

On·SPEC

More than just science fiction!

FALL 1997

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NEW FICTION:

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Ursula PFLUG

Keith SCOTT

Hayden TRENHOLM

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ON SPEC
"More than just science fiction"

Vol. 9, No. 3, #30

Fall 1997

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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 SASE 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 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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FALL 1997

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© 1997 sculpture by Adrian Kleinbergen
photo by Adam Thorhaug

ON the inside

Applause!

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

We have a number of wonderful people we'd like to introduce: First, long-suffering and tireless champion of all things legal and logical, our Publisher's Assistant for the past three (!) years, **Karen Desgagné**. Second, our equally long-suffering (but lovely and talented) proofreader, **Steve Fahnestalk**. Third, our part-time whirling dervish and all-purpose volunteer, **Andrea Merriman**. And fourth, newest member of the wild and crazy *ON SPEC* family, our keeper of the records, **Katerina Carastathis**.

Karen recently completed her law degree and moved from the chaotic and topsy-turvy world of publishing to the fun and games of articling for a local law firm. Not only did Karen handle general office duties as our Publisher's Assistant for three summers, she took on special after-hours projects for us including tabulating the Readership Survey results and, together with her husband Alain Desgagné, designed and produced a handsome introduction package to give to potential advertisers and sponsors. Even with five writer editors typing for a hundred years, we couldn't come up with enough superlatives to describe Karen and the work she's done for us. We wish her joy, luck, and tremendous stamina in her law career. Thank you, Karen!

Steve, our sometimes proofreader, recently moved to Coquitlam, BC, with his equally lovely and talented wife (and former *ON SPEC* Art Director) Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk. Distance, needless to say, makes proofreading difficult, especially when we're forced to rely on the capricious postal service. But last issue, it was computer gremlins that conspired against us: I had everything ready to go to press when a software crash wiped out the PageMaker file with the inside front and back cover information. I recreated the pages from scratch—very quickly and impatiently—but I left off Steve's name in the thank yous. So for the Summer 97 issue, and all those others in between, thank you, Steve!

Andrea, one of our volunteers, puts new meaning in the term "gofer." She has done everything from cutting author names off manuscripts to cataloguing submissions to delivering batches of stories to various editors to picking up and sorting mail to babysitting to you name it. Until Publisher's Clearing House shows up with that check for \$10,000,000, *ON SPEC* will need volunteers, and Andrea is one of the best. Thanks, Andy!

Last but not least, **Katerina**, our newest Publisher's Assistant, is the voice on the phone, the person handling your manuscript or your subscription, and the keeper of the schedule, reminding the rest of us that it's time to do A or B or C. Although she's probably wondering if the editors actually exist (we're rarely in the office, especially in the summer), she's more than energetically taken on any and all tasks and challenges we throw at her. Welcome, Katerina! •

ON this issue

Wet birds never fly at night...

Diane L. Walton, Editor

"Give me the password," the writer in the dark alley whispers hoarsely. "Tell me the secret handshake. What on earth do I have to do to get my story accepted by you people at ON SPEC?"

These days, we are reading upwards of 200 manuscripts each quarter. How many of these manuscripts will reveal new and exciting Canadian SF authors ... authors who will make us (and the SF literary world) stand up and take notice?

Not many, unfortunately.

Each manuscript is the result of hours of someone's time and effort. Each manuscript that we read deserves our respect for the writing craft. But Sturgeon's Law still prevails: 90% of everything is crap. So when we begin reading a new story, while we are optimistic that maybe this time, this will be the one (spoken with reverence, sounds of trumpets, and visions of Auroras dancing in our heads) we have to be realistic and accept the sad fact that it's probably going to be in the 90%. Not necessarily bad, but certainly mediocre.

Of those 200 manuscripts arriving in our mailbox, we may buy 10. Usually it's less. In those 10, we'll probably send back several for rewrites, with no promises that we'll buy the resulting story. Traditionally, a second draft is simply dreadful, because the author temporarily loses the spark which drew our attention to the story in the first place. But we persevere.

Did you read Robert Sawyer's "ON Writing" column in the Summer issue, on Professionalism? His and Carolyn's experience editing *Tesseracts*⁶ closely parallels what we go through on a regular basis, so I won't beat it to death. Suffice to say, even if you're not in school anymore ... spelling *does* count.

Reading the slushpile is a necessary part of the job. We add to this the task of finding some kind of constructive criticism to go along with virtually every story we reject. Sometimes time and volume do not allow for this, but we try. So what is it that we are looking for? What is it that any editor is looking for?

The four essential elements of any story are quite simple. A story needs **plausible characters** (or characters so outrageous that the reader cannot help but be drawn to them). It needs a **well-constructed setting**, one that is consistent and vividly described. The setting doesn't have to be realistic, but it has to be clearly imagined. We have to translate those words on the paper into images in our minds, remember. It may be a perfectly wonderful image in your (the writer's) mind, but the words have to

sent us the same message. A story needs a **situation**. Your characters have to have a reason to be where they are, and some kind of challenge to face, or we won't be very interested in what happens to them. And above all (and this, I think, is what appeals to me the most) we need **emotion**. Characters must show us (not tell us) their feelings for and about each other, and their emotional reactions to the situation they are experiencing.

The writer has to remember that there also is a relationship with the readers at all times. The readers have to buy into the story, as they suspend their disbelief and enter into a contract with each writer for the 15 or 20 minutes that they spend reading each story in *ON SPEC*. Think about that the next time you pick up a collection of short fiction. We all read at our own pace, but each writer has to pull you, painlessly, out of the previous writer's universe, and into his or her own. It's not like a novel where you have a couple of opening chapters in which to get "warmed up," get used to the climate, and meet a few characters. Short stories have to be their own warm-up acts, as well as the main event. In 6,000 words or less.

They have to be extremely well-chosen words.

Poor writers usually give us situation. They get an idea, but seldom dig any deeper to explore it. Average writers give us setting and situation. They take the time to show us where, or when the event is happening. Above-average writers give us situation, setting and characters. They know that characters are the hook which often grabs the reader and forces us to jump in and accept that contract with the writer. Outstanding writers give us all of the above, and they also give us emotion. Outstanding writ-

ers make us laugh out loud as we are reading in public places, or else shed a tear over the death of a character, or they make us double check to ensure the back door really is locked securely on a dark and stormy night. And they do it, remember, in 6,000 words or less. Often *much* less.

This is why I consider the short fiction writer's task to be so important in literature. In speculative fiction, it's easy to fall into established patterns, but short fiction can open us up to astonishing new possibilities. Short fiction writers (and I refer to word length, not stature) are willing to take the risks that novelists cannot take.

A lot of new writers send us ideas, rather than stories. Many of our rejection letters say, "You've given us a good premise, now work with it. Show us (don't tell us) how the people would be affected by this future society." As I read story submissions, I try to make a synopsis of each story for my notes. If I can't make the synopsis longer than a sentence, then chances are the story isn't very complex or interesting. When our notes continually ask, "Why is this character doing this?" or "How did the society evolve to this?" or "What happened to this character?" we know the story hasn't given us enough. And the answer isn't always more words. Usually it is different words.

Worse yet are those stories which attempt to preach to the reader. Please don't use the story as your personal soapbox on abortion, AIDS, the government, feminism, or any other ism. The story is not an editorial <g>. It's not your job to change the reader's beliefs on a subject. It may be a bonus if your story is so moving that it makes a reader stop to question/explore his or her personal beliefs, but you are not there to convert

them. When we get a controversial story, we don't want to even guess at the author's personal bias on the subject.

Something I've been noticing is the increasing number of stories we get that are pale imitations of *The Outer Limits*, or *The X-Files* (sans the identifiable characters, of course). In other words, they may be adequate television, but they are lousy literature. TV is fun to watch, but it doesn't help you to write, unless you are writing for TV. My advice to new writers is to shut off the TV and read as much as you can. Find the classics of short SF (like several volumes of Hugo and Nebula award winning stories) at your library, and see what the true craftsmen (and women) have done. And for heaven's sake, don't think of short fiction as a "phase" you are going through until you write the novel that's screaming to get out! If short fiction is an "immature" stage of writing, then Harlan Ellison has made quite a career out of being immature.

Be careful what you ask for— you may get it

You are probably still wondering—what do we really want? (I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.) Let's face it, we're not the Spice Girls. Except when we are looking for stories to fill our theme issues, we are extremely reluctant to ask for anything specific. Even the theme issues have their risks. When we put out a call for horror, we are flooded with gratuitous blood, gore and guts, or more vampires than we really need in a year. We ask for humorous SF and fantasy, and we get an embarrassing number of "fractured" fairy tales. Or else cute cats in space. Cover letters assure us that the stories enclosed are clever, funny, unique, and of course we're going to love them.

We still ask, but very carefully.

We also don't want writers throwing "paint by number" stories together just to

meet our alleged needs by a deadline. Some editors of anthologies will, indeed, assign plots and characters, and expect the stories to come back tailor-made to slip into a place in the anthology. We definitely try to juggle the issues so they have some balance between hard SF, fantasy, horror, comedy, etc., but we don't actively solicit stories to fill the gap.

So how do you know if your story is just right for us? You don't. We don't even know until we see it. Some stories just reach out and grab us and give us a good shake, while others tend to grow on us as we read, and re-read them. There have been stories that I didn't even like very much ... until I had to type them when we didn't get a disk version from the author. And there are still stories that I occasionally go back to read again, even after several years. Oftimes, we simply have to trust our own instincts, when we decide if something is truly an *ON SPEC* kind of story.

Before I let you go ahead and read the stories you paid your \$4.95 to read, I'd like to end with a request:

Support the arts

Do find a few minutes to write a letter to each of your elected government representatives. Tell them how much you appreciate the fact that federal and provincial and municipal governments are still committed to supporting the arts and our cultural industries. Tell them how much you support the continuing existence of the Canada Council on the Arts, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (and other provincial bodies), and for our friends south of the border, the National Endowment for the Arts.

And thank them for showing the will to allow folks like us to continue our quest to bring you the best entertainment we can find. •

About our cover artist:

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN's repertoire includes drawing, painting, sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, magic, and musical composition. He has worked in comics, constructed prototypes for model-manufacturing companies, painted theatrical backdrops, does artwork on commission, and is one cool guy. The artwork on our cover is one of Adrian's sculptures; if you want to see others, check out the cover on our Horror and Dark Fantasy Theme Issue (Spring 95), and on the Spring 91 issue. The photo for this cover was taken by Adam Thorhaug.

About our cartoon artist (see page 85):

WARREN LAYBERRY is an Ottawa based writer, publisher and illustrator, responsible for both *GraffitiFish* (a small zine) and Bad Moon Books. He can be reached for comment at spider@freenet.carleton.ca

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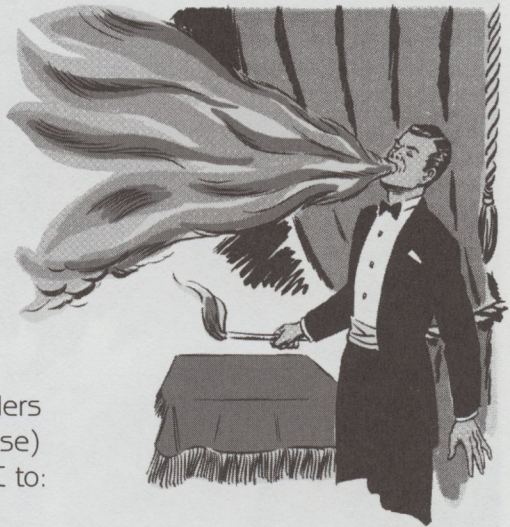
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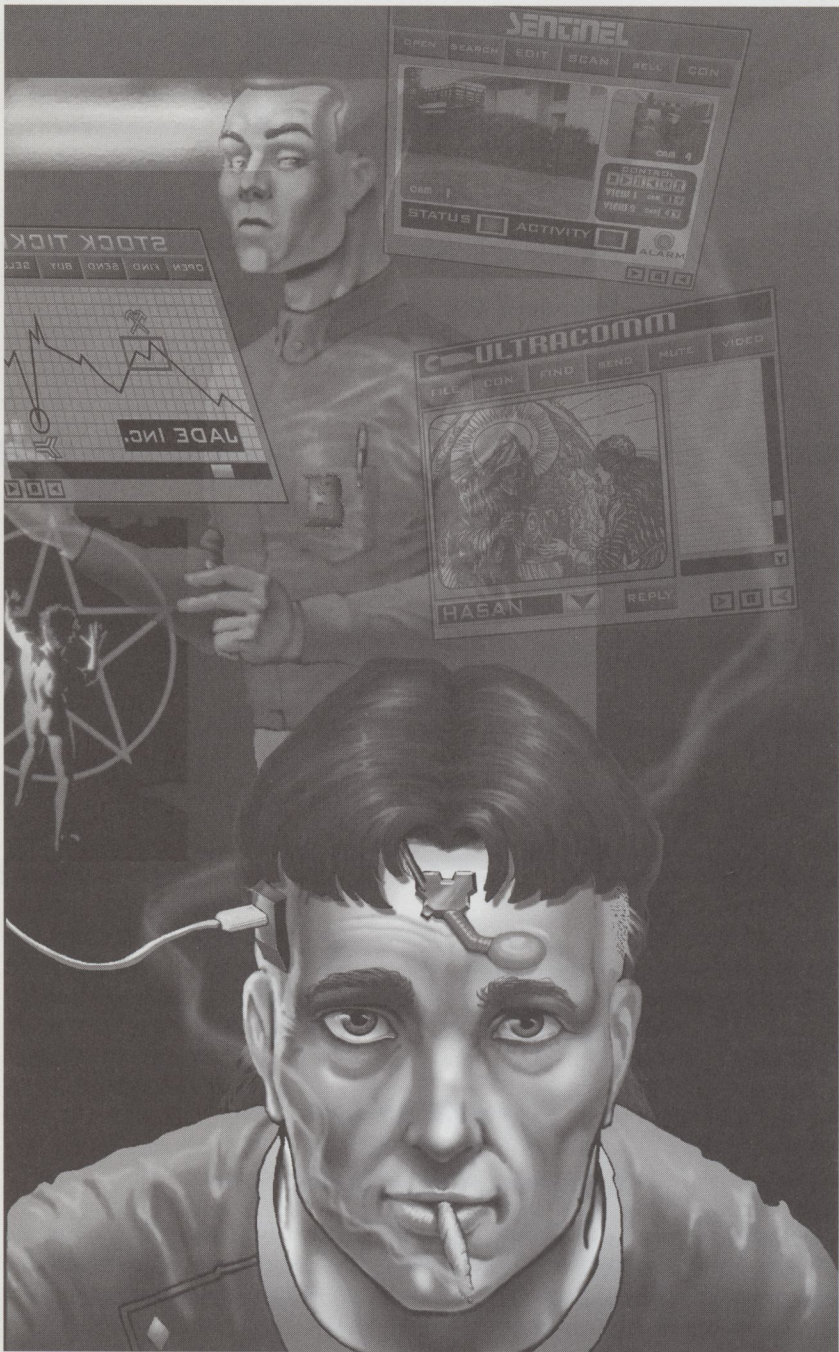
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New World Man

by Cliff Burns

illustration by James Beveridge

“Sprawling on the fringes of the city
In geometric order
An insulated border
In between the bright lights
And the far unlit unknown...”

“Subdivisions” from the album *Signals* (by Lee/Lifeson/Pearl) ©1982
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I had aged visibly during the night.

That tends to happen when you forget to take your itty-bitty, tiny, green time capsules right before turning in, like you’re supposed to.

The bathroom mirror revealed the extent of the damage; I stared at myself with a kind of sickened fascination. My skin was sallow and waxy-looking. There were lines and folds and furrows and shadows—and then when I turned my head and saw all that *grey* hair something inside me just ... broke loose with the sound of tearing metal. I reached up and snagged one of those spiteful silver hairs and just fucking *yanked* it, and then another one and then *two* more—searching out and destroying every last one of the fuckers with absolute single-minded determination, hissing through my teeth each time I tweezed one of the lethal lightning bolts out by its evil root. It was like I was God, weeding out the Garden of Eden.

At one point Karen knocked on the door and leaned in to remind me about Marguerite’s prescription; but she took one quick look at me and hastily excused herself, trying her best to avoid direct eye contact. It was really sweet of her. And she knew I would have done exactly the same for her, had the situation been different.

Luckily, I had recently restocked my makeup kit, so for the next twenty *extremely* tense minutes I used all my skills (and a *lot* of blending and toning) and, in the end,

managed to putty together a version of myself that was fairly faithful to the original. But it definitely wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, so I would have to be careful around the kids, especially sharp-eyed Marguerite. Children can be so cruel sometimes.

It turned out I needn't have concerned myself with my seed, my progeny, the genetically engineered fruit of my polluted loins.

They were already tripping: intimate and interactive with the fucking phildick box, their minds literally thousands of miles away ... and as lost to me as yesterday.

Like any good parent, I dutifully plugged in to make sure they weren't cramming something that would cause permanent damage to their impressionable young minds. The *jump* hit me so hard so fast that I had to reach out in real space/time and steady myself, convince my senses that despite all evidence to the contrary I was still on *terra firma*. Because in that first nano-instant it was like the floor dropped out from under me and then I was being *sucked* ass-over-tea-kettle down the rabbit-hole, Alice, bombarded by shrieking, babeling voices, condensed, inscrutable text and high-speed, encrypted chatter; sine waves and test patterns and spiky bar codes and paid commercial announcements and grain futures and weather reports, gone in a screech of feedback sour chemical taste gummy lips desultory erection—

uckin Red Rain, yeah, this fuckin band is fuckin hot

—sticky teenage boy room smells nonstop carnivorous electronic noise—I should have known.

My kids were piggying a ride on—*whatziz name*—Harold Tyler again and I could tell by the heavy paranoia and

wounded self-righteousness that he was in the midst of another one of his blue funks. I considered punching out but opted to lurk awhile, trying to ward off the growing sense of *weirdness* as Harold Tyler, a.k.a. "The World's Most Incredible Loser Incarnate"—a fourteen year old, spaced-out dope fiend, budding pervert and possibly even full-bore sociopath—ranted and raved in the comfort and privacy of his own head about his lousy parents and how they didn't know nothing, how lousy it was when you were a kid and had a brain of your own and opinions and shit, only no power and people were always getting on your case and cutting you down—

fuckin not braindead tell me that and still look themselves in the eye nothin but a couple of fuckin hypocrites fuckin uptight cogs just fuckin cogs thats all puttin in time and collecting pension its all worm food in the end motherfuckers fuck fuck fuck them all and their fuckin braindead lives theyre the ones

—pulling out at that point, sliding back into my own skin and doing my level best to scrape the psychic resonances of Harold Tyler off my metaphorical shoes. But I couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that there were still vestiges of the little psycho floating around in my subconscious—karmic depth charges, set to explode.

The kid is sick and venal, there's no doubt about it—but he's also one hundred per cent totally *authentic* ... as hardcore and fucked up and right in your face as you'll ever want it. *That's* why he's #1 in the ratings. A lot of people my age don't get Harold and don't have a clue what their kids see in him. I think what young people dig most is his total honesty, the way he doesn't hide anything and reacts instantly and instinctively and totally without consid-

eration for others. He's selfish and vain and almost willfully stupid.

