied her face after the machines went dark. Had she finally remembered everything, all the reasons I'd never understand?

The nurse came over, trying to take me from the room. But I stayed with Sarah this time, watching her and remembering. I thought about the third quantum and all those beyond, imagining a place where Sarah stood again in the warm light, her small hands gently pulling me close. •

Steven R. Laker formerly lived in Vancouver, where he completed an Astronomy degree at the University of B.C. He now resides in Winnipeg, where the long winters motivate him to stay indoors and write. This is his first professional sale.

Dory A. Rikkonen keeps a computer and her art supplies in a hovel somewhere in Calgary. She spends her days churning out advertising of many and varied sorts, and her nights exploring human nature in the chatrooms. Sometimes you can catch her in Banff, exploring a different sort of wild-life in the mountains. She believes that speculative fiction is the best kind for expanding your mind ... or was that blowing your mind? Whatever.

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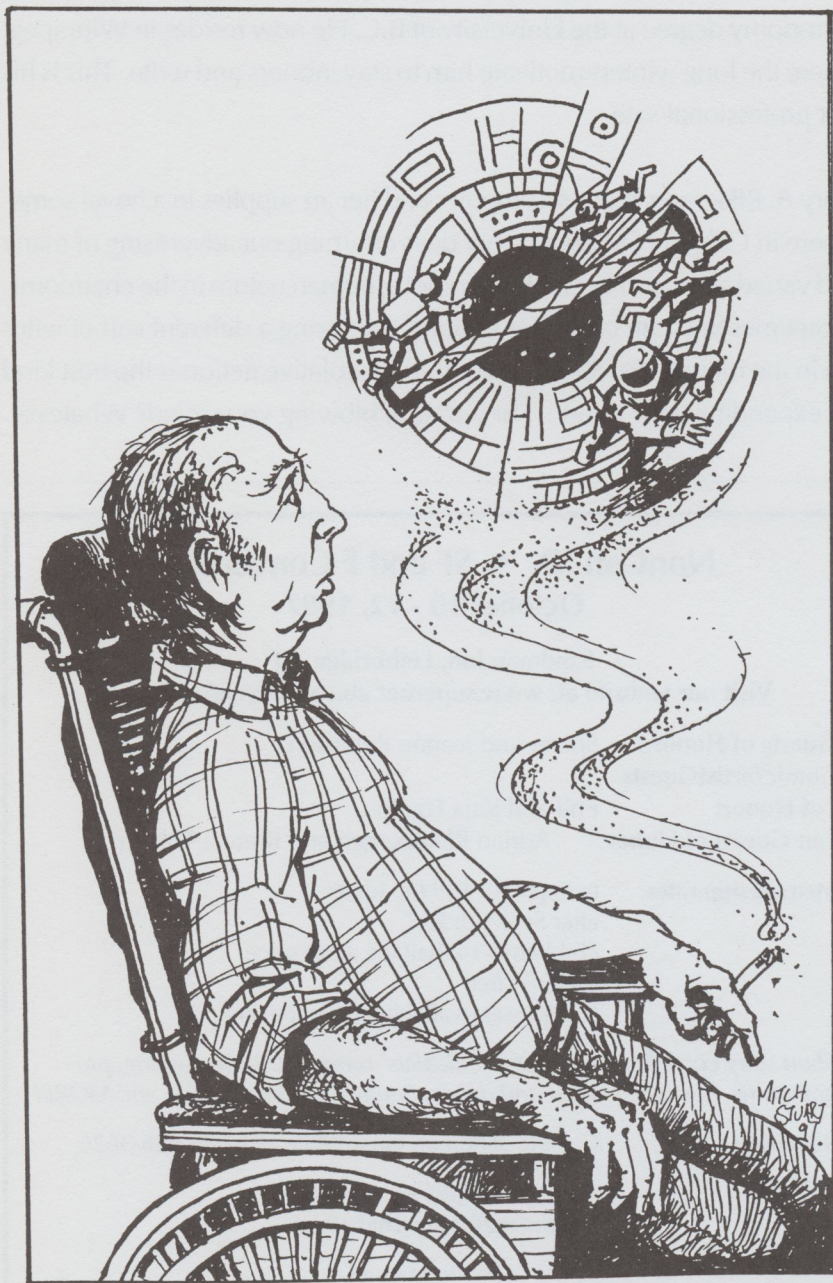
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# Frail Orbits