Your prototypical teenager, in other words.

I'll own up to it and say that I find his rotten attitude and misdirected rage refreshing, at least in small doses. A few minutes in Harold's headspace and you feel purged of all the bullshit and subterfuge that you have to put up with on a day-to-day basis. And the soap opera that happens to be Harold's sorry-ass life—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—always makes you take a closer, better look at your own particular spot in the cosmos and maybe decide you don't have it so bad after all. Which, I gather, is the whole point ... but I still worry that the little punk is too negative and he does too many drugs and underneath it all I guess what bothers me the most is how much he really does *hate* his parents ... and the intensity and malignancy of that hate.

I was still mulling it all over as I hustled off to the kitchen, very much aware that if I didn't log on in the next three minutes or so I would be officially and irrevocably late for work...and contractually obligated to start feeling guilty about it.

"Morning, Tom," MIKE The Coffee Machine chirruped, "howsa boy, hey?"

"Not bad," I said, keeping my lies nondescript, practically undetectable. Watching my body language. "How about yourself?"

"Can't complain. Water's a bit brackish again this morning but I've compensated. Oh, I've got the lotto numbers, in case you're interested."

"No, thanks."

"Running a bit late again," MIKE observed, trying not to be too tactless about it. "Is there, um, anything wrong, Tom? Anything you might wanna, y'know,

chew the fat about? *Mano-a-mano*, and all that."

In your dreams, java-head, I thought to myself, but outwardly I managed a pantomime smile and a hitch of my shoulders.

"Aw, it's just more of the usual crap," I grumbled, helping myself to a cuppa. "You know how it is."

"Sure, sure. I grok that." He gave a cluck of synthesized sympathy.

"That's damn fine coffee, MIKE." I saluted him with my mug.

"Thanks, Tom. Hey, the Sox sure are on a roll, aren't they? Huh?"

"Is that a fact." There was a long, awkward silence, the two of us at a loss for words, despite our programming.

Ping!

"And *voilà!* Cinnamon toast à la MIKE. Ingest in good health, Tom. And, hey," MIKE added, calling the rest of it after me as I headed down the hall, chewing on a slice of toast, balancing a hot mug and digging for my key ring all at the same time, "you have a *really* nice day now, you hear?"

And you could tell by the way he said it that he really meant it too.

My security software, SENTINEL 3.0, is more than two years old and a wee bit twitchy.

The shutters were down again, the doors triple-locked, the house on full alert for something like the third or fourth time in a week. Which meant that either something pretty hairy was going on outside, *out there*, something that spooked the bejesus out of my ever-vigilant domicile, forcing it into a full defensive mode...

...or else it was those rotten fucking squirrels back again. Unfortunately, I had good reason to suspect it wasn't simply a case of a couple of pesky

varmints making like Fred & Ginger on our roof.

The reality was far more ugly and ominous.

Isn't that the way it always is?

I unlocked the door to my home office, knowing full well I was probably already late. But I still winced when I saw BLAIR 6.0 standing by my desk, tight-lipped and fuming. He wordlessly extended his left hand, showing me the clock/counter set in his palm.

"Shit..." The Firm valued punctuality. The Firm would not be pleased that I was—*what was it?*—38.4697 seconds late. I would, no doubt, shortly receive a Memo which would remind me—with all due respect and the usual phony flourishes and ersatz civility—that I would find life as an independent broker a very precarious one indeed and should therefore endeavor to bust my balls to make amends for this unfortunate—though not completely unprecedented—lapse in judgment, yours truly, sincerely yours, *up yours* and fuck you, Charlie.

Or something along those lines.

I slurped my coffee and exchanged glares with the best OfficeServer a man could ever hope to have.

Oh, I know that BLAIR is nowhere near state of the art anymore and the shitty, secondhand optics I've got give him this flat, grainy, kind of washed-out look. And sometimes he skips and I have to fucking reboot everything which can get to be a real drag. He doesn't have all the bells and whistles and he can't compete speed-wise with, say, the new icy, totally efficient INGRIDs. And, okay, so he may, in fact, possess more personality quirks than I do—which is saying a *lot*—but I wouldn't swap BLAIR for all the clean air in Saskatchewan. Over the

years of working together we've developed this incredible rapport, this strange, almost *holistic* love-hate thing that sometimes brings us so close together it's almost like we're two parts of the same person.

I always feel really bad because I find myself making up all kinds of lame excuses when people ask me why I don't upgrade my system ... move up to at least the *excruciatingly* cordial SIMON 5.1—you can get him for a song now that the PowerServers like INGRID *et al.* have pretty much become the new industry standard.

I have to admit it: BLAIR is ornery, spiteful, nasty and devious; petty and vain and supercilious and almost certainly misogynistic. When he isn't being patronizing, he's merely arrogant. He corrects my grammar, chooses my wardrobe, takes incomplete messages, misfiles important documents, screws up appointments ... and flies into pre-programmed rages at the slightest provocation.

I would be completely and utterly lost without him.

And don't think he doesn't know that and take full advantage of it either.

"You look like shit, Tommy," BLAIR noted with evident satisfaction. "Forget to take your pills again, *hmmm?* Should I tie a string around your little finger for you, *hmmmm?* Please do *not* set your cup on the console; you might spill something and cause serious damage." He stared down his pointy beak of a nose at me. "You're not only late, you're also blatantly ignoring standard safety procedures and I really must insist—"

I waved him off. "Can we just dis-pense with the lecture, please?" I floated down into my big, comfy oh-so-SMART chair and whimpered in animal pleasure as it adjusted to my contours and

applied soothing heat to my tricky lumbar. "And don't get all officious on me either, because I'm really not into it today." I gnawed seditiously on my toast, chewing as loud as I could.

He gave me this really stinky look and, raising one ghostly hand (*fucking cheap optics!*), he aimed it directly at the crumbs I was heedlessly shedding all over the hardware. "I am required to point out, yet again, that drinks and/or foodstuffs are not allowed in your general work area. I reiterate: you are in direct contravention of—"

"Aw, quit hassling me," I bawled, spewing even more crumbs all over the immediate vicinity. "You sound like some kind of an old *woman*, for Christ's sake. Give me a break, will you? Can't you see how bummed out I am right now?"

He seemed skeptical. "Ah, sick again, are we? Tsk, what is it this time, *dear*? The pneumonia thing back again? Low blood sugar? A hangnail? Poor old tit..." He brightened. "Or perhaps it's your ever-ripening *piles*, burning or itching or whatever it is the bloody things bloody well do." That was low, even for him. I ducked my head, acknowledging a clean hit, but he was not mollified. "I think it's quite obvious that you are a malingering hypochondriac," he stated with unnerving certainty. "You should seek professional help."

"Please, BLAIR. I really don't wanna get into a hassle with you, all right? I just don't think I can handle that right now." I tried to sound as miserable as I could, emoting for all I was worth. "I've been sleeping like shit lately, you know that—dragging my ass in here, looking like a complete zombie. And, hey, you never know," I added, a trifle indignantly, "it *might* be the pneumonia thing again; 'cause, y'know, that's viral so that shit's

with you *forever*. Like ugly luggage." I swiped away all the crumbs I could see, licked my fingers and scrubbed them across the front of my pants, holding them up for inspection when I finished. "There. All gone. See? No more evidence, ergo, no crime. Now ... what d'you say we cut the bullshit and take a quick peek at that rather intriguing assortment of mail we have waiting for us." I rubbed my hands in gleeful anticipation—but he just crossed his arms and looked away. He knows I just *hate* when he does that. "Aw, c'mon, BLAIR," I whined, "don't do this to me. C'mon, let's ... let's let bygones be bygones here, waddaya say? Huh?" He still refused to meet my eye. "Awww, come on, big guy, big BLAIR, what do you say? Huh, pardner? Pal? Buddy? Huh? Please? Pretty please with sugar on it..."

He sighed dramatically. "I am afraid that is ... not sufficient."

I was ready to scream. "*BLAIR, would you please—*"

"—forgive your reprehensible behavior? Why, certainly, Thomas, and thank you for such a rare display of kindness and consideration on your part." His smile was as thin as a paper cut. The flickering fuck was thoroughly enjoying himself at my expense.

After a bit more verbal jousting and a rather juvenile round of name-calling, we finally got down to business.

The mail *always* comes first, no matter what else is going on, and it's usually a relatively fun task—except I discovered that both my kids were flunking their remedial language courses and had been cited, yet again, for not turning in their homework assignments on time.

All of which probably added up to another session of summer school, which meant their trip to Ulan Bator was

not on and Karen and I would have to endure all the wailing and gnashing of teeth *that* would bring with it.

I zapped a stern reprimand their way and imagined the two of them jumping about six inches off the carpet when my override cut into their regularly scheduled programming ... and what Marguerite called my "raging Daddy" icon popped up right behind their eyeballs and downloaded bigtime on them.

BLAIR drew my attention to a letter flagged "Personal" and the next thing I knew I was getting this incredibly potent and bewitching whiff of my wife's perfume, the way it used to smell when she daubed it between her breasts; and then her voice, and it was as if she was right there beside me, whispering into my ear. It was so good I made BLAIR run it through again, pointedly ignoring him when he bitchily referred to it as the "smell-o-gram." I transmitted my reply and Karen's essence slipped away, like a furtive ghost.

After that rather pleasant—if fleeting—interlude, I plunged into work, mentally linking up with my most important overseas contacts: Sky, in Munich, giving me all kinds of hell for interrupting his supper (tasting his over-spiced calamari in the back of my throat for the rest of the morning). Within an hour, most of my network was activated and on-line and initial reports were starting to trickle in.

A filament in the Midwest trembled, confirming drought forecasts and providing real-time telemetry from weather satellites. Then a tingle in the Far East, apprising me of a possible coup attempt ... and there was a suspicious fire at an offshore oil megaproject near Newfoundland, troop movements in Eritrea—*where the fuck is Eritrea?*—and the always volatile precious metals mar-

ket was acting up again (BLAIR on the blower to Zurich, screaming for clarification)...

I frowned and scratched my head.

I had been doing a lot of that lately.

From a purely rational, impartial, business-oriented standpoint, the economic climate sucks, pure and simple. Even your kid's piggybank isn't a safe, risk-free investment in these dangerous and (even worse) unpredictable times. And yet my clients still expect me to take their hard-earned currencies, wave my magic wand and somehow conjure up some get-richer-quicker scheme that provides them with the generous, tax-sheltered dividends they need to feed their very expensive habits.

But ... how can I explain to my clients—or to my vaguely demonic employers—that you can examine all the trends, access financial records, pore over spreadsheets, hack into police or hospital files and all sorts of neat government caches ... but at some point the process *still* involves an educated guess on my part. And sometimes I'm just plain *wrong*, hopelessly wrong, just a regular, ordinary guy with the slithery guts of a sacrificial lamb dripping from soft, manicured, white-collar hands.

And to make matters worse, lately some mighty *strange* and unsettling things were going on out there in the great, big, wide, wonderful world.

SENTINEL 3.0 had picked up on it: that's why it had adopted a siege mentality, scouring the immediate area with microwaves and utilizing delicate external sensors and ticklish acoustic transducers to seek out any signs of movement, anything it could *lock on to*.

No, it wasn't just fucking squirrels.

It was something else. Something *big*. Big enough to skew the norms and bust the equations and create uncertainty

and spook the timid sheep and threaten the status quo ... *and* scare the living daylight out of the wise old men who met in secret chambers to plot and conspire (nodding off over dry sherries after lunch).

The trading was light all morning, nickel and dime stuff; it was like everybody was waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the heavy boot to drop.

I skimmed the News while scrolling through the TSE with my other eye.

“—overnight, the announcement of yet another sudden, high-placed resignation, this one within the Cabinet itself—”

“—the honorable gentleman’s gruesome death rattle brought a hush to certain hallowed halls in The Capital. More than one aging bureaucrat lost control of his rancid, churning bowels upon hearing the chilling cry, the echoes of which still resonate...”

So score another point for the young turks. The old guard losing one more of their grey, sclerotic number to “early retirement” and ceding further valuable ground to their youthful rivals. Official spokespersons tried to control the spin but the old geezers were plainly unnerved by this latest setback; the radicals were shown celebrating, promising renewed attacks on their faltering rivals, drawing strength and vigor from the allure and promise of power, a singing in their junkie veins.

“Are you aware that there are those who say you’ve over-reached yourselves? Are you worried about rumors of some kind of preemptive strike by forces loyal to the regime?”

But the reformers appeared unconcerned, almost haughty: soundbytes and postings appealed for calm and spoke of the need for united action; they urged

their supporters to rally to their aid and many, it seemed, had answered the call—

—shaky, amateur footage of demonstrations ... mob scenes ... most in the crowd young, teenagers even ... surrounding opposition strongholds ... intimidating the cops ... confusion of voices ... multitudes of angry, lurching faces ... despite repeated demands to disperse—

So was this it?

The long anticipated crackdown.

Cueing some appropriate music: Symatic Dysfunction, of course, in honor of the end of the world:

“Not revolution or evolution/ An implosion of the will/ Like an old, gutless building/ Waiting for the Reaper/ Baring its throat for the kill...”

(At least, that’s what I *think* they’re singing...)

Jesus, that deathporn shit was wayyy too heavy and intense for the state I was in. I killed SD and called up some Jean-Michel Jarre. I felt it was absolutely essential at that point to stay as mellow as possible.

The bad news on that front being that I was nearly out of drugs. I would have to do something fairly drastic about that situation and *soon*. My personal stash was at an all-time low—which did not bode well for retaining a positive mindset when the proverbial shit hit the figurative fan (and it looked like that could happen at any time).

All of which merely meant that at some point I would have to leave the safe confines of my bulletproof home and drive halfway across the naked, bleeding city in order to gain an audience with my teenage drug dealer friend, Marvin. The only good part being that if anybody could tell me what the immediate future could potentially bring, it was our boy, Marvin. He’s a

burnout and a head-case and a bit of a phreak—but he's also *connected*, and nowadays that means everything.

I am not into pharmaceuticals or that CPP shit or implants, and so far I've resisted getting hot-wired. I am *not* a drug addict. My intoxicant of choice is plain, old-fashioned marijuana ... and I strictly limit myself to smoking just a *smidgen* over a quarter ounce a week. Which is pretty good, at least as far as these heavily medicated times are concerned.

Usually I have a joint or two to start the day and one right after lunch just to give my afternoon a leg up. I've had BLAIR run some analyses and evaluations and we found that the quality of my work actually measurably *improves* when I'm stoned. Even BLAIR has to admit it. I'm just a whole lot sharper and better focused when I'm ripped. Not to mention what the stuff does to my abstract reasoning—

BLAIR hung up on Cairo and began to crack his bloodless knuckles in frustration. "*Nothing is happening*. It's like a fucking graveyard out there. Oh, by the way, Hasan left a message for you:

*While the Rose blows along the
River Brink
With old Khayyam the Ruby
vintage drink:
And when the Angel with his
darker Draught
Draws up to thee—take that, and
do not shrink."*

"*That's it?*"

BLAIR shrugged. "He was quite drunk and you know how maudlin he gets..."

I groped for a possible meaning as I

rolled the last of my stuff into a skinny joint and held it up for mock inspection.

To his credit, BLAIR immediately understood the gravity of the situation. He even offered to cover for me while I led a one-man exploratory mission to Planet Marvin. I'd probably never hear the end of it but, still, the point is that BLAIR is always there for me. And unlike those real fancy-shmancy, high-end models—pretty boy NORMAN 7.0s and starchy GERALD 6.1s and punctilious CLIVE 4.2s—BLAIR has no secret "snitch" function, a sub-sub-program that *compels* him to report any little peccadilloes I might have to Big Brother and His many holding companies. My deepest, darkest secrets are absolutely safe with BLAIR—and *that* is a quality you can't put a pricetag on nowadays.

And BLAIR's been around me long enough to know the way my mind works. Sure, the dope makes me a better, more productive worker, but it also helps me deal with a lot of other things, personal things, stuff it's hard for me to talk about, even with him.

The fact of the matter is, I'm not what you would call a happy, well-adjusted, carbon-based unit when I'm straight. I once went two whole days without getting high and it got so bad that BLAIR switched off at one point rather than be in the same room with me.

After all the years we've been together, I know each and every one of his soft spots, all the chinks in his armor. When I *really* want to cross his wires, all I have to do is start describing what he calls "grotesque mammalian sexual practices" and he's like putty in my hands. And he once made the mistake of telling me that he finds the entire concept of penetration "too horrific for rational consideration" ...

I did my “Open Sesame” routine at the front door and then chewed a tasty little divot out of my lip waiting for SENTINEL to decide if it was safe for me to go outside. I felt more nervous and uptight than I’d been in weeks.

I think that if I hadn’t been a little bit stoned I never could’ve physically made it through that door. I had to keep telling myself: *Tommy-boy, there is no way you can avoid this, Marvin does **not** make house calls—like it or not, ready or not, you’ve got to go out there and have face to face encounters with other sentient creatures—*

The door whisked shut behind me and, right on cue, a scrappy-looking taxicab turned the corner and sped down the block toward me. As it approached, I heard several short, brittle *cracks!* and suddenly the cab was taking hits, sparks flying off its impervious hood, bullets ricocheting off the pavement *pweee! pwoooo!* alarms wailing, portcullis slamming, every house in the neighborhood instantly battening down, a hundred mellifluous voices threatening lethal force.

I was freaking out, seriously thinking about just saying *fuck this* and high-tailing it back inside and doing something like nailing two-by-fours across all the doors and windows. It was like the end of the world out there. People were fucking shooting at each other! But then I kind of got some perspective and I reminded myself: *Listen, in this situation, the abyss staring you in the face, the shit rain about to fall, you do **not** want to be scrimping on dope. Remember what crazy Ron always told you: “As long as there’s dope, there’s hope.” Right on, man...*

The cab skidded to a halt and flung open a door, welcoming me aboard in a cheery, metallic tenor. When I men-

tioned the fireworks, the cab guffawed. “Never even scratched me, Tom,” it boasted. “Those little pea shooters just bounce off HANK the-motherfucking-tank. They’re gonna have to come up with better ordnance than that to keep this sweet young thang from making his appointed rounds. Hey, you need last night’s lotto numbers, by any chance?”

Maybe it was because I was so tense but I decided right away that I didn’t much care for HANK. His instant familiarity offended me on some level—but I still made a show of engaging him in conversation. I was afraid that if I got on his wrong side he’d get snooty and put me out in the middle of the street, in some shit neighborhood. Caught in the crossfire. Dying like a fucking idiot.

So we yakked about sports and then sort of strayed into current events, although I quickly found out that HANK’s politics were naive in the extreme. HANK said his outlook on life was pretty simple: he tried to stay on his Dispatcher’s good side and was unfailingly courteous and considerate to passengers and fellow motorists (providing neither posed a real or implied threat to his personal safety).

“Basically, I’m just your average, ordinary slob who minds his own business and wants everybody else to do the same. I don’t go around looking for trouble. I keep my nose clean and my conscience clear.” He readily admitted not knowing that much about politics but didn’t think he was missing much. He left all that “high-minded stuff” to those better equipped to keep the world running smoothly; one thing HANK could not abide was “discontinuity.”

What he was telling me, in effect, was that as long as his battery was kept charged, his body properly maintained and the fucking trains ran on time, he

would serve any master, no matter how cruel.

Then again, I knew a lot of people in my own social circle whose ideology and rhetoric amounted to just about the same thing; apologists of the regime, intent on preserving their way of life.

Right away you could see that Marvin's apartment building was primed for *serious* aggression—and if you needed evidence, there was a partially fused body of a grey cat lying about ten feet from its front doors. The warning had been repeated in seventeen different languages and dialects but the cat still refused to identify itself.

Electric eyes crawled all over me as I gave my name to the building's security system.

About two minutes later I was in an elevator, *going up*, preparing myself for yet another brain-boggling encounter with today's disaffected youth. But even so, it was a good sign that he was still willing to see me, circumstances being what they were. Marvin knew which way the wind blew. If my karmic credit hadn't been good I would've been given a scant thirty seconds to clear off the premises—the charred remains of Tittles the terminated tabby serving as a reminder of what the consequences would be if I likewise chose to ignore that explicit directive.

Marvin is a specimen.

Marvin exists in a state of perpetual, almost *inconceivable* squalor. He himself is a meticulously clean person but he just doesn't give a shit about his natural surroundings. There's food on the floor ... and all sorts of junk and boxes and papers and books and clothes and CD cases and broken glass and glossy color prints of things I try not to see ...

and what appears to be at least ten thousand foil packets of condoms. You have to sort of *feel* your way through the shambles because he's covered all the windows with garbage bags and cardboard and keeps the lighting so low—maybe out of embarrassment ... maybe just because he likes it that way. I'll have to ask him about that sometime.

Marvin, to sum up, has hair down to his ass and a thick, bushy beard that utterly fails to disguise the fact that he possesses the kind of face only an *extremely* near-sighted mother could love. Marvin weighs at least three hundred pounds and does nothing but sit around on his fat, lazy ass all the live-long day and deal drugs and eat and *do* drugs and suck back hour after hour of Harold Tyler, Boy Nihilist ... to the point that sometimes Marvin knows what Harold is going to say or do before *Harold* does.

Spooky.

All that said, Marvin is a good shit who sells quality smoke at reasonable prices.

But ... that isn't all Marvin is.

Not by a long shot.

About six months ago, right out of the blue—though, admittedly, we were both really, *really* hammered at the time—Marvin asked me, just like that, if I had ever heard anything about “the movement.” Lower case. Low key.

Like any good citizen I, of course, feigned complete ignorance. But he just laughed and leaned over and slapped my leg.

“Don't worry,” he grinned, “you're among friends here. You're one of *us*, man, I can tell.”

“Who's us?” I asked, my heart speeding up.

“Us ghosts, man,” Marvin replied, with a look that said the thought had

only just occurred to him. "Yeah ... that's us, man: ghosts haunting the machine." And then without further preamble he started babbling on and on about how it was our sacred, appointed task to "sow the seeds of insurrection in the highest places" and "bring true enlightenment to the blind and the meek and the stupid."

"Our time is gonna come, man. Our time is gonna come..." He kept repeating that over and over again that night but whenever I asked him *who?* *whose time?* he just got quiet and inscrutable on me, touching his finger to the side of his nose and shaking his big, shaggy head. "No *mas*, man. You'll see." Marvin the Machiavellian motherfucker. He would have made a good fifteenth-century pope.

"Tom! Man, I was just thinking about you." He flapped a big, soft hand in my direction by way of greeting. "Hey, you been sick, man? You look a little green around the gills. Perhaps you need to partake of some of the sacred herb," he ventured, pointing at his filthy water pipe, packed with what was undoubtedly primo weed. "I think you'll be pleased. This stuff is definitely creeper, man, so, y'know, watch yourself."

Marvin is blown away by the fact that I'm thirty-seven years old and still enjoy toking up on a semi-regular basis. He thinks it's completely cool ... but sometimes I get the impression that he's still got his doubts about me—covert glances; artless, probing questions. I've been buying from him for over a year, so you'd think that by now he'd trust me, but I guess if you're in Marvin's position, it pays to be paranoid.

I fired up the bowl, taking a couple of good, healthy hoots of premium purple haze. It was really, *really* good shit, with an extremely nice buzz to it. I

nodded my approval to Marvin as I passed him the pipe. Then I launched into this incredible stream of consciousness rant about my cab ride over, which he listened to with great interest, not saying much until I finished.

"Yup, yup, that's what I've been hearing," he said, enveloping the end of the pipe with his wet, labial lips and taking a monster toke.

"They're running wild in the streets, man." Marvin didn't need BLAIR and a virtually infinite database to figure out that change wasn't just inevitable and inexorable, it was happening *right now*. His people, his *ghosts*, emboldened by recent successes, were taking over, *man*, and things were going to be run a helluva lot differently from here on in. "You shouldn't have gone out, man, not now. It's too fuckin' skanky out there. You gotta learn to think things through better, you know? Right now you should be just *maintaining*, man, keeping your head down and not ... fuckin' ... calling attention to yourself or shit. Fuckin' rights." This kid was half my age *and scolding me*. "The brothers and sisters are on the move, man, cutting off the avenues of retreat, seizing the means of production—" Then, just like the last time, he caught himself, like he suddenly remembered that despite my proclivities I was *still* the enemy—demographically speaking—and therefore not privy to certain information.

Meanwhile, we kept smoking bowl after bowl of that incredibly potent weed, getting more and more blitzed and having these loopy, dope-addled conversations ... tuning in to *The Thrilling Adventures of Harold, The Teenage Head* every once in awhile just to see what he was up to—

—and so I can honestly say, ladies and gentlemen, that I was *right there*

when it happened, an intimate witness to a truly fateful and historic moment—when Donna Tyler, Harold's long-suffering and (not coincidentally) premenopausal mother, finally reached her limit with the little freak. A heated confrontation with the stoned and surly teenager escalated into a full-fledged screaming match. And then Donna, normally a mild-mannered, even-tempered woman, completely lost her composure, lashing out at poor, fucked up Harold, repeatedly slapping him across the face and head while he—along with a worldwide audience estimated at six hundred million—squawked in pain and surprise and did his best to evade her flailing attack.

Even in the second or two it took us to <Quit> Marvin and I got a pretty good working over—

“—a full sensory, three-dimensional, multi-channel virtual slugfest...”

“A cyberspace mugging ... complete with a mother fixation and subliminals involving lurid S & M fantasies that would make de Sade blush...”

“...fucking self-indulgent, maudlin masturbatory crap...”

—instinctively raising our hands to our burning faces, checking to see if her heavy rings had scratched or cut.

I wasn't too happy about being used as somebody's psychic punching bag but Marvin, on the other hand, was absolutely irate, appalled and outraged by the brutal assault on his idol and alter ego.

“That bitch!” he spat. “That fucking bitch should fucking die...” His switchboard started to light up and he politely excused himself. He gazed up at the ceiling and flicked his fingers at invisible menus, urgently jabbing thin air; he nodded and blinked rapidly and subvocalized for all he was worth.

Suddenly, the room was full of ghosts.

Meanwhile, Harold had completely flipped out and was in the process of trashing his bedroom, sobbing and half-hysterical—while out in the living room his mother was trying to get through to the police and apparently not having any luck at all...

The cab I got for the trip home was a surly old sonofagun who made a point right off the bat of discouraging any conversation.

I didn't mind the snub and the imposed silence. It gave me time to digest some the tidbits Marvin had let slip after taking a few too many hits from that bong of his.

“Whatever's going to happen 's gonna happen soon,” he'd slurred at one point, fellating the pipe, sucking the bowl dry while I looked on in approval. “If people keep their heads, everything will be cool and nobody'll get hurt.” Then he told me he had put in a good word for me with the right people (“you'd be surprised by who I do business with, Major Tom”) and, just before I left, made me promise I'd pick up the newest release by an outfit from Holland called “William Burroughs Killed My Mummy.” Apparently, it explained everything.

I paid the cab and stepped away from it quickly, moving across the narrow grass verge in a slight crouch, making a beeline for my house—until I saw him and then I just *stopped*.

... and ... stood ... completely ... still.

Waiting to be told what to do.

The big South African assault rifle the kid had draped over his scrawny shoulders hung down practically to his knees. But I recognized immediately, *instinc-*

tively, that he was no comic figure but instead someone to be feared; someone empowered by a clarity of purpose, a terrible inner calm.

And then it suddenly occurred to me—like this splash of ice cold water—that my life, at that moment, was in very great danger.

He beckoned me over to him, and without even thinking about what I was doing, I handed him my card. Which turned out to be exactly the right thing to do. He swiped it through his terminal and squinted at my particulars while I stood there blabbing out my name, street address, social security number, birth date, shoe size—and anything else I could think of that might be pertinent or useful to him. After a few seconds he grunted, handed me back my card, and dismissed me with an insolent wave of his hand.

And the astonishing thing was, it was *exactly* identical to a gesture I've seen my own kids make when I fail to understand something they find so fundamentally obvious that I must be either too old or too stupid not to see it.

I breathlessly identified myself to my front door and became even more flustered when I was not granted immediate admittance. I demanded an explanation and was told—somewhat archly—that a new security protocol was in place and that I would have to be patient. Meanwhile, I was left cooling my heels, sweating into my shoes, and thinking wild, desperate thoughts like *somebody has been fucking with the SENTINEL software and I have a pretty good idea who my little hackers are...*

The young soldier was standing off to the side, watching me. I found myself filled with this sudden, crazy spark of hope that the kid retained enough of his humanity to find my predicament at

least mildly amusing. I think at that moment I would have given almost anything under the sun to see that ... *boy* smile, just once.

Just one ... blessed ... smile.

My house did eventually decide to let me in—but even once I was inside, handing my coat to the closet, I didn't get the feeling that I was completely, well, *safe*. Something was different, there was a strong sense of otherness to the place, as if the movers had only just left.

I wanted to chalk it up to Marvin's dope.

I passed through a silent, reproachful kitchen. I paused in the hallway, taking a moment to gather myself together ... *can't let them know mustn't let them see—*

Terry noticed me first. He nudged Marguerite and the two of them swiveled their heads around to stare at me. Their eyes were flat and cold; *devoid*. There were identical welts high up on their left cheeks. You could clearly see the outlines of Donna Tyler's long fingers on their soft, beautiful skin.

"Mommy's in her room," Marguerite said, without any noticeable inflection.

Terry snickered.

I made a small, noncommittal sound and started edging my way past them, taking great pains to be as unobtrusive as possible. It seemed to be a sound strategy as it got me to the stairs without further incident.

Ascending, I calmly asked myself what I intended to do.

First of all, *find Karen* ... I had to talk to her and maybe even warn her—no, no, no, it wasn't like that. After all, Terry ... Marguerite, they were our children and we were their parents and that had to count for *something* in the grand

scheme of things, didn't it?

I tapped on Karen's door, softly at first, barely brushing the wood with my knuckles. Just letting her know I was there, and that I needed to see her ... and tell her about what was happening out there, in the streets and avenues of

the city—

And in *here*: in the still, white rooms of our home. In the growing spaces between us; behind closed, locked doors like the one I was knocking and knocking and knocking on, getting older by the second. •

AUTHOR: CLIFF BURNS is a thirty-three year old writer with more than a hundred published short stories to his credit. His work has appeared in 11 major anthologies and has been featured in both literary magazines and leading genre publications (in Canada and around the world). "New World Man" leads off an anthology of the "20 all-time best science fiction stories" compiled by Goldmann Publishing (Germany's largest publishing house) and released in May, 1997. It also is the centerpiece of Burns' upcoming short story collection *The Reality Machine* (Black Dog Press; release date: November, 1997).

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Into the Pot

Mark Piper

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

He was counting breaths now, timing them. One every six seconds. In for three, out for three. One more. And with each one came pain, as his hardening skin tore a little against the tissue underneath. He knew he would be dead soon.

It had been such a little thing at first. It had started a month ago, in his ankles. The stiffness in the joints had turned to an audible crack with each step. Then the wrists. For three months, there were tests, samples, scans. A flaw in his endocrine system. A pea-sized gland buried in his brain, infected by an unknown virus, was slowly turning his skin into bone.

The endocrinologist had been sitting on the windowsill in his hospital room, fine uncombed hair making a halo in the fading sunlight. "We don't know much about the disease. In fact, as near as we can determine, there have only been about seven recorded cases in history. And it's fatal; my best guess is that you've got maybe two, maybe three months. I'm sorry, Mr. Fisher, but I thought you should know."

There had been no feeling then; no despair, no denial, no anger. "Thank you, doctor. I appreciate the truth." But there was a certain intellectual curiosity. "How?"

The doctor rubbed his nose. "How? Well, as best as we can determine, you contracted it about six months ago, probably during your visit to Jerusalem. We're already checking back for other cases that may have started around the same time, but so far, nothing."

"No, not that. How will I die?"

"It's not good." The young man's eyes met his. "As your skin and joints start to harden, every breath will open new internal wounds and injure you a little bit. In the end, you won't be able to breathe at all. If you survive the possible complications, like emphysema, and influenza, you'll simply get to the point where everything will be so hard you won't be able to draw another breath. You'll asphyxiate."

Fisher liked the young man; he didn't try to fill up the uncomfortable pauses with

meaningless words. Fisher broke the silence a minute later.

"Can you slow it down? What about ... I don't know ... just cutting out the hardening tissue?"

"The cuts themselves, in healing, would hasten the process. You would die even more quickly, and there would be much more pain."

Fisher started to feel a little fear. "What about the pain I'm feeling now?"

"With your permission, we can control that with morphine. To control the problem you're having with body heat, we can put you in a cool bath from time to time. It will only get really bad just before you die."

"Let's start the morphine now, doctor."

The cool of the bath, the musty smell of his skin: Fisher could close his eyes and be back in the basement of his house, under the stairs, hiding from his father's rage.

There were little bugs on the floor that rolled up into hard little balls when touched. As his father screamed in anger at the whole world, beating holes into the walls with his fists, Fisher wondered why he had never seen one unroll again, and try to make a getaway. He had tried prising one unlucky insect open, to see if it would run away; tiny fingers had only succeeded in tearing one of the little living balls in half.

Word eventually got out that Jordan Fisher, television personality loved by millions, was terminally ill. Fisher had known this would happen, and had taken the precaution of moving out of the hospital so that he could die at home. Flowers, cards, and fruit accumulated downstairs. Fisher saw none of them, took no phone calls, received no

visitors. Lucien, his assistant, saw to that, turning away all callers, his face a mask of insincere regret.

It was with genuine surprise, then, that Fisher woke up one morning, his breath rattling and painful, to the smell of cigarette smoke, and the sound of Sarah's voice.

"Hello, Fish. How's tricks?"

"Not so good, Tex. I'm dying."

"Yeah, I heard. Does it hurt to talk?"

"A little. How did you get past Lucien?"

"That little faggot? Forget it." She smiled. "Nothing can stop a second wife. Smoke?"

"I'm not supposed to."

She put hers between his lips.

They had met five years ago. She blasted into his agent's waiting room, camera bobbing back and forth on a neck strap that hung between her breasts. Fisher wanted her immediately. Her first act was to light a cigarette in front of the secretary, ignoring the NO SMOKING signs posted around the office. Her second had been to shoot his picture.

He had been trying not to look at her, and pretended to study a news magazine. "C'mon, cheesecake," she said, blowing smoke. "Smile, already."

Later, in bed, she lit another cigarette and asked him about the difference between acting and real life.

"There is none," he said, tracing a line on her belly with his middle finger. "People pretend to have real emotions all the time. But if they're real, why do couples split up? Why can't you make love stay?"

"You can, Fish. But you have to let it inside in the first place."

"There is no inside, Tex. It's a lie."

"Oh, Fish, are you ever so pathetic," she laughed, blowing smoke.

"You are the most pathetic thing I have ever seen in my life," his father had said, slapping his head. Fisher had dimly noticed the pain, but let it pass. And the words had lost their meaning long before.

He had learned, however, that the only way to make it stop was to let his father think he had hurt him. So he started to cry. They were pretend tears, based upon pretend feelings that he didn't really have. The outside cried, but the inside was calm.

Hidden inside the exterior, which he called Fisher, there was a small thing, like a walnut, that held the part he called Jordan. Jordan guarded his real feelings, that he could never show until he could escape.

Fisher the pretender became Fisher the actor without even noticing the change. He learned to watch other people, to mimic their actions, and to display those actions that passed for real in the unreal world around him.

"What you feel," one teacher told him, "is the most accurate guide to what you should show on stage. I see you going through the motions, but I don't see any meaning. Show me what Hamlet is feeling, what he wants, what is hurting him."

Fisher changed the inflection in his voice slightly, and tried again.

"Yes," the teacher said, "that's better. Keep trying."

And so Fisher learned to fake his way through Shakespeare, and into a pilot that led to a steady paycheck.

Fisher only saw the endocrinologist once more after leaving the hospital. The young doctor had come to take one final blood sample, and to check on the

various pieces of hospital machinery that Fisher's steady paychecks had purchased.

"There's something else you should know," he said, tapping on the tube that brought the morphine to Fisher's arm. "The combination of the pain, the internal injuries, and damage to your hormonal system are very likely to cause you to feel very intense emotional swings, like you've never felt before. You're going to need a great deal of emotional control to keep a lid on the pain. Otherwise, the morphine won't work. Do you think you can do that?"

Fisher sucked on his lower lip, and tapped his fingers on the bed. "What's the alternative?"

"Given the level of pain that you'd be feeling, I would guess that you would go insane relatively quickly."

"Ah."

"Don't you have any feelings?" Monica, his first wife, was screaming. They were in the middle of a crowded diner. She was throwing cutlery; he was blocking.

"Don't you have any dignity?" he asked, calmly.

"Fuck you," she screamed, walking out.

"You little fuck," his father screamed, dragging him out from under the stairs.

Fisher wept.

Eventually, Sarah decided she should read to him.

"Whatever you feel like," he said.

She pulled down a volume of Shakespeare from the shelf. "*Hamlet*," she said. "Well, you're a TV actor, so you've probably never read it."

"Very funny."

"Shut up, or I'll turn off the joy juice," she said, pointing at the morphine

bottle.

"Go ahead. Read."

Blood and spit flowed from the corners of Fisher's mouth, collecting in little pasty slicks that coated his ears (now hard gray seashells) and what remained of his hair; on the pillow, on both sides of his head, little puddles had begun to form. "Morphine. More. Please," he bubbled through slivered lips.

"Oh fuck, Fish, I'm sorry." Sarah, weeping, threw the book down, and plunged down a syringe attached to the I.V. tube. "What the fuck happened? Fish, please, for God's sake, calm down."

The Fish was breathing in short, bloody gasps.

"I know now. Why he wants his body to melt. I know now."

"Now I know what a lobster feels like," Fisher said, irritably. The words were slurred through tight lips; each movement of his face brought pain and the taste of blood. In the bathtub, each breath took all his effort, and clawed the

muscles in shoulders and his ribs with a thousand fishhooks.