by Derryl Murphy

*illustrated by Mitchell Stuart*

*I didn't sleep well. Pressing crowds of people dominated my dreams and nightmares. The noise of the crush of hundreds of thousands drifting up from the streets below our windows colored what little sleep I did get.*

Daytime now, and I stumble through my routines, breathing easier now that everyone hides from an almost pathological fear of skin cancer. The only sounds from the streets are machinery and vehicles, all far away.

The sun's rays drift through the blinds, casting harsh lines on the hardwood floor. Dust raised by my sweeping floats through the light, thousands and millions of motes all orbiting each other, fashioning rough ellipses as they slowly circle to the floor, gravity wrestling them to earth, or spiraling crazily upwards with unseen currents of air.

I stick the broom under an old radiator, pull some king-size dust bunnies out, then lean the handle against the wall and limp over to the table where the others are gathered. Jason eases his wheelchair over a little, giving me room to pull the old kitchen chair up to watch the game. Hearts, a game I learned to hate a long time ago and very far away.

I sit and rest my knees, only half paying attention to the game in progress. My eyes dance from cards to the rest of the room, wondering at the stark brevity of this place where old wood has replaced the steel and plastic and ceramic of years gone by, this new home for the five of us. Old boxing ring in the middle, ropes long gone and mat torn and tattered. Two old wooden benches sitting on the scarred floor, a three-legged stool lying near one of the benches. A water fountain that no longer works.

On the other side of the ring, five beds—cots, really—with curtains hung between them to give some sense of privacy, as though a room this large could not afford any one of us the space we had come to crave, but still give us the company we cannot live without.

Behind me, a small kitchen; microwave, gas-powered fridge, ancient toaster oven, a sink and a few cupboards. Beside it, the door that leads to the showers and toilets and rusted-out lockers. I often find myself spending time in there, taking in the smells. I have yet to admit it to the others, but it sparks a certain something in my memory, being in there. I suspect it is the same for the others. Why else would we be here, together, after so many years, but for memory?

"Bastard."

I turn my head, join in the laughter as Tom rakes in the Black Bitch. A quick look at the score sheet shows that he was winning, but the thirteen points will put him behind Peter.

Around the table. Beside me is Jason, the oldest of us. His wheelchair is powered, but not smart. Luckily, the arthritis has not too severely affected his right hand, so he is able to steer himself, and play cards, without help.

Next on the right is Peter, cane hanging from the back of his chair, patch covering his left eye. Scars peek around the edges of the patch, remnants of the accident that took his eye and killed three of our comrades.

Beside Peter is Tom, next to me the youngest. He inherited this old boxing club from his uncle, set it up to live in and invited the rest of us when it became obvious we'd been forgotten. He still walks okay, and so far his hands have escaped the withering. I've seen him, though, sometimes, when he thinks no one is watching. How he'll stumble, just a bit, or lean on a counter and grimace, sweat on his forehead breaking out like condensation on a faceplate.

To my left is Alex, the other one with a wheelchair. His has a powerful chip

running it, though, so he only needs to talk to it to get it to do what he wants. But his hands work fine, which is good since he is by far the best cook among us.

I'm Randall, the youngest, still moderately spry at fifty-eight. Sure, my knees are starting to ache with too much work, but my family has had a history of joint problems. This was expected, and only barely hastened along. And so far my hands and back give me little trouble.

Alex takes a quick sip of whiskey and taps my forearm. "Go look out the window, will ya? I'm getting antsy waiting for him to show up."