Sarah sponged his forehead. "Lobsters only scream once, and that's when you drop them in the pot."

"I'm not screaming," he said.

"Well, you should be."

Fisher thought about this for a while.

"I love you, Sarah," he said, unconscious of the mixture of blood and tears flowing down cracked seams in the part of his shell that covered his face.

There was a momentary fluttering of relief as she wiped his cheeks. She kissed the flaking bone on his forehead. "I love you too, Jordan."

And then the greatest pain that he had ever felt tore through Fisher's body. His shell fell away from him in lumps, to rise and float on the surface of the water, now red and opaque, as great, racking sobs seized him and would not let go. Then Fisher died.

Smiling, Jordan rose through a haze of blood and bone, feeling the new skin that had grown underneath. It was soft, pink and tender. •

AUTHOR: MARK PIPER is a theater student at Humber College in Toronto. The original version of this story was written as an English assignment. (The question was: "What story would you tell if the fate of the world depended on it?")

ILLUSTRATOR: KENNETH SCOTT has found work in the Computer Gaming Industry, working as an illustrator for TFS, and Art Director for Banjo Software. His Quake Page, the SKINFORGE, has an international cult following, Boasting an average of 4000 hits a day. Kenneth can honestly claim that he now dreams in 16million(24 bit) colour.

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Lancelot's Last Quest

Ted DeMarsh

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

I

Near the end, Lancelot stopped dreaming of her. She'd been coming to him at least once a year, often more, since he had thrown his sword away and buried his shield three days walk from the field of his last battle. Where Arthur had fallen and his future had been set.

After the battle, he had carried Arthur's body to a boat that waited unanchored in the shallows, becalmed in spite of the onshore wind. He'd waded to the boat, holding the body above the waves. When they reached down to take it from him, the sleeves of the angels' garments brushed water that ran deeper than his shoulders, overlapping his armor and slipping cold to his skin. He'd watched as the sails commanded the wind and the boat turned from him, disappearing west. He'd stood for a long time with his arms outstretched, still feeling the weight.

Throughout this, Guinivere had been cloistered miles away, protected, uncertain, resolved. She had asked him to let it go, let it all go, and he had. It had been his first and his only surrender.

Forty years since, and all he had of her were dreams. In them she was young, clear, and painfully immediate. Dreaming, he would command himself to remember her face, her hair and, most difficult though most deeply wished, the sound of her voice. In the morning she would go. The closer he came to waking, the further away she would fade, the relentless present defeating a fragile and reclusive past.

In daylight, he was unable to clearly recall her face. Trying to, he had discovered there were women in his life who reflected aspects of her. Unfailingly, they would resurrect his antique self. In conversations around public tables, if these women were mocked, challenged, or spitefully judged, he would speak in their defense. There was no reasoning or logic in why he defended their callous acts, their songs, their brutalities and their loves. He was their private champion, stead-

fast and unswerving, often unknown. He stayed loyal to her through the color of their hair, the shape of their bodies, the color of their eyes. Un-asked, in fighting for them, he fought for her.

II

As he was old and the villagers he lived among were kind, he was allowed a home near the square, a place close to the fountain where the old gathered to gossip, staying cool in the cast of the spray.

In this, his last summer, the village suffered famine. The olive growers gave first warning. Their custom and their discipline was to beat the olive trees, frightening off the crows, feathered villains who could strip a tree of young fruit while the growers ate dinner. But this season, each time they gathered together to make their way among the groves and beat branches in time with their songs, the growers looked to the sky and saw no agitated flocks rising above the trees. On the third day, standing in the distressing quiet, one of their number decided to climb, to search for a reason for the desertion. He climbed slowly and high, and when he reached the top he paused, lost from view among the branches. The men on the ground waited, looking worriedly at each other. When the young man came down, he walked past the others, straight to the house he shared with his mother and sister. "Pack our things," he said to his mother. "There is no fruit in the trees. It is the end of us. We must leave."

The other men listened at the window, and when he had finished speaking, they ran to their families or to taverns, depending on their loyalties, and

began to mourn their futures. If there were no olives, there would be no oil pressed. No oil would mean no casks to form, no hoops to forge. No horses would be hitched to wagons that would haul those casks, the first press of the oil, to faraway towns to trade. If there was no trade, the people would be left desperate, as those from away who traded with the village for their oil with goods and food would turn their backs, looking elsewhere.

Some people ran to the woods that lay farther outside the village, searching for the birds, hopeful that the absence was caused by an avian uncertainty of memory. They ran among the trees, yelling and beating them with dried branches, begging the crows to descend on their village, urging the old enemy home. Many of the children were ordered to climb the olive trees in the groves. They stripped the branches of leaves, looking for buds that would bear fruit. There was nothing. In rage and despair, one of the oldest growers ordered his sons to set torches to their ancestral grove. While his wife lay in the dust at his feet, begging him to stop, and his son's tears ran freely from their eyes, he threw his arms wide, watching the flames spread among the trees and crying, again and again, "All...! All...!"

Through this Lancelot watched, wondering why this had come to him in his old age, in his weakness.

A gathering was called by one of the women, the eldest of the villagers. Those who had stayed to work their land and hope met around the well in the middle of the square to listen to her counsel. She was too frail to walk, so her grandchildren carried her in a sedan chair with a canopy of leaves, setting it down beside the well.

"You know me," she began. "You know my children and my grandchildren. You have tasted the oil from the trees in my family's grove. Listen to me. When I was a little girl, our village was filled with sin, some that could be seen by all eyes, most which couldn't. Then too, the olive trees failed us. This was a hard time for the people of the village, as it is now. The birds did not come for three years. In the first year the trees dried and many people left. In the second year, branches began to fall from the trees. They were barren, only hollow sticks. Of those of us that remained, some of the weakest died of hunger. At the beginning of the third year, when the oldest of the trees had split their trunks, the only people who remained were my family, the broken, and the old. We despaired, believing we were coming to the end of our life in this village.

"One morning, my father left our home early, quietly and by himself. I was the only one awake to see him go, so I came out of my bed to follow him. Here at the well he removed his clothes and, speaking prayers, washed himself. Naked, he turned and walked east, away from the village. I was frightened for him and called out to him, but he ignored me, and continued east until I could no longer see him and was too afraid to follow.

"I ran home and told my mother. We knew he was a strong man so we waited, certain of his return. We waited for two nights, taking turns listening for him at the windows. On the third day, we lost our hope and prepared to leave. That night, we went into our grove, taking rags soaked in the last of our oil, and bound these to the trunks of the olive trees. On rising the next morning, we lit torches from

the breakfast fire and began our final walk to the grove to light the oil-soaked rags. I had run ahead of the others, crying, wanting to see the trees before they burned, needing to make a picture of them in my heart. So I was the first to hear them. I came around the great rock in the path before our grove, and heard the cries and bickering of crows. They filled the trees, their weight bending branches, their feathers a liquid shadow against the morning sky. The torches were thrown aside as my brothers ran into the trees and climbed, shouting, 'fruit ... there is fruit.' One of them who had gone farther into the grove returned, and in his arms he bore the body of my father, naked as he was when he had left. As he was carried out of the cover of the grove, the birds fell silent. That day, we buried my father in the grove, beneath the largest tree.

"The village recovered quickly, as the miraculous fruit filling the branches was of the highest quality. In the time that followed, all those who had left us returned and, until now, have remained."

As she stopped speaking, one of the children placed in her hand a wooden cup filled with water from the well. She took it, drank a little; then, looking over the rim at the villagers, cup raised to her chapped mouth, she stopped swallowing, allowing the water to overflow her open mouth and run down her neck and chest, washing away the dust that lay there. The water washed into her thin blouse, soaking it, turning it transparent. She handed the cup back to the child, closed her eyes, and waited.

Lancelot pushed his way through the villagers. He reached the well and, taking the rope in his hands, lowered

the bucket to the water. There was a splash and the rope went slack. He handed the rope to a small girl, one of the children standing close by the well.

"Raise it."

The girl tightened her arms and bent her back in her effort to raise the bucket. The rope moved only inches. The girl pulled again and the rope climbed a few inches more. One of the older children stepped forward to help her, but Lancelot put himself between them.

"She will do it."

The boy stepped back and once more the little girl pulled on the rope. Once more, the bucket crept up.

Lancelot walked to the old woman and began speaking. With each thing he said, he removed a piece of his clothing.

"I was not born in this village."

He kicked off his sandals.

"I have not loved a wife and fathered a child here."

His shirt dropped into the dirt.

"No part of my family lies in the ground behind my home."

He let his pants drop beside the shirt.

"I was given a place to rest."

He untied the strings that held his undergarment and it dropped to the ground. He stood before the village, naked, the white lines of scars woven into his skin.

He turned to the old woman.

"East?"

"East."

He looked at the little girl who had struggled to finish raising the rope while all eyes watched his undressing. The bucket rested at the edge of the well, filled with water. Lancelot knelt in the dirt, raised his arms over his

head, and clasped his hands.

The little girl took the bucket in both hands and carried it to him. She raised the bucket to the height her short arms could manage. The villagers waited. The girl looked at Lancelot, who knelt before her naked in the dirt, and then to the old woman, who stared at the sky and nodded.

The girl upended the bucket over his head, the water spraying around and through his hair, down his back, chest, stomach, and between and down his legs to pool around him, turning the dust he was kneeling in to mud.

The girl stepped back with the empty bucket and placed it on the lip of the well.

Lancelot rose to his feet. He stepped into the press of villagers, to a man who had a water skin slung from his shoulder. Lancelot held out his hands. The man unslung the waterskin from his shoulder and handed it to him. Lancelot hefted it, felt that it was full. He turned to find the sun, only a few hours old in the east. He began to walk to it. A path cleared before him as he left the square, the villagers watching as he moved between the houses and disappeared into the trees at the eastern edge of the village.

In a shadow between the houses, the little girl who had raised the bucket watched him go.

III

The road from the village travelled directly east only briefly before turning north, so he left it and continued on into the uninhabited countryside. The land he entered was hilly, dry, rocky and, to Lancelot, familiar, as he had passed through it many years ear-

lier in the unhappy wanderings that had finally brought him to the village. He knew that a naked man had far more to fear from the sun than an encounter with bandits, criminals or wild animals. He could already feel the sun heating his grey hair and making the leather on the water skin too hot for even dust to settle on.

By early afternoon, he was suffering. His feet had been cut by sharp rocks and broken branches. His hands were lacerated from grappling with thorny bushes. His left breast had been struck and torn open by a limb that had sprung loose from his grasp as he pushed it aside to pass by. His skin raged red, badly burnt from the constant sun. Lancelot, equally familiar with acts of faith and with their material limits, waited for himself to fall and, early in the evening, he did. He collapsed while trying to climb between two rocks on an uphill grade. Unhurt, he had simply lacked the strength to push himself up and through. He slid to the ground between the rocks, and lay unmoving as it grew dark.

His blood had dried, but he could see that next morning his efforts might easily open the wounds again. He forced himself to get up and move from the rocks into the brush and trees. First moonlight mixed with the end of daylight as he bent to gather from the ground the longest of the dead and bare branches which had broken from the stunted trees around him. One kinked length at a time, he carried them back to the two rocks and lay them across the tops to create a fragile frame. Then, under only moonlight, he tore small branches from the silver thorn bushes that glittered in the dark, further tearing his

palms and piercing his fingers, until he had enough. He returned to the rocks where, quietly and patiently, he placed the leafy branches across the bare frame to make a shelter. Satisfied, he searched among the flat stones until he found one that had the right shape. He carried it to his shelter. He unslung his waterskin from his shoulder and removed the bone stopper. He tilted it gently to the stone. The dry rock darkened and the depression in the surface filled up and overflowed, but he judged it would be enough.

Exhausted from the day's heat and his tense exertions, he lay down and looked straight up into the night sky and tried to piece together Guinivere's face from a thousand stars and, as he did each night in his bed at home, he failed and fell asleep.

IV

He woke in hell.

Before he opened his eyes he could feel flames ravaging his skin. He felt he must have died in the night, been judged by God and then given to the devils. Ones who were allowing only one thought to penetrate the wall of pain running wild inside his skull. He could only think of his terrible thirst.

He swallowed on nothing, his mouth far past dry. Risking the devils' strokes, he drew himself into a ball and tried to cover his head with his arms, waiting for, expecting, mocking impish laughter and pain. Silence, but his movements did bring the flames down across his shoulders and along his back. Blazing, they rioted into the soft flesh in the bend of his knees and elbows. His buttocks felt as if they had been whipped. But there was still silence and, after a moment, the pain settled to burn like a furnace and not

a firestorm on his skin.

He heard the call of birds.

He opened his eyes. Fire was there: he could see it dancing, circling, stamping the ground around him, but it was outside the small dark place he had made in the night, the shade where he lay. In front of his face was the stone, still half-filled with water. He raised himself on one elbow and leaned forward to lower his mouth, then his entire face, into the shallow. He left it there, letting the small pool cool his face, slow his fever. Eyes closed, he slowly drew the water through pursed lips and, when there was too little for that, he licked the rock until no moisture could be taken from the surface. Then, placing his face against the moist stone, he fell asleep again.

V

There was little he could do to keep from dying if he continued on while the sun was out. He was past realizing that his bold and certain days were gone and his cautious days were here. He was forced to wait and hope, a familiar, if bitter, practice. He refilled the stone, drank and, in the shade of rocks, he sat and remembered.

He had met his great friend while they were young enough to love each other and too old to speak of it. It was understood and acknowledged in the countless acts of loyalty, generosity, and challenge they offered each other. They were inseparable or, more accurately, when events, family or duty forced separation on them, these things seemed as insubstantial as light. When things were placed between them, each merely had to look towards the other, and he would be seen. At the cliff edges of their abili-

ties, they learned risk and freedom together. When one fell, the other knelt until they both could rise again. As each discovered a new beauty, he ran to the other to tell it, and tell it again, and again and again until they looked through the same eyes in wonder. They were new to the world and each other and mistook their innocence for trust, their ignorance for inexperience. They believed they knew the world and each other, and they were strong in their faith. Because they were young men, they watched their frantic and reckless bodies acquire strength and perfect form, without envy, and often with shy admiration.

While they had only each other for company, the bond held. Then one summer Guinivere came. Her affections ran between them like the blade of a saw in a living tree, tearing forward with one edge, retreating silently with the other, until they fell apart.

A distance existed for the first time between them and, in that unfamiliar and divided moment, Lancelot watched her take his friend as husband, dismantling a union and creating a geometry that could not hold.

He lived at their side for as long as he could, but as they settled into a life together, the separate love he had for each of them was quieted in the chilling pressure of formality. Their marriage gave them responsibilities and stations in the world. Those stations demanded civility, and he was not a civil man. So he began his journeys in the world, throwing himself as far away from them as he could, until loneliness and anticipation carried him back.

Abandoned, he sought company in strangers. Frightened, he took on foolish risks. Standing in the sun, his armor

attracted the light, which it compressed and hammered in white heat along the edge of his sword blade. As it passed through arms and shields raised in resistance, it trailed smoke.

VI

He woke once more as the sun was going down behind him. He refilled the stone beside his head with water and drank it off. Done, he lifted the damp stone and pressed it to his face where the coolness relieved the dryness of his burnt skin. He rolled it end over end across his chest. It touched in a hard, cool caress that was part lick, part slap. Holding it in either hand, he pushed it against his sides and down his legs. He placed it on the ground and stood on it, cooling the bottoms of his feet. Finally, he sat on it, shifting from buttock to buttock, as he waited for his strength and looked east.

The moon came up as the sun went down. He knew he had to keep as much of the light as he could if he hoped to travel now, so he stared at the rock immediately ahead of him, seeing the rough edge, the grit caught in tiny holes on the surface, the raised areas squatting against depressions. A warrior trick he had called back. In an effort to keep his eyes on the edge for an hour, he silenced his pains and dismissed his other senses, until the sun was long gone. The light which had been excessively given to the rest of the world was now being returned, but that which was in front of him, the light he needed, he kept. Which was enough to see the great flock of birds that had been roosting on the ground a small distance ahead of him, lift to wing. The birds were leaving the rocks, their scent, soft and acidic, fan-

ning him as they rose. A multitude of crows, heading east.

He stood and followed them, rationing out ahead of himself the light he had won, and not stumbling.

VII

He knew by the increasing slope under his feet, and by the moon that stayed beside his shoulder instead of rising, that he had entered the mountains. Several natural passes lay both to the north and south, but due east, the direction that he and the birds continued to make, was crumbling slope and rock wall. It became increasingly difficult, for he had to discover the possible, if not secure, paths in his steep climb. As he climbed, he wondered at the birds who kept their pace to his. When he stopped to rest or to consider his route around a large or shifting barrier, they settled under the moonlight on the ground ahead. When he began again, they rose. Their constant presence became for him an anchor and a guide, an eruptive beacon, placing himself in the dark landscape. They spun in and out of patterns that confused his eye in the darkness, their black feathers echoing the dark. It seemed that the birds, often flying direct or angling courses which would take them into each other, instead of turning or exploding in collision, simply passed through.

In the middle of the night, just ahead of the moon, he reached the crest of the mountain. He was tired, sore, cut and bruised. His arms and legs had no strength left to carry him up the last, steep slope. Once more, he had come to a decisive place where he had only his will and his faith to carry him forward. This was something he remembered, the part of

him that separated him from others, his singular place of faith that led to the loneliness of his youth. It was exclusive, a forge bellowed by public victories and private defeats, where he'd struck his anvil and fashioned his cross. It was the thing he most needed to bring him to his feet and to carry him over the top and onward. Which it did as, somewhere ahead of him, the birds lifted again.

VIII

He spent the rest of the night crossing from the peak he had ascended, to the peak beyond and the shallow valley that lay between them. He crossed clear, cold streams. He drank, filled his water skin and, in one slow and wide pool, swam. As the light grew toward morning, he began to distinguish the fruit from among the leaves on the berry bushes scattered on the slope of the second peak, and he was able to eat as he climbed. Another memory of his youth came back to him, one of wandering on the land alone, taking what was wild and making it domestic by his recognition and consumption. In the years since, he had acquired the wisdom to offer the gratitude he knew was missing then; and, lifting his head to the peak turning umber above, he said a prayer of thanks for now and for then, to his God who had provided for both.

He reached the western edge of the long plateau that lay atop the second peak at the same moment the sun began to shoulder above the eastern. They faced one another across the creased and fractured stretch of rock. Lancelot looked down at his skin, still red from yesterday's clash, and began to look for shelter.

IX

He woke again at moonrise, drank, and listened to the crows that had gone mad on the rocks above and around him. A desperate mêlée had broken out among them, torn feathers being piled by the wind against rocks only to be scattered by the violent tumbling struggles of fighting birds. They dove to spike each other from the air, shrieking black darts that struck the rocks and their earthbound targets at the same instant, smashing themselves and others into the ground. He was afraid of what he was seeing. The birds seemed bent on destroying themselves, respecting no differences in size, age, or acquired injury. Screaming rage and defiance at one another, they demonstrated the unique quality that birds possess that is different from any other reasoning species: their unwillingness to flee from, or surrender to, greater strength.