Old habits die hard. Alex gives an order, I jump to obey. Well, I slowly get out of my chair and shuffle over to the window, but the idea is the same. I do not hesitate, do not question. Alex gave an order that saved my life once, and it has remained difficult to see him in any light other than that of superior.

The street outside is still quiet, bare. The people in this area have no reason to go out in the day, no jobs to go to, no one worth the risk to visit. But there are many people near us, surrounding us. This I do know. The city is congested, crowded beyond belief, thousands flooding in each day as they run from one disaster or another, swelling the numbers to millions and millions.

My first night here I sat and watched as they came out at dusk, setting up small booths on the street, a market taking shape before my eyes. People; men, women, children, pressing in on each other, elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder. The noise carried to the window, barking, hawking, yelling, arguing, laughing. No room, no space between them.

Tom had seen me and come over, closed the blinds, put his hand on my

elbow and steered me to one of the wooden benches, sat me there and left me alone. So did the others, for the whole night. I just sat there, hearing the noise, thinking about the crush. I imagine the others must have gone through this, one at a time, as each moved in, although we don't talk about it.

During the day, though, it's safe. No people, no noise except the rumble of anonymous distant machinery, a comfortable sound for all of us. A sound that proves things are still running, that there's been no breakdown.

I walk back. "Nothing, Alex. Still plenty of time, don't you think?"

Tom snorts. "Sonuvabitch always thinks there's plenty of time. Drag his heels at his wife's death bed, he will."

Alex fixes Tom with a cold stare, the rest of us looking downward ever so briefly. After a second, Tom mumbles "Sorry," and we all turn our attention back to the game.

"You in this hand, Randall?"

I smile. "No thanks, Jason. Not interested."

Peter guffaws. "You'd think after twenty-five years you'd get over being sick of this game, Randall. Sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Everyone laughs, even me. They can bug me all they want, but each one of us has more than one strange habit left over.

Another hand is dealt, they pass across this time. "What do you think he'll be like?" asks Peter.

"Hard to say. You've seen him on the news, looking pretty fucking spry, standing with the President and all the other *politicians*." He almost spits the word. "I imagine still working for the government, they've managed to give him the best medical care that we all missed." Tom plays the two of spades.

We all nod, not bitter about his luck, understanding that he was touched by God since he'd first been selected. Understanding that the touch had become a caress after the accident, after our return.

Jason takes the first two hearts, swallows the last of his beer and opens another bottle. "Shitheads," he mumbles, but with a smile on his face. Five years of this, holed up together and playing this stupid game, swearing and bitching at each other. But all still friends.

I turn my head, watch the broom for a moment. It seems to be calling to me. After a few seconds that pass for thought I get up and make my way back to the broom, start pushing the dust around again. As I push and sweep, I listen to the conversation that follows the cards.

"Why do you figure he wants to see us?"

"Fuck if I know."

"Jack takes it. Who played the jack?"

"Maybe they're starting the program again."

"Ha! With what? Even if they do, what would they want with a bunch of sorry old cripples like us?"

"Fuck! I was going for power!"  
Laughter.

I stop sweeping, turn to them. "Maybe he's coming to apologize for them."

That stops them cold. I can feel my heart sinking, butterflies in my stomach, at the idea. I didn't stop to think before I spoke, just said it.

Jason puts down his cards, backs away from the table and glides up to a window. I limp over and open the blinds so he can have a peek outside. "Too late to say sorry, don't you think? Quarter-century after a so-called minor design flaw kills three of us, sends the rest of us on the slow boat, fucks us over and

leaves us all shriveling up." He bites his lower lip; I'm the only one who sees it quiver. I look away.

"Jason's right," says Peter. "Too late. Too fucking late. I'll take their money, if they suddenly decide they can afford us, but I won't take their apologies."

The others push their cards away. The game is obviously over.