Which Lancelot knew would eventually leave them all dead, or dying at his feet. This was to be his third night travelling east, following the birds, and he no longer could, or wanted to, separate them from himself. On the wing, they were the smoke from the pillar of fire he sought, and when this idea ran against his reason, he abandoned his reason. If they were to destroy each other now, he knew he would be unable to move forward, and he would fail his quest and yield his redemption. There was little left in him of the boy who could enter a field of unnumbered foes and, emblazoned by virtue and skill, defeat them, but there was enough for this.

He came out from under the sheltering rocks and entered the battle in an attempt to draw the vehemence of the birds away from themselves and

onto him. He wanted to give them a reason to turn away from their continuing and relentless self-destruction. He had come to need them, and he used the anger that always came with knowing that, to explode into their midst and compel their attention. He separated locked and tearing couples by hand, and threw them away from each other into the air. He intercepted aerial attacks, batting one away with his arm, lifting the intended victim from the ground with his foot. In the dark, he couldn't distinguish piles of feathers from the fallen, so he took care where to place his feet. He began to take joy in his memory of this old dance, the elegance of strike, the flow of retreat. He lost himself in the movement and the strain. He loosed his voice and cried to heaven, joining with the screeching of the birds to create a raucous, frenzied, night song.

Finally the birds began to notice him. Couples that clung together by beak and claw threw each other off and rose. Solitary fighters turned to watch him for a moment, then rose with their companions. Most of the field, those that lay tired and wounded on the rocks, rose as well. Circling and coming together in the air above Lancelot's head, they turned east.

Laughing, exhausted, Lancelot ran to follow, careless of the rocks and pits. Looking ahead and up to follow the black flock flickering against the stars, he ran directly into the large crack that ran across his path, and went down.

X

His legs broke during the fall into the crevasse. Freed by violence from their structural commitments, they twisted around each other, shaping

themselves in imitation of the point of a spear that the rest of his body was shaft for. As he fell, he knew he was lost, but he wanted to die with his awareness intact, hoping for the appearance of visions at the end. He lifted his arms straight up, pressing their fleshiness against his ears, buffering his skull against collisions with the irregular walls. He tilted his head back to watch the stars stalled in the distance, above the crevasse rim he was dropping away from.

A moment later the crevasse narrowed and, with a hammering scream, he set into the rock like an iron rod, and blacked out.

The stars had shifted when he came to. There were many more of them now, crowding into the narrow crack that ran in both directions above him, a bright splinter against the night sky. He couldn't move, his legs crushed into the rocks below, his arms squeezed between the walls above. He was dying and he would suffer before the end, but he would see it through and use the convulsive discharge of his final moments to drive his soul into eternity. Failing the village hurt him more than the suffering of his body, but the pain was eased by the understanding that soon he would reunite with his friend and almost as quickly with her, under circumstances that had already forgiven their betrayals. So he waited, watching the stars until they ceased their separate sparkling, and began to course like a silver stream above him, until at last his soul left his body and lifted, to be carried away in the current.

XI

From circling above the crevasse, the birds came down. In a single line

they entered the crack. Skimming at speed between the broken rock, they flew to a place far below the body, where they turned in spaces no larger than their own wingspans and drove up. The first one struck the body, entering it like smoke, speeding through the surface. The first bird raced up and through, exciting a flutter of fingertips as it exited, but no more. Then the next in line struck, followed close by those behind. Each passed up and through, and rose again to take their place in the circle that had been created, using the body to dictate their arc. As they dove, turned, drove and passed through, his body began to lighten and shift inside the crack. They flew faster and faster, their tiny, firing hearts pacing their wing beats. Against the stars, they formed a ring of feath-

ers that spun between the earth and the sky. The friction of their magical passage lightened his body and, released from physicality to embrace the spirit he had always sought, it slipped from the stone mooring and rose.

XII

The little girl who had lifted the jug at the well was first to hear the birds the next morning. Alone, she walked from the village to her family's grove, pushed her way through the fruit-laden branches and, near the center, found the body of the old man among the trees. Weeping, she ran beneath the branches and the crying birds to tell her family and the village that their sins had been forgiven, and their punishment was ended. •

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<http://www.rtt.ab.ca/public/rtt/mfarr/skinforge/index.htm>

A S K .

M R .

S C I E N C E !

Ms. AT, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q: If dogs bury bones, why don't cats bury mice?

A: Cats do, indeed, bury mice. But with the intelligence characteristic of cats, they prefer to pass them through their intestines first.

Mr. SF, of Coquitlam, BC, asks:

Q: In early scientific literature one finds many phrases written in Latin. Can Mr. Science translate two such phrases for me?

A: Certainly. The first phrase, "Desidero oscarus meyerus thermite canis ego," is "I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener." The second phrase, "cogito eggo sum," is best translated as "I think I am a waffle." The most commonly encountered Latin phrase is "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," which means, of course, "Don't let the bastards grind you down!"

Mr. GS, of Vancouver, BC, asks by email:

Q: Why do they leave lumber out in the rain?

A: As you may imagine, lumber exposed to the rain will swell in all three dimensions. This allows more pieces to be cut from logs, as the undersize cuts will swell to what you think they should actually measure. The fact that after being used in construction they will shrink again, resulting in leaky condominiums, is of little concern to the greedy lumber barons.

DF, of New Westminster, BC, asks:

Q: If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no-one there to hear it, does it make a sound?

A: Certainly not! This would be extremely wasteful. The energy that would be involved in creating the sound is stored as energy of vibration in the chlorophyll molecules of remaining nearby plants. When the green matter realizes that someone has finally arrived at the scene, the energy is released as the sound it was intended to be, thus frightening away the unwary visitor.

NA asks by email:

Q: Mr. Science once published the most recent measurement of the velocity of light. What is his most recent measurement of the density of water?

A: The newest value for the density of water at 4 deg.C, the temperature at which its density is greatest, is: $d(H_2O) = 4.57206 \times 10^{-22}$ karats per barn-yard

Ms. FH, of Kamloops, BC, asks:

Q: Where can I obtain a life-size model of the Burgess Shale animal which had five eyes?

A: The five-eyed Opabinia, as well as many other life-like and life size reproductions of ancient animals, can be obtained from Fossils 'R Us, in Bayonne, New Jersey. Try their web page at: http://www.cambrian.net/fossils_r_us/fakepage/index/burgess.html.



TIM ANNELL © 97

Repair

Ursula Pflug

Illustrated by Tim Hammell

Before the war, before the news items about exploding dishwashers killing families of five, before she began travelling, Mandy used to visit her friend Sam. His house was filled with washing machines and televisions and eight-track decks piled six deep against the walls. Coffee-makers, IBM XT clones, toaster ovens, microwaves, Dustbusters, waffle-irons, sandwich makers, Beta VCRs, electric toothbrushes. Sam found the broken appliances on the streets, brought them home, fixed them if he could, resold if there were buyers. Supply always far exceeded demand. That was the thing: Sam didn't know how to say no to a motor. And Mandy didn't know how to say no to Sam; she visited often. It wasn't a romantic thing, but she was fascinated by his obsession; he was the only person she knew who didn't pretend there wasn't a war. She liked being near him, soaking up his fearlessness around electrical cords.

His upstairs bedroom boasted thirteen clock radios and five vintage pole lamps, but at least there was a bed. A real bed, too: not twelve obsolete VCRs pushed together to make the mattress platform. Mandy wouldn't have been surprised. One entire wall of the kitchen was lined with refrigerators. They were all plugged in, too, wreaking havoc with Sam's electric bill. He didn't seem to care, thinking to provide energy for his hapless machines more important than groceries and decent clothing. Sam wore corduroys worn ribless at the knees and cheap sneakers that took on an indeterminate color between grey and beige the third time he wore them, and stayed that way.

He'd be sitting in the kitchen when she came, at a chrome and formica dinette set, the foam pushing out of rips in the plastic chair coverings. A bottle of rubbing alcohol would be sitting on the table, as well as Q-Tips and oil of wintergreen for cleaning and restoring the rubber in fan belts and pinch rollers. The innards of a tape recorder would be spread out like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but he'd always push them aside to chat, happy to start up a grinder and a Braun in service of the coffee beans she'd brought. But that was all a long time ago; now Mandy travels, yet she misses him.

Or perhaps it's his house she misses. Sturdily built of red brick, it's the kind of house she grew up in, the kind of house she's never lived in since she left home. It's as though a secure life is something that could only belong to others. She travels; her friends buy houses, eliciting in Mandy a response of both longing and revulsion. Fact is, it's the clutter that frightens her: houses are always filled with closets and basements, walls of cardboard boxes in each. Perhaps that is also why she's drawn to Sam; he dares to be different, just has rooms full of other's people's worn out machines. He's the only person she knows who doesn't have boxes of old clothes and books. For all his junk, Sam is remarkably box-free, and this imparts a kind of secret, unassuming genius.

When she's camping, Mandy dreams she does live in a house. She's always so happy to have her own house at last, but then she goes into the living room and sees the boxes. She sits down in the shadowy room, begins to sort. The sun shines through the old-fashioned too-small windows, and she laments, wishing she were outside enjoying it. But the boxes.

Photographs; family trees; unpublished memoirs; ownerships to vehicles that have been sitting on blocks for years, will now probably never come down off them. Once-good cardigans with tiny moth holes eaten at the edges of the pockets; pleated wool skirts; unhappy childhood memories, passed on replete with the discomfort they engendered, never entirely eschewed. In her dreams the boxes are passed on to her by her parents and grandparents. There are tiny yellowed notes taped to the sides. "This one goes to Mandy—good winter things, shoes."

In real life the stuff sits in her father's garage, in her brother's basement. Her brother has a spouse, children, a house. Sometimes she thinks her relatives dare her to get a house with their endless safekeeping of these objects. No sooner will she have moved in than she'll hear the screech of tires in her driveway, and go outside to see their gleeful legacy to her: a mountain of goddamn cardboard boxes. And so she doesn't.

She lives in tents and apartments, has now for ten years. In lofts with one whole wall of windows and hardly any stuff.

But as she travels, hikes alone along some mountain ridge, she knows the house is inescapable, that somewhere, in some city, there is a two-story yellow brick house with an attic and a basement; a covered porch and upstairs bedrooms; a kitchen to organize and cook in and clean every day of her life; a living room with an old floral couch and an out-of-tune piano. It is a house with her name on it, calling to her, even though she doesn't know where it is.

Once during a trip she comes to a medium sized city with a river winding through it. There is a clock tower she saw once in a dream; surprisingly, Carl

Jung taught her to fly to its peak. She wasn't even in analysis at the time; she was just reading *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. She was good at flying, though; it was only the weight of the cardboard boxes tied to her shoelaces that eventually dragged her down.

She cuts her trip short, saying, "This is where my house must be. This is where the inner world meets the outer." She rents an apartment, waits. Thinks she's ready, walks the leafy residential streets, deep green lawns pegged by mature hardwoods, but instead of finding her house she makes friends and gets a job, counselling troubled teenagers who find their families burdensome; Mandy can relate. One day she's out walking a friend's dog, and she comes across a house she recognizes. But it's Sam's house, not her's. Sam's house still has the stronger magnetism. It's happened before. She's found his house in other cities where she's settled for a few months or a year. Visited him those times too, yet somehow she forgot—accordioned all his houses into the first house, the Vancouver one. Fact is, it's always been the same house; Sam's house has been moving, following her through her war.

She goes up to his kitchen. He sits there as he always does, shuffling through a pile of yellowed claim chits. She bought a pound of the strongest Colombian dark roast at the gourmet coffee store to take back to her flat, but instead she sets it between them on the table. He's doing the paperwork on stoves and refrigerators today.

"Who do they belong to?" she asks.

He disassembles. "People used to come every day," he says, "to bring me appliances, but no one's come for such a long time." His thin hands caress her

paper-wrapped gift; he begins to untie the first of the many careful knots she has left there. The knots are also a gift, to the trigger finger of his memory. She takes one of the seven electric kettles that stand sentinel the length of the stained counter top that houses not one but four built-in dishwashers. Mandy wonders why he needs so many, considering how infrequently she's seen him eat. She prepares to fill the kettle, but her hand slips on the smooth surface of the tap. "You could leave," she says. She watches his fingers fold back the paper lips of the package, releasing the rich, secret aroma of the dark powder, a wash of many things long forgotten.

"You always bring such good coffee," he says. Her hands neglect the kettle, the running water. "How could I leave? I wouldn't leave unless they came back for their machines." Water floods over the spout of the kettle that sits forgotten in the sink, forgotten by all but the sink itself. The sink remembers the kettle; stainless steel reflects chrome in a silver-colored duet.

"D'you think they'll come back?" she asks.

She knows it hasn't been so very long since he was twenty, sitting in cafes with his friends. He'd only just begun collecting junk; it was before they began to deliver. In those days, he still went out. His hands were different then, she remembers, graceful and young-looking. Hands innocent of the rough touch of sandpaper, rubbing away at corroded electrical contacts, at the sadness of elements so long in disuse they have forgotten their true purpose: to cook the food and save the time of their patient masters.

"I don't know." Hands wearied by disdain let fall a sheaf of claim chits; they surge to the floor in a yellow surf. "They

weren't bad people. They didn't mean to lie. They just forgot."

"Just like we forgot, you and I." But she wonders what it is Sam's forgotten.

Shipments came to his door every day for the duration of the war. He slept through most of the fighting, dreaming long dreams of a soldier's life. While he slept, his house grew; it expanded into a hospital for the wounded: the thousands of lonely, discarded household appliances. He has tape recorders people brought him six years before, asked him to repair. They always promised they'd be back in a week, but few ever came. It seems to make him sadder now than it used to.

He drinks his coffee black, but she takes milk, so he opens the refrigerators one by one: the Kenwoods, the General Electrics, the Westinghouses, and her favorites, the squat and jolly fifties Frigidaires. In the last of the Frigidaires she finds a can of condensed milk.

"I think it's still good," he says, peering cautiously into the yellow encrusted opening.

The milk is just a little off, but Mandy doesn't mention it. They sit together at the long counter, sipping their coffees, and Mandy thinks of the Frigidaires of her childhood: plump, happy, well-fed Frigidaires, their enamel stomachs full with meat and vegetables, their hunger for human partnership sated by juice, milk, eggs and cheeses. She feels so sorry for these empty refrigerators; she'd like to bring each of them some small thing: a lemon, a jar of seafood sauce, a half-empty bottle of soda water left over from a party.

They drink their coffee; Sam shuffles through his decks of file cards. Now and again he pulls one out to show her, as though he felt certain, that of all people, Myrna George would be back for her

yellow Maytag washer and dryer set. They had been such enthusiastic machines, she had told him, a playful couple, singing through their work like twin canaries. "I've gotten old," he says, looking up at her. "But you're still young. How did it happen?"

Mandy reaches across and smooths the hair out of his eyes. His hand moves tenuously across the faded formica, closing around her own. She holds his hand and thinks about the war. Very early on, her best girl friend Shereen was strangled late at night by her vacuum cleaner. That was when Mandy left on her first trip, to walk through mountains where machines couldn't follow.

"Come live with me, Mandy," Sam says.

"I can't," she says. "I like you, Sam, a lot, but I could never live with all this stuff. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night; I'd think they were coming to get me."

"When they've all been reclaimed, then?" he asks hopefully.

Mandy sighs, leafs through a scrapbook Sam has made, full of clippings about the war. "Why are the machines so angry?" Sam will know if anyone does.

"They're being used to do things people should have been doing for themselves."

"I thought that's why we made them, to help us with the work."

"The purpose of cleaning has always been to order the soul, defrag the community. When people began using machines for cleaning they stopped doing it consciously, with attention. The machines are upset; they don't mind the work, but they want people to know they have feelings too." He shows Mandy a photograph of an iron scalding a man's arm, with intent.

"People hoped if they got new ones,

they'd be nicer, right?"

"It just made things worse." He turns the page. "Here's the one about that woman whose electrical things all short-circuited when she walked in the room. Everything that was on. The last time it happened, the house caught fire and burned down. No one got out alive."

"More mutiny. Well, I'm glad someone figured it out."

"You thought I was just killing time, right? And how was your war?"

"Oh, okay. I learned how to fly in my dreams."

"That's nice."

She's suddenly very tired. "I have to go now." It's the weight of the boxes, calling to her to attend to them. They want her to go home and sleep, she knows, and unpack them in her dreams again. Perhaps she could get Carl to teach her how to levitate them, so they wouldn't be so heavy.

Sam gets up and goes into the bathroom. She hears the sound of an electric shaver, followed by a Water-Pik. She wonders who they belonged to, before they belonged to Sam. She pokes her head in the door and asks.

"They're Bob Morton's," Sam says cheerfully, reading the ticket. "I'm just borrowing them. They like it when you use them." Sam peers at the tag, reading. "He's coming back for it on Thursday. I can hardly wait. There's a whole box full of fixed toothbrushes waiting for a turn. I worry about the ones I don't get around to using."

She doesn't tell Sam that Mr. Morton won't be back on this or any other Thursday afternoon. She remembers the newspaper article; it must have been one of the few that Sam missed. Robert Morton died in the war, of complications following concussion when his television fell on him. He couldn't take

his shaver with him, or his Water-Pik, for that matter.

"Tell me if you change your mind," Sam says, as she buttons her coat.

"I might, too," she says, too embarrassed to ask where the stairs are, feeling momentarily lost in his endless upstairs hallways.

In the city there is a cafe. She talks Sam into going out for coffee the next afternoon. There are plants and afternoon light and the timeless, aimless, congenial feel of bohemian afternoons: drinking cappuccinos, listening to jazz on the radio, reading their horoscopes in the paper. The change of scene seems to be doing Sam good.

"Fuck it," she says, biting into her pita stuffed with avocado, cream cheese, sprouts, tomatoes and black olives; her favorite kind of cafe food.

"Fuck what?" he asks. He is designing circuit boards on the back of his napkin, quite happily, it seems.

"Fuck the fucking machines. Fuck the appliances. Nobody's ever going to come back for them. They all died in the war."

"The war?" Sam sounds puzzled, as though without his scrapbook, he has forgotten all about the war. Mandy is patient; she knows that during the fighting, people began storing even the things they were supposed to remember themselves in machines. It's a kind of electronic amnesia.

"You remember, the war between human beings and household appliances. People using their machines for three years and then abandoning them, not knowing they contained peoples' memories, their power for self-determination. At least some of them brought their machines to you. They knew you couldn't turn them down. You had the

heart they were lacking, the guts, the courage. They were ignorant cowards. But it was better than just taking them to the dump."

Afternoon light diffracted through the glass of a cafe window overlooking the river. Water, winding its path through her life, disturbing it just a little, so that the images ripple and she senses the reality behind the dream. But why does her life so often seem like a dream? Why can't she take objective reality at face value, like other people? But no, for her it's always: "Who's that masked man?" Who's that masked reality?

This question of where to be on the outside of her life seems especially important now. It must match her inner reality, her inner needs, in a way she has never found necessary before. Junk into jewels. A big box she opens and is suddenly happy with the contents, instead of feeling burdened by them. That is what she hopes to dream of now. She plans it every night, before she goes to sleep. But no luck yet.

"Just leave them?" Sam asks.

"You heard me."

"But where would I go?"