I finish sweeping the floor, push the dust and dirt into a pile, then slowly crouch down and sweep it onto a dust pan. What I miss I push back under the radiator, after standing back up. Too much effort to stay crouched down for too long. Besides, we all feel at home with some dust.

Tom's notepad beeps. He gets up and saunters over as casually as possible, answers it. I strain my ears to try and listen in, but the sound is too small, too far away.

He disconnects, puts the thing down and turns to face us. "He's canceling for today, says he couldn't get a flight out of Denver until too late. Says he'll be here tomorrow morning."

Silence for a moment, then I say, "You mean I cleaned up for nothing?"

We all laugh, like I knew we would.

I dream the dream again. A giant anvil pressing on my chest, the pressure that makes me sweat, that pushes at bowels and kidneys I had thought empty, and then the release, the freedom that feels so glorious, proved so harmful.

The transition is sudden, me standing with eight others on barren wastelands, breathing my own air, my own body odors, sharing them with no one else. The red and orange dirt and rocks, the sky a pale pink, the sun cold and unblinking near the horizon, smaller than it has any right to be.

I look to my companions, note with surprise that there is an extra one, not wearing a helmet, but I can not see his face, and although I can't see through their faceplates, I can somehow see that three of my other companions are nothing but skeletons beneath the layers of protective clothing, bones shattered but still standing in this light gravity. I turn to warn the others, and am shocked at how stooped, how old they look. Two have fallen to the ground, pulling themselves along with their arms.

We rise then, nine of us in front, the mysterious faceless one following behind, like many space-suited versions of Icarus flying towards the sun, a star suddenly much closer and brighter than it should be. It flares brighter, and I hide my eyes, dip my head in fear and deference, feeling cowardly but knowing that fear will save my life. The star flares around us, expands, then turns into arrows of light, throwing the three skeletons spiraling away, smashing the faceplate of another.

And then the release and freedom that had felt so glorious, now only ominous and frightening. Rats with helmets and air supplies continually gnawing at our joints. Small, sad-looking men approaching us and removing marrow with large, animated, cartoon needles.

And all the while, a deck of playing cards floats through the air in front of my eyes, the Black Bitch sneering at me as she wheels by, and hundreds of voices murmur in the background, a pressing choir of humanity.

I wake up sore, as usual. I've slept on my arm funny, my knees ache more now than they will later. Sweat is pooled on my sheets, the air too humid by far. I can hear Jason's chair buzzing around in the



kitchen. He always wakes up first, spends the half-hour or more needed to get into his chair without help.

I slowly stand, then when I don't feel ready to tumble over I walk over to the kitchen, wearing my boxers and nothing else. A curt nod to Jason, I pour a cup of coffee, take a sip, then wander to the bathroom and pee. When I come back out Peter is just trudging across the floor to use the head. Everyone else is starting to move, decades of discipline overriding years of pain.

Alex comes buzzing in after his trip to the head, starts getting out pots and pans, ordering me and anyone else nearby out of the way. "Potato pancakes today," he announces, and we all scatter to let him have the peace and space he needs, knowing we'll soon be full to bursting, Alex wanting to put on a good show for our visitor, even though he is not here.

More cleaning up, we all get dressed, then eat. Everyone is quiet, this time of day. The pains are at their worst first thing in the morning, each of us concentrating on keeping them down, small, out of the way. Chewing, clanking of cutlery on plates, the odd snuffle or crack of a joint, these are the major instruments of our opening soundtrack.

A car door slams. Out of place, that sound. Nobody drives anymore.

We stare at each other for a second, maybe two, then jump into action.

"Shit! He's here!"

"Get the plates."

"Randall, fix the beds."

"Get a chair ready for him."

"Drinks! We got any cold beer?"

"Beer? It's six-fucking-a.m. Even I wait until nine."

"Oh yeah." Laughter.

"Why the hell didn't he call first?"

"Too late now."

A rap on the door. "Yeah!" shouts Tom. Wilson, the kid Tom lets live on the bottom floor in exchange for doing errands for us, pokes his head in, speaks that strange language of the street. "Man d'stairs sayee gonna be see ya. Leminear?"