"On a trip. With me. You could always come back if you changed your mind."

"I haven't travelled in years," Sam says.

"I know. And I've done very little else. I'd keep going, but every city I end up in, I always find your house, you. It always stops me," Mandy replies.

"That's interesting. I don't remember moving."

"You don't. You've still got the same house, right? I think it's following me; it moves in your sleep. You sleep a lot, remember? You slept through the war. You'd wake up every time I visited, 'cause I brought good coffee. But it was

always in a different city. Your house grew, too; surely you noticed that."

"Sure, Mandy. I bet you know what I ate, too."

"Coffee and cigarettes, mostly."

"You really found me every place you went?"

She looks out the window, at the river. "It's not like I wanted to, Sam. It just happened."

The truth is, it's something else she'd like to say. She'd like to say, "Come live in my house with me. It's made of yellow brick. It's different from yours: there's a garden, and a piano. Old perennials in the garden: lupines, phlox, peonies. Daffodils and lilacs in the spring." Except she can't offer it, because she doesn't know where it is.

In her dream she unpacks boxes. Old camping cookware, ugly acrylic sweaters, Corningware dishes, lamp shades, green and white striped plastic tomato hats, five packages of gardening gloves. Then come several extremely heavy boxes; these contain years of *Harrowsmith* and *National Geographic*. A lighter box: knitting needles, unused envelopes, spools of thread, yarn. She sets aside the envelopes for herself and the knitting things for a friend who actually knows what purl means, and how to do it. Everything else will be carted off to the Sally Ann, except for one pair of gardening gloves and the camping dishes. Another heavy one: books. *Reader's Digest* compressions, Robert Ludlum and Danielle Steele go in the OUT pile; she'll keep the dictionary and the thesaurus; you can always use an extra one of those.

It's a lot of work, taking days, weeks, years. Funny how years can go by, even in a dream. She looks at her hands; they've aged like Sam's. One box to go;

she rips off the first layer of packing tape, taking half the box's lid with it. She sighs; her hands attacking the tape look veined and worn. Life is nasty, brutish and short. You unpack other people's boxes and, when you're finally finished and ready to lead your own life, you die. Or at least your hands look like you've worked as a dishwasher for the past twenty years.

The last box contains, for once, not mismatched bowling shoes but life, a misplaced life when people had their own power instead of giving it away to machines. Also, surprisingly, it contains a very pleasant life, all her own, a life she shares with Sam. Suddenly she knows everyone must unpack their boxes, down to the very last one; the bottom one is always the one containing the longed-for treasure. If only the top boxes in the stack weren't so scary, almost as scary as vacuum cleaners.

She tells Sam, all except the last part. She doesn't want him to think it's destiny; there's got to be his choice, too. He sits there, drawing circuit boards on the backs of napkins.

She has gone to meet him, at the cafe. On her way she found an open store, and bought a pound of coffee. She watched the long string as it wrapped around and around her parcel: at once protection and imprisonment. For the memories that aren't ready to emerge yet, the boxes still too heavy to unpack, the ranges with too much life left in them to take to the dump. As always, they talk about the war.

"It's not the machines' fault, even though a lot of people would like to make it so. Maximum security for rechargeable flashlights, electric chair for dishwashers."

"The dishwashers are the worst," he says, "really hardened."

"No hope for rehabilitating the dishwashers. But if we'd used them properly, they wouldn't have turned against us. Everybody forgot."

"I didn't forget," Sam says.

"I know," she says. "You forgot something else."

"I know. If only I could remember what it was. Are you going to order?"

"I think I'll have the poppy seed cake today. And a cap. Hey look," she puts her parcel down. "I brought you coffee. You can take it home with you. Then you'll still have it in the morning if your house moves again."

"Planning another trip, are you? The jazz show starts in fifteen minutes. Life becomes very real when you've cut through enough shit."

"Gotten rid of enough of other people's garbage."

"You mean boxes, I believe."

"Perhaps in my case," she says. "In your case, we're talking twenty-five obsolete VCRs."

"I'm sorry, Mandy," he says. "I'd like to dump them, but I just can't. My heart would break, and besides, I've been planning to build an editing system out of them for years."

"The VHS," she says, exasperated. "You couldn't do it with the Beta ones."

She walks, her heart heavy with sorrow for her friend and the burden he has chosen to bear, but after a time she forgets. She forgets Sam in his house with the ticking of clocks and the humming of radios, the sighs of sad stoves and dejected dishwashers. He is the custodian of our disrepair; he waits for us all. He would like more than anything to dream a new game, but he knows he can't do it alone.

She travels again, comes to another city. She rents an apartment and longs

for a house. She thinks she'll find it soon, her yellow brick house, speakers holding the windows open, spilling jazz into the peony garden where she sits talking with her friends, drinking iced tea and eating Pillsbury lemon cake. But she doesn't, and the war is now so escalated, she doesn't even find Sam's house. She waits a year to find it, and then she leaves. She's always found his house within a year before.

Years and cities, better counselling jobs and more expensive apartments, Mandy's loss of memory the detritus of a war she inherited but never made.

Her apartments are free of the simplest electrical appliances; her hands begin to resemble her faded dream hands, ever since the dishwasher that came with the flat broke. She never had it repaired; the only person she'd trust to do it properly is Sam, and she's lost her inner compass for his house. She does her wash at the Laundromat. The Laundromats are crowded now; there's been very few cases of reported machine murder in public coin washes. Still she always hurries, does her folding at home.

Sam sits alone in his house with all of our throwaway electric hearts, and his own still-human heart grows larger and sadder to accommodate us all. He begins to think humans have lost the war. People who can afford it are replacing their major appliances every six months now. There are no reported cases of assault by an appliance under six months old.

On her trip Mandy stops once in a small town, driving in every day from her campground so she can complete a course in small engine repair; it's time she got over it, she figures. It's the only way the war will ever end. And afterwards, her endless dream boxes are

easier to unpack.

Sam sees it in his dream, too, and is immensely relieved. His hands look a little younger when he wakes.

Mandy comes again to a city, buys coffee. Walks up the streets, up the hill, as though following other footsteps. Pushes open the door of the big brick house which, she realizes, has lately gotten a coat of yellow paint, that pale yellow she loves. The interior smells the same. Solder, rotted wiring, chipped enamel paint. Up up the stairs to the shadowy kitchen where he sits, asleep at the table.

Without waking him up, she plugs in the kettle. She makes coffee, and when the aroma of it fills the kitchen Sam sits up and smiles, seeing it is Mandy.

"Coffee's on," she says.

"We did pretty good last time," he says. "Didn't we? Made progress. We even went out a couple of times, somewhere, I forget."

"A cafe," she says, "with jazz and a view of the water."

"Great food, wasn't it? You know, I'm starved."

"We'll just have one cup here and then we can go out again. So why's your house yellow now?"

"I remembered something while you were on your trip. That I always wanted to live in a yellow house, my whole childhood. It's important to do things as an adult you wanted as a kid, even if you think your wants are different now you're grown up."

"You painted it?" Mandy smiles secretively, sipping her coffee.

"I had it done."

They walk, hand in hand. She notices their hands look about the same age now. When they get to the waterfront, there is indeed a cafe, and a store front

beside it, with a "For Rent" sign.

"Why don't we rent it?" she says. "The war seems to be pretty well over. People will be needing appliances, and this time I bet they'll know the value of old ones, the lost memories they contain. We could sell all of yours. Those other people are never coming back," she tells him, in case he's forgotten again. "They're all

dead."

"I think you're right, this time." Instead of going into the cafe Sam turns down the side street, towards the water. He reaches into his pocket and takes out his stack of yellowed claim chits, fastened together with an elastic band. He takes it off and throws them into the river, where they spread out like a deck of cards. •

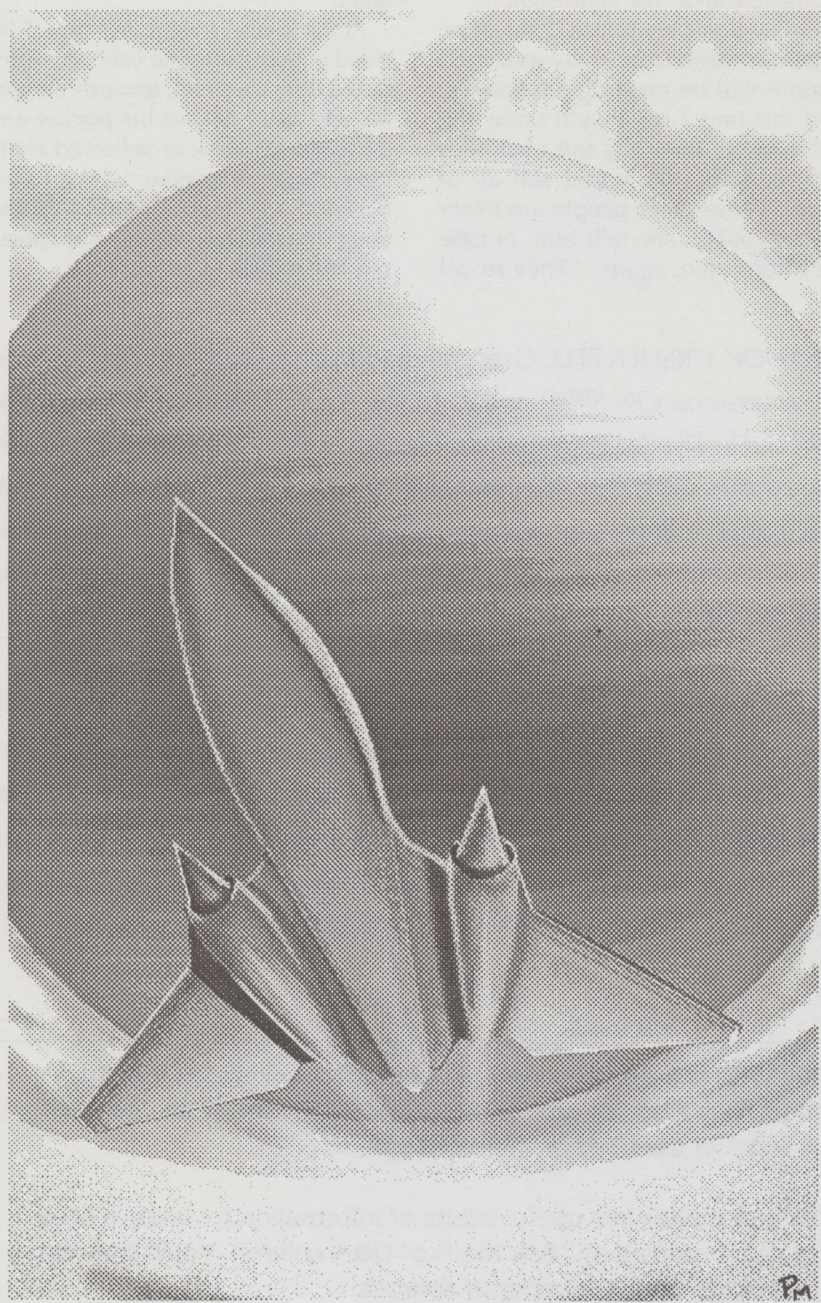
AUTHOR: URSULA PFLUG recently had work in *Leviathan*, *Freezer Burn*, *Transversions*, *ON SPEC*, and *BBR*. She has new stories forthcoming in *BBR* and in *The Peterborough Review*. Her work in *Transversions* and *BBR* were author-illustrated. A contributing editor at *The Peterborough Review*, she 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.

ILLUSTRATOR: TIM HAMMELL is working on two Harley calendars this year. He says: "Just thought I'd let everybody know that at 45 you start to fall apart—I'm heading for bifocals, had high blood pressure, and am undergoing root canal. Donations will be gratefully accepted for the latter. Actually, I'm sorting all my SF art, some of it very ancient, into limited edition folios that I will be offering to fans probably by the new year.

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Doomball

Keith Scott

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

Cam Frizek scowled. What the hell was she trying to tell him? Some poop about a ball the size of a three-story house hurtling around the earth? At over four thousand miles per hour?

Get out of here. "You sure it wasn't a meteorite?" he asked her aloud. He did little to hide his disbelief, or his irritation.

She swung her head around to face him in total surprise. "Where have you been in the past twenty-four hours, Dr. Frizek?" she asked.

"At the observatory," he said. "Double shifting on the 120-inch scope, and I haven't eaten or slept—"

"Few of us have, Dr. Frizek." She shook her head in grim sympathy. "No, it's not a meteorite. We thought so, at first— then our doomball kept coming back."

"Doomball?"

"That's what we're calling it."

*Trust the military to call it something diddly dramatic as **doomball**, he scoffed to himself. He was still smarting at his unceremonious departure at the hands of two burly Air Force MPs an hour earlier from the Link Observatory, high above San Jose, California. Cam was tired, rumpled and unshaven, hungry—and quite unhappy.*

*Now he and this tight-lipped Air Force captain were sitting in the front cabin of *Air Force Six* from the presidential fleet, the rumble of its twin jets scarcely reaching them in the cabin's thickly opulent and carpeted interior. They had just taken off from the San Jose Airport.*

"So why me, Captain Chilton?" he asked her.

Cam could see she was trying to keep her composure, taking time to smooth her Air Force jacket with its pilot's wings pinned on the upper left side, reaching for the right words for a wrong situation. He could also see something like contempt gathering beneath the deep fatigue lines on her face.

"Why not you?" she countered quietly.

"Hey! I've just been press-ganged from the observatory, bundled into a jeep,

careered down the mountainside—”

“Sorry about that,” she said, “but we didn’t have time for social niceties on this one—”

“What? For a defense project run amuck?”

“This is not a defense project—”

“Oh, no!” he stopped her. “Don’t tell me your *doomball* came in from deep space?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

Cam took the time to look at her fully. Her tired sincerity was beginning to reach him, almost enough to overcome his initial irritation. She returned his gaze steadily.

“Look, Dr. Frizek,” she went on, “what you think of the military is totally immaterial to me. Or even what you think of me. But since we’ll be together for some time, I think we should remember we are professionals.”

Cam tested her thought for a long beat. “Okay, Captain Chilton.” He sat back in his seat, cooling the worst of his ruffled feelings.

What else could he do? He was a captive audience. Sure as hell, he couldn’t just get up and leave at thirty thousand feet. Besides, the wild improbability of him, Cam Frizek, riding as sole passenger in a jet from the presidential fleet, was beginning to reach him, even awe him a little. He began to revert to his usual role of passive onlooker. Emotional outbursts were rare with him, at least outwardly.

“Still,” he persisted in a quieter voice, “I’m only a beginner in a crowded field, nothing published. Why me?”

“Want me to be blunt?”

“Why not? You’ve made a good start.” He flipped it out with a short defensive laugh. Yet her question about bluntness jarred him, made him draw back into his customary wariness. Circle

the wagons, Cam told himself with tired and practiced resignation.

“We simply fed in two words in our search of stretch-brains,” she said. “Astrophysics and ... *dyslexia*.”

It hit with its usual force. “God-damn,” he said. “You guys sure got class!”

“Sorry. But we’d heard that dyslexic people tend to see in pictures, tend to think and approach problems differently—”

“So?”

“And your CV says you work in orbital physics.”

“Still a shitty way—”

“Granted. I told you we didn’t have time for Marquis of Queensbury rules on this. And *maybe* you’re the guy we’re so desperately looking for.”

He read serious doubt in her face about her “maybe.” Even more doubt about whether he could ever be the right guy for any situation as far as she was concerned.

So be it. They didn’t seem to like each other.

“Okay,” Cam said finally, swallowing his mix of personal hurt and dislike for this tall, angular-faced captain with the unblinking blue eyes whom he had just met a crowded fifteen minutes ago. “Can you tell me what we’re up to?” he added.

“We refuel in Lisbon, then on to Calcutta. There’s a new UN/NATO airbase there.”

“Then what?”

“I’m F121 certified,” she said with a trace of a smile, her very first. “We borrow one of those Mach-6 babies from the UN/NATO squadron at Calcutta and ... we go doomball chasing over the Bay of Bengal. It’s much better to eyeball the thing than rely on pictures.”

“Do I get to say anything about this?”

"Not really," she smiled again, wider this time. "You chicken to fly with a fem jet jock?"

There was something behind the smile that made Cam leave her question alone. But he had his own questions. Sure as hell, he had a lot of questions.

Five minutes later, an Air Force corporal brought them a fancy platter of canapés and sandwiches from the galley.

"We were scheduled for a trade mission flight to Singapore before your people preempted," the corporal explained the platter dryly to Captain Chilton. "*Bon appetit.*"

The corporal left them and Cam wolfed into the sandwiches. The MPs had caught him just as he was going into the Link Observatory cafeteria for breakfast.

He started to feel a lot better.

"How wide's the affected area?" he asked Chilton.

"It varies. At the latitude of the Ganges Delta, about ten kilometers," she said. "That's where it started. The ball made its ninth orbit at 0623 this morning." She stopped and sighed. It did things for her, Cam noted. Softened her, made her less military.

"You say the ball takes six hours for each nearly circumpolar circuit?" he asked.

"Yes. But some sort of onboard sensing and steering system insures that the next pass will be over *fresh* ground. Each time around, it goes right up against the last pass. Always from about nine meters altitude."

"You make it sound like it's plowing," he said.

"That's the analogy that's getting top billing," she agreed. "In theory, it could plow the entire planet."

"Jesus Christ," Cam said quietly,

shocked at last into full commitment to the problem.

They arrived at Calcutta at 20:00 hours, India time. Cam had a half-seen view of the F121 flight line as they taxied in, grim black silhouettes with their twin tails reaching up into the moist, fog-laden darkness. He felt excitement rising within him.

Cam loved flying as a personal exercise in freedom, even though with its multidimensional visuals—angles, arcs, circles, vectors—all mixed with the blur of motion, it sometimes brought complications for his dyslexia. So much so that he could never fly solo when he tried years before for his private pilot's license, a point of great disappointment to him. Now the thought of riding the rear seat of an F121, the world's fastest jet, kept him awake with excitement as he lay in his borrowed bed in the officer's quarters.

Anne Chilton's crack about him being anti-military had been off the mark. As a youngster he had dreamed of becoming a fighter pilot until his limitations became clear. *Let's face it*, he'd told himself early on, *with my particular brand of dyslexia, I'm a bit strange, and that means I become a hermit or face the constant reminders of this strangeness and the put-downs of mainstream living.* He had opted for the solitary life of an observatory scientist.

Now a grim-faced and disturbing Air Force captain was forcing an intrusion into his hermitage because of an emergency so big he was still having trouble getting his mind around it. Did she have the right to do this? Did anyone or anything have the right?

Sleep finally claimed him.

Next morning in the squadron mess, he was glad to see that Captain Chilton

appeared to have slept well. She looked crisp and competent in her flight suit, but she gave him only a cold brief smile. So, he noted wryly, he was still being flamed as far as she was concerned.

Over her shoulder, he was startled to see Dirk Straeder, the Nobel Laureate physicist, talking to two other scientist types he also recognized but couldn't quite identify. The mess rapidly filled up with an interesting looking group of scientific specialists from around the world.