Tom nods. "Thanks, Wilson. Yeah, let him in."

We all line up, like we're there to shake his hand when he was first introduced to us, the *man*, chosen by the powers that be to show us the way to glory and history, to pull our suffering nation out of the hole it had fallen into and lead us all back to stage center.

The *man*, who despite all that happened, is still the one who holds sway over all of our lives, who is now back and maybe even riding the top, perhaps the crest of a new wave.

He walks in, and I can tell, can *feel* that we all sag a little.

A small, distant whine, telltale sign of small servomotors operating a lightweight exoskeleton. A fanny pack, carrying a power supply and gyroscope. Hair thinning like a radiation victim's, not at all like the thick mane of white hair we have seen on the news. Hands palsied, covered with liver spots.

"Jesus," whispers Peter.

That and the blood rushing through my head are the only sounds I hear for several seconds, and then he moves forward again, awkward motions reminding us with every step what grace and dignity and power seem to have been lost. Then Alex glides his chair forwards and extends his hand. "Sir. It is good to see you again."

"Thank you, Alex. The same to you." His smile and voice are still the same, and we all step forward now, take turns

greeting him, basking in the individual attention that he is able to turn on each of us, even if only for so brief a moment.

And then we find ourselves sitting around the table, Tom bringing coffee over for us, sitting and just catching up, reminiscing about training, about this scientist or that team member, remembering family and friends no longer with us, even those who left by choice. And it's funny, we feel so good about these things, even the painful memories, because he is there and he is sharing all of it with us, and he is telling us about some of the bad things that happened to him, proving he is a leader right to the end.

But then he tells us why he's there, and it all comes crashing down.

"The President wants to get the program up and running again," he says. His smile is huge, fierce-looking. His eyes glare with an intensity and a sheen of fanaticism that I recognize, although I would never have given it that name before.

Everyone shuts up, and now it is quieter than when we first saw him. Eyes are downcast now, at least mine, but I'm sure the others are as uncomfortable as I am. I can't bear the thought of meeting his eyes right now.

He lets the silence go for a few more seconds, and then says, "The Pakistanis and the Turks have offered their help. They supply the booster and some of the crew, all we have to do is use one of the surplus vehicles sitting in the VAB, truck it up in four or five jaunts and have it fit together."

Still, silence reigns. We all stare at him. I feel my insides begin to churn, but I know I look very calm outside.

He looks around at all of us, meeting each pair of eyes for just a second.

When he looks to me I realize with shock that he is taking our silence as approval, perhaps even worship. But then, that isn't so surprising.

He continues. "We, the President and I, need your help. Congress and the Senate will have to be swayed, the media, and through it the people, will have to be convinced. We all have a certain ... cachet with different aspects of the population, and certainly with some very important members of the government."

He pauses, takes a sip of his coffee. I watch him grimace, realize that he is probably used to better, much better, but that he drinks it to prove he is one of us.

As soon as that thought comes to my mind I shake my head. How can I be thinking so ill of him so easily? This is the man who I trusted with my life, and who accepted that trust and saved that life! But still, but still...

"Of course," he says, "the Turks and the Pakistanis will want to be a part of any mission. This is proving to be a sore point with several members of Congress, but it can't be helped." He shrugs, a move I recognize as being calculated to be disarming. We still remain silent.

"The central point of the mission will be to reestablish America's prominence in the exploration of space, of course. The intent is to take one of the Mars vehicles, probably the *Kennedy*, and go to the moon. Use the bulk of the ship to carry enough supplies to set up a more-or-less permanent base. As you know, even the current space-faring nations haven't done much more beyond orbital factories.

"The Turks have offered us space on their low-orbital, something we can lease to get back to basics, do some

fairly basic mission training and the like. We would, of course, also have to rent their shuttle. But the consultants loaned to us by Rand and Microsoft have assured us that in the end it will all be cost-effective."