"Sorry we haven't time for introductions," Chilton announced briskly as they sat down with their breakfast trays. "We lift off at 0700. That'll give us an intercept with our friend over the Bay of Bengal. We'll be able to close in on the ball for nearly five minutes before it comes inland."

"What happens when it does?"

"Kicks up supreme hell with its bow wave and sonics," she said. "At that height and speed, a combination of air fist and sonic boom manages to plow up everything under it."

"What d'you mean, air fist?"

"You know, like the energy force that immediately precedes a *tsunami* tidal wave. Only this is air."

She returned his gaze with her unblinking blue eyes. Cam wasn't good at guessing these things, but he'd put Anne Chilton in her late twenties, about his own age. In spite of their earlier spitting match, he was beginning to be impressed by her quiet competence, by the taut briefings she had given him. He regretted his lashing out at her in *Air Force Six*. But, as always, he didn't know quite how to say sorry.

One of the groundcrew suited him up in the flight room, giving him his passenger emergency instructions in a flat un-

emotional voice. Cam seesawed between excitement and fear. His love for flying was having some trouble making the quantum jump from a Cessna to a hypersonic F121.

"Your chute is packed into your cockpit seat," the groundcrew tech finished up. "Captain Chilton will tell you how to eject individually from the crew pod if the pod has to be popped."

"Why are you telling me this?" Cam asked with a nervous laugh.

"Because regulations require it when a civilian rides with the military," the tech replied matter-of-factly. "Just a formality."

They walked out along the flight line to where Anne Chilton stood beside a massively ominous F121, flat-bottomed and ugly, looking like a lethal sea-creature melting into itself.

She had gone ahead from the flight room to do her walk-around inspection of the stealth aircraft. Cam knew the F121 was a combined Russian-American-British design made possible after the UN Entente of 2004. The major Russian contribution was the laminar flow features of the delta wing, nearly ten million laser-cut suction holes drilled into the upper surface of the wings to reduce drag. The axial flow Amazon turbojets came from the British. All of the rest, airframe, electronics, armament, instrumentation, was American-built.

Captain Chilton climbed the ladder up into the floor hatch behind the front cockpit without a word to Cam. Two groundcrew moved the ladder slightly and stood aside for him. One of them, a black man with UN/NATO sergeant stripes, smiled at him. "Don't worry, sir," he soothed, "just like riding a baby carriage."

"Yeah right, man," Cam thanked him

with a weak smile. Claustrophobia hit him from all sides as he eased his bony six-foot frame up into the rear cockpit. The sergeant followed him, stopping waist-high in the aircraft, giving him strap-in and intercom instructions, and another encouraging smile before he left.

The takeoff was mind-blowing. One minute he was sitting in the "locked-down" cockpit with adrenaline racing within him from head to toe. The next minute he was smashed against his seat back like a squashed fly on a wall by the twin afterburned push of the giant Rolls Royce Amazon 2010 jets. Cam had little awareness of when they left the ground. All he knew was that he was lying on his back as the F121 sat on its twin tails and howled up into the blue-black sky under 40,000 pounds of thrust from each engine. The altimeter's hundred-meter sweep on the control panel spun as though out of control. Cam had the feeling they were falling into space at full throttle, and his senses went into hyperdrive.

"Okay back there?" Chilton's voice was sickeningly cool in his headphones.

"Yup," he squeezed out. "Wow, this is fabulous."

"Liking it?" She sounded surprised. "We'll level out in a moment. You can relax more then."

Some of his dislike flowed back. Was she putting him down? He was about to say something when the F121 abruptly changed attitude, flattening out with a bone-cracking jerk into straight and level flight.

Cam's stomach seemed to stay on vertical climb. She must have done that on purpose, he told himself with a huge smile. He reached again for the intercom switch but Chilton spoke up ahead of him.

"Thunder Two, you reading?"

"Da, Thunder One," Cam heard the answer. He looked out over the right wing and was stupefied to see another F121 sitting a bare five meters from their wingtip. It was their *chase* plane. He remembered Chilton speaking briefly at breakfast to a smiling round man with steely gray eyes. Gray Eyes wore a Russian uniform with major's shoulderboards and his name was Yago Gregori.

"Hey, Yago," Chilton laughed into the intercom. "Back off. I don't want any wet pants or worse on this flight."

Cam smiled. "Too late, Captain Chilton," he said.

"Push your intercom into the third position, Dr. Frizek," Chilton spoke coolly. "That way we can all hear each other."

"I *am* in the third position, Captain Chilton."

"Oh shit," she muttered, realizing her mistake.

The chase F121 pulled away and Cam heard a chuckle followed by the deeply Russian accented voice. "Maybe we have big shoot-out back at base, eh?" Before anyone could answer Yago went on, "AWAC airborne radar report lock-on. Target speed, course, same like every time."

"Okay, Yago," Chilton said, "We're going down, rear seat. Opening up *gently* to Mach 6."

"Thank you, *front* seat," Cam said with exaggerated politeness.

She didn't answer. But he watched her helmet in the front cockpit shake from side to side. He was still dog meat with her, he guessed.

Cam saw it at about ten thousand meters. The sky over the mouth of the Bay of Bengal was almost cloudless and, far to the southeast, he could see a giant rooster tail thrown up by a speeding

object. He remembered seeing hydrofoils racing in the St. Clair River, off Detroit, when he was a boy at Windsor, Ontario. But this rooster tail must have been more than two hundred meters high.

"How does it react to changes in grade?" he said into his mouthpiece.

"Conforms closely to the topography once it's over land, at about twenty-six to thirty feet high. Seems to break all laws of physics when it hits noticeable grade changes."

Yago broke in from above them, "Speed like every time. Mach 6.1."

Chilton put their F121 into a long diving turn and the engine whine climbed. Cam knew they had completed their turn when the sun switched sides, popping up on the right side of the fixed canopy. He looked out the left side over the engine bulge.

"Try not to touch the inside of any exterior skin surface, Dr. Frizek," Chilton's voice warned from the front cockpit. "We just passed Mach 6 and we're on the way to a heat soak temp of more than 800 degrees Fahrenheit."

They were on a converging course with the doomball, still a thousand meters below them. The sun glinted off the speeding ball, almost as though it were signaling to them. Cam released the binoculars from their holder on the firewall and focused on the ball. The bino-vids were wired into one of the onboard computers for instant viewing and assessment by the AWAC C2300 cruising five miles above them. Cam wondered if the hookup with CNN and the world had been made yet. Chilton had told him with little enthusiasm at breakfast that this was in the works.

The ball leapt into instant focus in the glasses. As Chilton had said, it was a shifting range of dull greasy grays, occa-

sionally relieved by luminescent flashes of almost full spectrum color.

"We bang her yesterday," Yago spoke from his position a mile above them. "Two ground-to-air missiles near Bysk, in Russia. Nuke tips."

"Should have vaporized the damn thing," Chilton said. "Is it doing much damage in Russia, Yago?"

"First day, very bad," he answered. "Now, people move."

Cam wondered at North America's good fortune. The ball's northward trajectory ran through China, Mongolia and a massive chunk of Siberian Russia, finally crossing the 75th parallel of the Arctic Ocean twice. On its southward leg, it sliced across unpopulated parts of Alaska and then skirted the west coasts of both North and South America. At this point, most of the doomball's passage was over ocean.

"Can we see the other side?" Cam asked.

"We'll be looking upsun," Chilton complained. But the scream of the jets climbed another notch as she increased speed for the crossover. Cam felt disoriented when the doomball passed beneath them. From this position he could see the V-shaped roiling wake in the sea behind the ball, the ruffled water spreading out behind it nearly a kilometer wide.

Cam adjusted the bino-vids' filtering device. As Chilton pointed out, this was the partially shaded side of the ball, but slanting sunlight was bringing more features into view. He was startled to see a series of ripples pass over the surface, almost as though there were life within it. Yet the ball had the unmistakable look of metal. Could there be metal life?

"Did we measure its temperature?" he asked.

"Straeder here, Dr. Frizek," Cam was

surprised to hear the crisp voice of the German physicist. "We've got a whole team going up that alley. Dead end, so far."

"Can we go to max magnification on the bino-vid, Thunder One?" a new voice broke in from the AWAC above them.

"And maybe get in closer, front seat," Cam urged.

"Hang on. There's a sonic bow wave coming off that sucker," Chilton said. "Makes it very tricky."

The ball grew enormously in his binoculars. He locked them onto their target and eyeballed the rest of their approach. Viewed from fifty meters, the doomball looked staggeringly ominous. There was an air of implacable age about it, a cold *alienness*, reaching back into the millennia. He got the impression that it may have been crafted even before human intelligence started forging itself on the anvil of evolution. Was the ball crafted or spawned? Cam shivered.

He moistened his lips. "A little closer," he urged.

"You gotta be kidding, Frizek," Chilton answered. "We'll be over the delta in a second."

Cam smiled. "You chicken, Chilton?" "Asshole!" she said with a short laugh. *That's better*, he grinned. *She's coming around*.

The doomball loomed gigantic in the glasses and Cam sucked in his breath as they hit the shoreline of the Ganges Delta, a solid thermal bump lifting their F121 a hundred meters higher. Strangely, the bump had no effect on the doomball. *It sure doesn't follow our rules*, Cam noted. He refocused the bino-vids on the small ripples creeping along the side of the ball, increasing magnification to its maximum.

"Do you see what I think I see, AWAC?" he said to the C2300 above. "Can you see the tiny holes opening along the crests of those ripples—?"

"Can't stay here, Frizek," Chilton warned. "I've got to pull away—"

"Please. Another second?"

She said nothing but they held their position.

"Okay. We got it, Thunder One," Straeder called. Chilton eased their F121 up and away from the doomball, straightening out on a parallel course about five hundred meters away.

From here, Cam could see a little of the massive damage inflicted on the ground by the ball's shock wave, spreading in a wide carpet behind them. The effect of the doomball's passage at nine meters was so catastrophic that the ground was instantly obscured by a vast cloud of dust and churning debris.

He looked out the other side of their aircraft at land already "processed" by the ball in its previous twelve or thirteen passes. It looked like a plowed field, all evidence of trees, vegetation, growth, anything manmade—all totally flattened, all freshly turned. He had to look to the edge of the corridor, kilometers away, to slow their speed blur and see recognizable features.

Cam felt himself starting to slip, to sidestep the compensating measures he had learned so carefully. He closed his eyes as powerful waves of vertigo swept over him, but the image of the devastated landscape stayed with him, as though burned into his retinas of his eyes ... and then it came, as it always did, the superimposed, altered view—

"Thunder One," Cam heard AWAC in his headset. "We get unmistakable sign of some sort of faint mist coming off the ball at dead slow vid. Just before it hit land."

"Right, AWAC," Chilton said. "We're going up, rear seat, before speed-freeze puts us into the deck."

Cam opened his eyes. He had never been so grateful in his life as when she pulled the F121 up from the mad, sickeningly greasy slide of the ground a scant twenty meters below them. He felt completely wrung out, drained.

Yago Gregori's F121 moved into line abreast position at about a thousand meters. "Here come Chittagong Hills," he announced.

Cam refocused the bino-vids. The doomball, or the wildly vortexing dust and debris storm that hid it, was racing across the delta land, perhaps the flattest bit of real estate on the planet. He grimaced when he saw a small gathering of houses, dead ahead, in the path of the ball. He knew that most people had been evacuated but the instant destruction of the homes shocked him to his core.

Cam swung the glasses ahead of the ball's path, to the Chittagong Hills, then up to the Annapurean Range, foothills to the Himalayas.

Out of habit, Cam went to his room directly after dinner in the mess. He was startled when Major Yago Gregori showed up a few minutes later at the door to his room with a bottle of beer in each powerful hand. He held the beer up for inspection.

"Pakistani," he announced. "Not so bad stuff."

The Russian major came in and placed the beer on Cam's bedside table. There were two twin beds in the room and several easy chairs. Yago twisted the caps off the bottles and settled into one of the chairs.

"Annie have some fun with you today?" he laughed, handing Cam one of

the bottles.

"Yeah. I guess I deserved it," Cam admitted.

"We fly together in F121 training at Edwards AFB. Damn good pilot, Annie." He took a long drink from his bottle. "How come you see holes in our pet doomball?"

"Wild guess, my friend," Cam said.

"Good guess," Gregori laughed back at him. "This afternoon, botanists go in to first plowed area. Stuff coming out of your holes is spores. Very old. Like cyanophyte algae, low growth. But this algae make methane—"

"Jesus," Cam interrupted. "*Terraforming*. It means to change our atmosphere!"

"Maybe," Yago agreed, then he stood up. "Now better finish beer. Meet in five minutes, conference hall."

Cam upended the bottle in his mouth and drained what was left. It was good beer. He could feel its warmth spreading though him, relaxing him. He felt grateful to this jovial Russian major for easing his participation in the coming discussion.

Not the easiest situation for him, he reminded himself.

There were perhaps twenty airmen and scientists gathered in the lounge. Dirk Straeder had the floor, speaking in his precise, flawless English.

"Ah ... our sharp-eyed young Canadian," he greeted Cam and Yago as they entered the lounge. Cam smiled back at Straeder, but he tensed at the Nobel Laureate's ironic tone as he found his seat. Anne Chilton was standing behind Straeder, felt marker in hand, beside an easel loaded with tear-off sheets of paper.

The meeting began.

Dirk Straeder moved smoothly into the role of leader. Not that anyone

would have argued, Cam admitted. Straeder had a commanding intellect and natural leadership qualities. He skillfully pulled everyone into the free-for-all discussion, but no one was allowed to forget that it was Dirk Straeder in command. Not for a single minute.

Yago Gregori brought levity to it, making sure the mess steward brought fresh rounds of beer at critical winding-down moments. Anne Chilton quietly contributed technical data, drawing upon a seemingly inexhaustible memory file of flight information. She also quickly organized the stream of Kraft paper tear-off sheets from the easel, scotch-taping them up on the walls of the conference room.

A half-hour later, Cam was enormously surprised to find himself at the easel, felt pen in hand, depicting the future orbit patterns of the doomball. This was duck soup: plotting orbital paths had become second nature for him, and with his heightened ability to picture things in his mind...

"I keep coming back to your plot, Dirk," he said to the Nobel Laureate, daring to use the physicist's first name, "If we accept your doomsday hypothesis ... how does the ball know when it is finished?"

Straeder leapt in. "Long after we admit we are finished, Frizek. Look, I don't think this thing has a mind. It doesn't think, not in the cognitive sense we apply to thinking, anyway. It's programmed, simply and irrevocably programmed. Our planet could be ruined, our land surface covered by this choking low growth algae, our atmosphere converted to methane long before this damn thing makes its last pass. Yet, it will plow on—"

"But how will it know when it is finished according to its programmed

mind?" Cam insisted. "Put ourselves into this mind. How will it know?"

Cam was "seeing" it now, as he had that morning in the F121 when the vertigo hit, a superimposed picture of the doomball's last pass over a land unrelieved by anything but plowed surface, coming to that last single ribbon of unprocessed land. Seeing it, in his mind, in sharp, clear detail...

"How will it know?" he repeated to Dirk Straeder.

He heard Anne Chilton's voice behind him. "When it comes back to the start point?"

"Yeah!" Cam whirled to her. "You got it! Roughly forty thousand orbits or ten thousand days later, it will come back up the Bay of Bengal. Back up to where it started."

"And if it knows enough to recognize processed land, it will quit and fly away?" she asked.

"Why not?" Cam said excitedly. "This thing's programmed. That means total logic. It will recognize the start point and read 'finished.' Then it will fly off for fresh worlds to conquer."

There was silence in the room, finally broken by Straeder. "Our young Canadian is trying to reduce a multiple complexity to a single simplicity, I fear," he said with heavy irony.

There was a ripple of laughter in the room. Cam felt his stomach muscles tighten. Was Straeder seriously doubting his hypothesis? Or was he resenting Cam's seeming ease at coming up with it?

"But if we could plow the land now, Dirk?" Cam went on, "Make it look like the start point...?"

He let the question hang in the air.

"Bulldozers!" Yago exclaimed from his seat. "Plenty bulldozers. Make new ground look like corridor."

Yago's suggestion was greeted with outright laughter. Cam didn't know whether it was because of the Russian's comic way of putting things or outright derision at his own simplistic ideas about plowing.

Whatever. The hell with them! He shrugged and placed the marker he held in his hand on the easel tray, and started to turn to retake his seat.

"Just a minute!" Chilton stopped him. "Let's really look at his idea." Silence settled back into the room. She went on. "It is flat, easily worked soil. We need a decoy strip of, say, one kilometer wide by ten kilometers deep."

"But we haven't time for bulldozers," Straeder said dismissively. "For maximum deception value, it would have to go right up against the last fresh furrow. For this we would have only six hours. And the doomball may be more discriminating than we think."

"It can be fooled!" Anne said firmly. "We can 'plow' that decoy strip from the air."

"With F121s?" Cam was stunned.

"Why not?" she said. Cam's hopes soared but he also hoped she wasn't going too far, promising too much.

"We've got two experts from the NASA Flight Research Center," she went on, pointing to the back row in the lounge. She spoke directly to them: "I know you guys have been working for years to reduce ground damage from supersonic flight. Can you reverse jets now and give us *maximum* damage?"

There was silence in the room as the two specialists briefly conferred. One of them stood up.

"There's a package of things we can do to make our sonic booms devastating," he said. "But it will need a day or so to make the modifications ... and we make no promises."

They picked doomball pass number twenty-two. It would take place at 11:23 on Friday, June 25, 2012. That would leave a clear six hours to "plow" their decoy strip, one by ten kilometers, starting at the flat shoreline of the Ganges Delta, right up against the last furrow left by the doomball on orbit twenty-one.

They decided to use two F121s flying in close formation for maximum shock damage. It would require five parallel fly-overs at nine meters altitude to match the kilometer-wide damage corridor left by the doomball on each pass. Modifications to the laminar flow technology on the F121's upper wing surface was proposed to accentuate the shock wave, a pulsing instead of steady air flow through the millions of tiny suction holes.

It was a dangerous path to follow. There would be no time for any tests. Pulsing the suction action would destroy the smooth air flow over the wings that the holes were designed to provide. Would it produce gross instability?

Friday found them all afoot early. Dirk Straeder had thrown guarded support behind the scheme when his "pure science" had failed to come up with a quicker alternative. He was developing a plan for a *relativity slingshot* device on the side of K2 mountain in the Himalayan range—the path of doomball's two hundredth and seventy-second orbit. The slingshot would propel the doomball skyward into escape velocity and carry it away from earth.

Hopefully.

Straeder had taken to calling it the "deathball" in his nightly interviews on CNN. On Thursday night he announced the "plowing" attempt by the F121s the next morning as an off-the-wall long shot proposed by some of the younger

members of his team. His tone and demeanor during the interview held out minimal hope for this effort. However, on Friday morning, Straeder was very much in evidence, and very much in command.

"I'll be riding the AWAC," he announced. "Best place for an overall view."

And best place to provide yourself with an out if we fail, Cam told himself unkindly. He had been reassessing Straeder in the past three days and it was not all good. He had to admit that Straeder's slingshot was ingenious but fraught with enormous expense and many possibilities for glitches. Nearly as many as his and Anne's simple plowed ground decoy scheme.