Jason finally breaks our silence. "What is it you want us to do?" His voice sounds tight, constricted.

"Why, make appearances, course. Shake hands with politicians and civilians, smile for the cameras. Remind people of the glory this nation and its space program once had."

"Glory!?" Peter practically roars the word, slamming his cane hard on the edge of the table. We all flinch. *All* of us. "You call what happened to us *glory*? I lost three of my best friends out there, as well as half my sight. We, all of us, even you, lost so much of the strength in our bones from floating almost aimlessly for five fucking years until the Chinese, the *Chinese*, managed to get a rescue mission to us! What the fuck have the Chinese done lately, anyway, besides fall in on themselves in chaos and starvation?"

He holds up his hand to stave off interruption, then waves it around to take in our surroundings. "And what about this? I sure as hell don't see any *glory* here! Fucking agency and fucking government use us up, spit us out, give us a pension that barely gets any one of us by. Civilians don't want to hear jack shit about us, they got enough of their own worries, giant hole in the ozone, that shit they call air to breathe! Money and population problems like we never even *dreamed* about!

"And then we hear that you got it good, that the President listens to you, values your advice. You got nice suits, enough food to eat, a comfortable place to live. And man, " Peter leans forward,

almost hisses this part, "I envy the fact that there are people out there who care enough to listen to what you say. Me, I got a sorry bunch of broken-down ex-astronauts who run to hide in a corner first chance they get to keep from going nuts, surrounded by more people than any one of us can handle. Not that I fucking blame them. I just thank God that your body is as screwed up as everyone else's. I couldn't have handled you being perfect there, too."

We are all deathly silent for a moment, me from shock. Then Peter gets up and starts to hobble away from the table. Jason wheels his chair away as well.

"Wait! Please." We all turn and look in shock, never having heard the word *please* from his mouth before.

He's standing now, leaning on the table and sweat beading on his forehead, looking at Peter and Jason, fear and anger seeming to intermingle on his face. He breathes deeply for a few seconds, and then speaks again.

"There will be room for you, for me... all of us."

Silence for a moment.

And then, "What do you mean by room?" I ask.

Now he looks at me, stares into my eyes with that intense look that I would once have died for. "Room, Randall. First, get you all out of here, get you set up with the best possible medical care, then get you on the road and selling this thing. Then, if this is fast-tracked as easily as we think it might be, there would be room for us on the third flight, at latest the fourth." He stops speaking and sits back down, looking very satisfied now.

It hits me, suddenly, what he means. I'm almost sick to my stomach, the ex-

citement at the possibility, the terror of being lied to once again.

Alex pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers, rubs his eyes in exhaustion. "For real?"

"For real. No one else has the background, a selling point even considering our ages. Of course, the work we'd be given would be minimal compared to what it was the last time out, but just think. No more pain because of gravity, no more fear because of crowds."

"Jesus," I whisper. I look up to the ceiling, imagining.

Again there is silence, and then Tom says, very calmly, "Fuck you. And fuck the President, too. I've been yanked around enough to know when the rope is being pulled tight again. I think I'll take my chances here, rather than get crapped on all over again."

I gape at Tom, and then see with surprise that Jason has turned and is wheeling his chair away again. "Same goes for me," he calls over his shoulder. "I'll take my chances with what I know, this time." Jason and his chair disappear into the old locker room, Tom behind the screen to his cot.

He looks helplessly at their backs. I can tell that he wants to say something. A look crosses his face and I think, I *know*, that he wants to order them back. But he stops himself, lowers his head and looks at his gnarled hands, clenched into fists and leaning on the table.

"We ... you have all suffered intense pain because of what happened to the program. Peter." He raises his head and fixes Peter with the look. "Peter, I'm so sorry about Liz. I wanted to come to the funeral, but they had me sequestered in a hospital, trying to stem the tide."

Tears well up in Peter's eyes, but he

fighters them down. Liz died fifteen years ago, killed herself because she, like all our wives, couldn't handle being married to a fucked-up alcoholic former astronaut. But she had chosen a more permanent way to forget.

"I hate to dredge up old pain like that, Peter. I just, I just want you all to know that I never did forget about you. That I haven't spent these years ignoring you and trying to shut you all out." He takes a breath, and I watch with awe and fear as his jaw trembles. "I knew that there was only one way for me to help you all. But it took so God damn long to get there."

He looks to the curtains where Tom and Jason have gone. "I wish they could know." Then he turns away.

Servos whine, the exoskeleton helping him walk to the door. He stops half-way and looks at us, sadness in his eyes. "We were a team, even a family. I am sorry for all that's happened to you," he looks around the room, "but what has happened means I can only help you *now*. And only if you can help me." He turns again and shuffles out the door.

We are still for a moment, and then Peter hobbles over to the door as quickly as his cane and bad knees will let him. He pauses as if in thought, then turns and looks at me, then Alex. He is afraid and sad, I can see it so clearly. And then he follows out the door.

Alex tips his head down, chin almost resting on his chest, eyes closed tight, and then he doesn't move.

And me. God help me, I don't know what to do. I walk over to the window, dragging my chair behind me, and sit, waiting.

Perhaps when the crowds come out tonight. Maybe then I'll know. •

**AUTHOR:** During recent research for his long-elusive novel, DERRYL MURPHY discovered he was born only ten days after the USS *Thresher* disaster. While doubting he is a reincarnation of an American submariner, he does wonder about any unfortunate ocean-dweller that might have been caught in the accident. But don't worry; there is a fabulous cream available at The Body Shop that keeps his skin from getting too dry and flaky. Unlike his wit.

**ARTIST:** When MITCH STUART is not creating the graphics for ITV's 5:30/6:00 and 10:00 pm newscasts, he enjoys illustrating for various Edmonton and beyond clients through his freelance company Pangaea Illustration/Design.

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# ON Writing:

## Professionalism

Robert J. Sawyer

This installment of “On Writing” is devoted to what my wife Carolyn Clink and I discovered while editing the Canadian SF&F anthology *Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup>—which should be hitting bookstores in September.

Unlike many anthologies, the *Tesseracts* series is wide open: anyone may submit work, and it will be seriously considered (indeed, our mandate was to bend over backward to find work by new writers; Carolyn and I are proud of the number of beginners from whom we bought stories or poems).

Still, despite the high quality of the work we did choose, as a group, it appears Canadian writers have a long way to go in the area of professionalism.

First, we were stunned by the very large percentage of submissions that were not in standard manuscript format. There’s only one universally accepted way to do it, folks: Courier 10-pitch / 12-point type, or as near as you can manage it, on one side of white 8.5x11" paper; 6.5" line; double-spaced (i.e., 24-point leading); ragged right margins; italics shown by underlining; blank lines between scenes shown by a centered number sign; a descriptive header and a page number on each page after the first; and, if your story ends near the bottom of the page, some indication that this is indeed really the last page (we had to phone one author to ask him if his story really did end with the words that appeared on the last line of what we thought was the final page).

Despite our intention to be forgiving, after slogging through about the tenth manuscript with no page numbers I vowed I would summarily reject unread any unpaginated manuscript that happened to fall on the floor; life is too short to try to figure out which page goes after which other page by piecing together the text.

On fonts: you may think Times, or some other proportional typeface, looks nicer than Courier. However, most editing is still done by hand. Trying to circle the extraneous letter for deletion in “illicit” is much harder in a proportional font—and damn near impossible in a sans-serif one. If your printer can do Courier, use it (it was frustrating to see all the authors who had Courier page headers or cover letters, demonstrating they clearly *could* use that font, but who set their body copy in a proportional face). [Editor’s note: Here at *On Spec*, we do things differently: we *prefer* a proportional typeface, both for readability and for paper conservation. —JS]

The guy who emailed us a manuscript because he was too busy to print it out and put it in an envelope didn’t do himself a favor—but even if a market *is* open to

email submissions (and ours wasn't), you're shooting yourself in the foot sending a word-processing file without telling the editor in a plain-text attachment exactly what word-processing program, on what computing platform, was used to create the manuscript (and you really should check first to make sure it's a format the editor can read).

A big part of professionalism is appearances—including giving the illusion that the market you're currently submitting to is your first choice. All those people who submitted multiple manuscripts on the day the anthology was announced were telegraphing that they were pulling old stories out of their trunk—and the person who submitted stories clearly dated "1986" and "1989" made it blatantly obvious. (Indeed, you're not helping yourself by submitting more than two or three pieces to any market—no editor wants to see every old dog you haven't been able to sell elsewhere.)

And please—don't ask for special treatment. There's been a lot of grouching lately about how long publications take to reply, but, as a writer, ask yourself whether you have been part of the perceived slowdown by demanding that extra time be spent on your submission.

Others asked for responses by email, or by a specific date, or wanted critiques. Sorry, but the only way any editor can process the hundreds of submissions he or she receives is to handle each one exactly the same way. If you want acknowledgment of receipt of a submission, send a stamped postcard with the work's title on it; don't send an extra empty envelope and expect the editor to take the time to write you a letter to put in it.

As I said, we tried to be forgiving of such lapses. But the one thing we

couldn't forgive, and were frankly shocked to see so much of, was the lack of basic literacy. We read countless stories whose authors didn't know the difference between "its" (the neutral version of his or hers) and "it's" (a contraction of "it is"). More subtle, but still grating, were the large number of people who didn't know the difference between "that" and "which."

("That" introduces a defining characteristic, and isn't normally preceded by a comma: "This is the novel that Jacques wrote." "Which" introduces an incidental characteristic, and is usually preceded by a comma: "That novel, which is actually quite good, was written by Jacques.")

Also irritating were those who used words that weren't in their computerized spelling checker and couldn't be bothered to look them up the correct spelling in a dictionary (there's no such thing as a "trilobyte").

It was also abundantly clear that many authors never looked at their printouts before submitting their stories. Some had missing lines of text or overprinted lines that even a cursory glance would have detected.

A key habit of the true professional: reading the guidelines. We said our reporting time was "10 to 12 weeks following the August 15 deadline" (which I'll point out, for those complaining that response times are getting longer and longer, is a much faster turnaround than the ten months *Tesseract*<sup>3</sup> took to respond). Those people who started pestering me at my private email address—which appeared nowhere on the guidelines—in advance of the expiration of our reporting period made no friends; those who cut no slack if reporting went a short period after that time frame likewise were no fun to deal with.

Finally, a word or two about content. We saw a large number of virtual-reality or cyberpunk stories; those are pretty moribund subgenres. We also saw a lot of high fantasy, most of it not very fresh. What we didn't see much of was hard SF; a well-written spaceship story with realistic characterization and dialog would have been a shoo-in.

And please note that song lyrics aren't public domain: you can't simply add them into your story. Many authors quoted from popular songs in their manuscripts, but without paying a permission fee, this is illegal—and since most such fees have to be renegotiated for every

new edition or translation of the work, most anthology editors will reject a work on the spot that contains such quotes, even if a note of permission for the current edition is included.

Anyway, *Tesseracts*<sup>6</sup> has passed into history. Paula Johanson and Jean-Louis Trudel are editing *Tesseracts*<sup>7</sup>, which is now open for submissions. Apply the advice above—and, of course, write a good story—and maybe you'll make a sale to them. But, no matter who you're submitting to, always remember to behave like a pro—and someday you'll actually be one. •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's *The Terminal Experiment* won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of 1995, and his *Starplex* is a current finalist for the Nebula Award for Best Novel of 1996. Rob teaches SF writing at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic University. His latest novel, *Frameshift*, came out in hardcover in May from Tor.

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