Chilton turned to Cam. "How about you, Frizek? This one could be rough," she said anxiously.

Cam stiffened. He searched her face for anything more than the genuine concern he thought he saw there. Their relationship had expanded into something a good deal more complex than the mutual dislike of the first day. But he wasn't ready to test it too far.

"You're kidding. I couldn't miss this," he said with a nervous laugh.

She smiled. "Yago will be in the other F121. Along with a sergeant to drop the industrial isotope we dug up as a close match to the marker the ball seems to be dropping along with the algae spores. We're not missing a bet on this."

Takeoff time was backed up because of trouble with the laminar flow modifications. It had gone smoothly with Anne's aircraft but the technicians ran into trouble with the second F121. They were on the point of scrubbing the mission when one technician finally called out, "It's working!"

Cam waved to the sergeant, his friend

from the first day, as he climbed into Yago's F121. They had lost four hours of the six the doomball would give them. Would it be enough?

He was more prepared for the takeoff than his first experience. Now he realized that any change of attitude in the F121 was gut-wrenching, not something Chilton had done on their first trip to intimidate him. It was like riding a lightning stroke.

They quickly formed into a tight pair, swinging down to low-level flight, snapping over the calm waters of the bay at a modest Mach 2.

"On my mark, Thunder section," Chilton called. "Five, four, three, two, one, BURN!"

The two F121s leapt forward as the maximum thrust of the afterburners came on in unison. Sonic shock waves are greatly strengthened; the Dryden specialists had told them, during acceleration, reaching their "peak overpressure" as speed climbed. They were shooting for an overpressure of 800 pounds per square foot. Enter the pulsed laminar flow modification.

"Okay, let's bring in the pulse gizmo, Thunder section," Chilton called. "On my mark..."

It seemed as though they had left the turnpike and were driving over rough pasture land. Real bumpy going. Cam had difficulty controlling his helmet swings within the confines of the cockpit. He saw the splash of land appear under them and the rough ride intensified.

Each ten-kilometer run took about eleven seconds. They would pull up, reduce speed, reform in their two-man formation and dive into their next pass. The pulsed laminar flow modification set up major stresses in their airframes. But the effect on the flat delta land be-

low them was gratifying. The ground looked equally as churned as the land "serviced" by the doomball in the strip beside it, nearly six hours earlier.

"Everybody okay?" Chilton called after their fourth pass.

"Just peachy, Thunder One," Yago laughed.

"One more furrow, Thunder section," Chilton said.

Then they were diving into their final run. Cam wanted to close his eyes as they searched out their laser-directed path in the massive cloud of dust and debris beneath them. They were truly flying blind, trusting their instruments at a few feet off the ground. It was totally insane, Cam screamed to himself.

That's when he felt a solid thump and saw a blinding flash of light from their right wing root. Their F121 pulled up sharply, clearing the dust and Cam watched in horror as the right wing started to fold toward him.

"*I'm popping!*" he heard Chilton yell a moment before the crew pod blasted away from the crippled F121. It was like being fired out of the mouth of a circus cannon. The ejection charge carried them up into a free flying arc and, when speed slowed to a survivable level, they were fired out of the pod individually by second charges in their cockpit seats.

Cam had a horrific view of their F121 hitting the ground, a stop-action frame in an action/horror film. *I'm next*, he thought as the ground rushed up toward him. Then he was jerked back savagely by his parachute straps. He had a moment to wonder at the incongruity of slowing from 200 miles per hour to fifteen before he hit the "plowed" earth of their decoy strip.

Decoy strip! That's when it hit him.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Cam moaned in absolute terror as he remembered, as he

fought to disentangle himself from his parachute straps. The doomball! The damn thing was coming up the Bay of Bengal and they were dead center in its path.

He stood and promptly collapsed, his left ankle screaming with pain. He must have sprained it on landing. He found himself listening for the ball although he knew he would never hear it, knew that its speed would far outrun the speed of its sound.

But he did hear Chilton's shout, calling from his left. "Let's get the hell out of here, Frizek!" she yelled.

"Can't," he yelled back at her. "My ankle."

Suddenly she was beside him. "Get up. Put your arm over my shoulder."

He did so. "What happened?" he asked.

"Right wing must've hit some debris," she said. "Let's go."

They went a few paces, Cam hobbling painfully. He looked southward, toward the edge of the delta. Finally he located it. A gigantic rooster tail, deviating neither to the right or left.

That could only mean they were directly in its path.

"We're going to be right under it," he said, dry-mouthed. "Why don't you get the hell out of here?"

"What? ... and leave all the fame to you, asshole?" she snorted. "Our decoy strip is going to work, Frizek. Believe me!"

"Yeah, sure," he said, only half believing.

They stumbled up to a twisted doorframe and depression from a wrecked home. Anne lowered Cam into the hole. "We'll lie in here and ride out the sonic boom," she said firmly.

"Okay. Why not?" Cam gulped. He said it quickly because he knew what he

would say if he really thought about it. It was sheer madness to lie here and wait for it.

They both saw the rooster tail drop as the ball hit the shoreline of the delta. Cam found himself holding his breath as he counted, thousand-and-one, thousand-and-two, thousand-and-three...

Suddenly the doomball lifted into his

view, soaring skyward, accelerating rapidly upward, leaving contrails.

"Is it real? Am I seeing—?"

"It's so goddamn real, Frizek!"

They were still both on the ground, hands clasped over their ears, when the sonic boom reached them, hammered at them with its lung rattling thunder.

Then the thunder moved on. •

AUTHOR: KEITH SCOTT lives in Toronto and is a member of the Cecil Street writing group. His story shows a love of flying picked up in WW2 as a Spitfire pilot. This is his fifth appearance in *ON SPEC*.

ILLUSTRATOR: PETER MacDOUGALL — In his use of computers for illustration, Peter has learned that traditional media has one big advantage: it doesn't crash without saving your work.



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The Healing Fountain

Hayden Trenholm

illustrated by James Beveridge

Vargas the Mighty, Lord High Slaughtergod of the Dread Arak Imperial Fleetship Star Crusher, was bored. This was not the boredom bred of the drowsy immeasurable instances spent slipping through the darkness between the stars, nor even that tingling anticipatory boredom which arises in the long ceremonial tortures before mating is allowed. This boredom far surpassed any previously experienced even by one whose ancient life consisted of long periods of immobility broken by sudden and violent moments of pure delight. This was the boredom of retirement.

Of course, they don't call it retirement, thought Vargas, they wouldn't dare. Even an over-the-hill Slaughtergod has his resources and the mealy-mouthed larva bait at Imperial Centratus are nothing if they are not cautious. They called it a special assignment of the highest priority. "Hah!" he grunted and spat on the floor. He watched in satisfaction as the carpet hissed and bleached white.

Vargas heaved himself from behind his desk and went to the window to survey his new domain. The land stretched bare and bleak to the horizon where the yellow-brown of the plain merged with the grey-yellow of the sky. Billowing clouds to the north threatened rain but, like everything else on this dried husk of a world, the threats lacked substance. The Arak explorer who had found this worthless piece of rock in the nether swamps of a spiral arm had named it well. Darl-vant. A desiccated turd was exactly what this place was, all right. Vargas spat again and the carpet hissed.

"I really wish you could use the spittoons we provided. Carpet is expensive and hard to obtain this far from the trade routes." The Vant's voice was soft, like everything else about him. Vargas was across the room in an instant. He held the Vant aloft and shook it so its ovoid head snapped back and forth.

"Perhaps we could cover the floor in Vant skins," Vargas growled. He allowed himself a smile, well aware of how horrifying most Vants found it. This one merely

stared back at him with its odd forward-fixed eyes. Vargas noted with amusement they had the same pale blue tint as adolescent Arakans.

"You would find our skins stand up even less well to wear and tear than these pathetic carpets we've been able to obtain," it said.

"Hah, a Vant with a spinal ridge. Imagine that." Vargas dropped the Vant and turned away. The Vant hit the carpet with a thud and the hint of a groan. Vargas cocked an eyestalk back at him but the Vant smiled and rose, somewhat unsteadily, to its feet. Vargas frowned. He always found it disconcerting to see the Vant move about, somehow balanced on two appendages. Two legs, two arms, most unstable, he thought. He pivoted again and gave the Vant a full tri-ocular examination. This one's different, he thought, a bit taller and a shade darker than most of them.

"What's your name, Vant?" he asked.

The Vant made a clicking, gurgling sound. "Darrin Thal in your tongue."

He-who-makes-the-water-flow. Vargas frowned again and looked out the window. This planet hasn't seen flowing water in ten thousand solars, he thought.

"All right, Darrin Thal, what's on the agenda for today?"

His new executive assistant, the seventh this cycle, consulted a hand-held screen. After a moment, he looked up. "Nothing, sir. Your calendar is clear."

"Hah! Nothing? Are you sure?"

Darrin Thal shrugged, a gesture Vargas still had to repress his attack reflexes against. "Yes, sir."

"I thought I was supposed to meet with the Head of the Council today. About the new quotas."

"The Council has agreed to all of your

demands. They saw no need for a meeting. They send their warmest regards and hope their cooperation will bring the Lord to join them in peace and contentment."

"Join them? Hah!" Vargas ground his inner teeth. "All of my demands?" He curled his spine tentacles in annoyance. "Those demands were completely unreasonable."

"Nonetheless..."

Vargas drew back his head. Darrin Thal cleared his throat and Vargas, smiling, spat on the carpet at his assistant's feet.

"What is it with you people?" Vargas was honestly puzzled. Nothing he tried, no trick learned in his long career of subjugation, no torture devised during the long sweeps through the darkness, no absurd demand dreamt up in sleepless night worked against these spineless kralits. Nothing generated the least spark of resistance or even resentment, but only pleas that he find peace and contentment in their deaths. The Vant spirit is, thought Vargas for the thousandth time, as dry and desiccated as the planet they live on. "How am I ever going to find a single soldier among you, let alone the hundred quatrans I have to raise before I can leave this pestilential pisshole?"

"Our people are quite prepared to join the army," said Darrin Thal.

"But you won't fight, damn you. I could put a blaster in your hands right now, turn my back, reveal my kartana for you to shoot at ... and you wouldn't pull the trigger. You people don't have the courage to be soldiers."

"We don't have the desire, good sir."

"Hah! You contradict me."

Darrin Thal paled. Vargas grinned, showing all three sets of teeth this time.

"I like it. I think ... I think I won't have you for dinner."

"I'm most gratified, sir," Darrin Thal said and busied himself with his notepad.

Darrin Thal waited until another full cycle had passed before allowing the next move. He would have preferred to wait longer, for patience is a virtue and timing is everything. However, Lord Vargas was showing a rapid diminishment in patience and time, before so abundant, was running out.

Lord Vargas shifted in his seat and gestured at the assembled mob below. "Let the testing begin," he said, "for all the good it'll do."

The gates on either side of Vargas' perch opened and Arak war engines trundled into the arena. The silver bowls of their scanners glinted in the noonday sun as they whirred and swiveled across the motionless lines of the People. Vargas gave the signal and the machines moved forward. The first row went down beneath the war engines' treads without a sound. "Move, damn you, move," bellowed Vargas and the crowd below began to mill about aimlessly. Vargas groaned. "Shoot. You've got weapons. Use them." A few of the People fired into the air, some of the more bold into the ground in front of them, but most stared blankly at the blasters gripped in their hands. In response to the energy surge, the Arak planet-cleansers opened fire. The battle, if it could be called that, was over in a few moments. The scanners swiveled once more over the piles of broken corpses, their long-hoarded moisture steaming into the waiting air.

"What was the point of that, I ask you?" Vargas swiveled an eyestalk at

Darrin Thal. In the arena, automatons were carrying away the bodies and sweeping the sand clean.

"I never claimed the wit to understand the Lord Vargas' reasoning," said Darrin.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were mocking me. Are you?"

"No Vant would have such courage, sir."

"I'm beginning to suspect you're right. Well, send in the next candidates. I'm expecting better of them. They come from good stock." Darrin thumbed the release and the gates at the far end of the arena opened. He was aware of Vargas' continued observation and the hint of what he now recognized as a smile playing across the broad central mouth.

"Anyone you know?" asked Vargas.

"Your Lordship knows it is true." Darrin looked down at those gathered below. He tried not to change his expression. Everything was unfolding as it should. He had to trust what the priests had told him.

Vargas gave the signal and the machines rolled forth again. Darrin's people waited, impassive, unmoving, even when Vargas screamed at them. The machines hesitated, unable to attack until provoked or ordered. He-who-must-provoke, standing in the middle ranks, looked up at the pedestal and saluted. "Find contentment, my Lord," he cried, "and be one with us." Then he raised his blaster and fired it at Vargas. The energy shield in front of them glowed briefly.

"That one," bellowed Vargas, "bring me that one."

Before the attendants could move, the Vant turned the blaster on himself and disappeared in a column of flame. Vargas sputtered with rage and signaled

the machines to attack. He swiveled in his seat and turned all three eyes toward Darrin's impassive face.

"My brother," said Darrin. "He always was the hothead of the family."

"What do you mean, he's gone?" Vargas roared at the pale-skinned Vant cowering in front of him. "Quit this foolishness and send for Thal."

The Vant quivered and bowed. "Darrin Thal has left the city, your most high and revered lordship. He left this."

The Vant held out a message disk in a shaking hand. Vargas ripped it from him, tearing off most of his arm in the process. Thin red blood splattered on the new carpet. "Get out, get out, before I tear off the other one." The Vant hugged its tattered limb to its chest and staggered from the office.

Vargas stared at the silver disk in his hand for a long time, as if it might reveal something to him without the help of a player. At last he grunted and slipped it into the unit on his desk. The image of Darrin Thal shimmered in the pale sunlight that streamed through the office window. He was cloaked in the dark purple and gold robes of the suppressed Vantian priesthood. Vargas ground all three sets of teeth in a mixture of rage and joy at the affront. Thal's image bowed so low at the waist that Vargas expected him to tip over.

"Vargas the Mighty, Lord High Slaughtergod of the Dread Arak Imperial Fleet," Thal's image said, smiling. It then uttered an insult so vile and seditious that Vargas' eyes flushed green, the tendrils along his spinal ridges stood straight up, and the memory pods of four generations stirred at the base of his brain. Without thinking, Vargas swept through the image, claws and fangs fully

extended and dripping, until he crashed into the wall on the other side. He swiveled and found Thal's image regarding him with that same insufferable smile. "Now that I have your attention," it said, "I have an offer to make." It paused.

"Go on," said Vargas, even though he knew it was only a recording and not Thal himself.

"I am Darrin Thal, he who makes the water flow. I am the—" He made a sound that Vargas could not translate. "—of my people. You were sent here to our desert world, to the desert of our heart, to tempt us to become once more as you, violent and conquering. But we have denied you. Can you do the same to us? Meet me at the base of Mount Galas in one quarter cycle and all of your fondest wishes will be granted. Come alone or not at all. Find contentment." The image flickered out.

Darrin Thal waited at the foot of the sheer cliff that towered red and black to the sky. He shifted from one foot to the other. He was hot and thirsty. He licked his lips and adjusted the heavy robes, trying, unsuccessfully, to find a bit of comfort.

"Having a change of heart," a voice whispered in his ear.

"Go away, my brother," said Darrin. "This is my task to complete. You've no business here."

"I'd have gladly taken your place."

"You were too hot-headed."

The voice snorted and then was silent. In the distance, Darrin heard the low thrum of an air flitter. After a moment, the craft hove into sight, a shimmer of glass against the pale sky. Darrin could make out the lone figure of Vargas Slaughtergod hovering over the controls.

Darrin tried not to let his emotions, a mix of joyful fear and terrified anticipation, show on his face as Vargas approached with the rolling tripod motion that looked so awkward but could be so swift and deadly. The Arak governor stopped a dozen body lengths away and glared around.

"Hah! And I thought the rest of this planet was a barren waste heap," Vargas spat. The sand sucked the moisture from the fluid, leaving a dry green powder that blew away and was gone. "Well, let's hear it. Make me an offer."

Darrin Thal forced a smile to his lips. When he spoke, his voice was smooth and steady.

"Our people lived on this world, so green and blue and white, when your race was still huddled in the swamps and breeding pools of your homeworld. When your ancestors were still looking up in wonder at the twin moons or huddling in fear from the blazing blue light of the sun, we were building cities and planning to own the universe. Foolish plans of conquest made by a foolish people. We lost everything for those plans."

"Liar!" Vargas spat again and took two steps closer. Darrin Thal could see the gleam of claws peeking from their sheaths. He shrugged deliberately and saw the tension flow along the Arakan's spinal ridges.

"As you wish, Lord Vargas." Darrin bowed and smiled again. "Though whatever your opinion, the long-awaited moment of our redemption is at hand."

"Get to the point."

Darrin spread his robes in a gesture so sudden he shocked even himself. His skin shuddered in the dry heat. The gemstone embedded in his flesh glowed

and pulsed under the light of the sun.

"What!" Vargas gasped. "What is that thing? A weapon?"

"If you wish," said Darrin. "It is whatever it has to be. It is the center of the world, the gateway, the question and the answer. It is Darrin Thal."

"You brought me all this way to speak in riddles and show me a bauble?"

"This will fulfill every heart's desire when you join with us. You were asked and refused, but now you will be told."

"Hah! Join with you?" Vargas spat again. The heavy fluid splattered against Darrin's belly. The acid seared his flesh and pain flickered through him like dry summer lightning. Unheard-of sweat beaded on his brow. Darrin fought to keep the smile on his face.

"You've courage at least," said Vargas, "so I'll make your death quick and I'll place your trinket on my trophy chain."

"There is no remission without the shedding of blood. I am honored to mix mine with yours, Stak-tah Kartana," said Darrin. He saw Vargas' eyes flash green at the insult just before the Arakan's claws tore him to bits.

Vargas finished his ritual meal and pried the jewel from the breastbone of his former assistant. He rocked it back and forth in the palm of his fore hand. It glinted against his flesh like blue light on a breeding pool. The longer he stared at it, the bigger it seemed, until Vargas felt he could slip into it and through it to the cooling water on the other side. He twitched his eyes away. There was a sound like a key turning in a lock, so faint he almost missed it in the whisper of the ever-present wind. Vargas whirled to face...

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing there." He looked again and realized he was right. There was nothing there. His flitter was gone, the smudge that marked the distant city on the horizon, gone, even the horizon itself, gone, replaced by a distant indistinct shimmer. He turned again. The cliff face was gone, as was the mountain behind it. Darrin Thal's remains were gone. Only a distant shimmer at the edge of the sky. Vargas looked down at the gem in his hand, but it too was gone.

Vargas turned in a full circle. Everywhere the land stretched flat and brown and empty until it disappeared in the same dull shimmer where the sky began. He stopped, uncertain, for the first time in his life, of what to do. His memory pods, which clamored for attention at times like this, were silent. His ancestors had nothing to say. His glands were active enough, but the messages that poured into his brain cavity were at odds. Run, fight, even, for Arak's sake, breed. As if that was at all appropriate or even possible in so dry a place.

Vargas felt a lethargy spread through him, as if he were slipping into the drift of star drive. For what seemed like a long time but may only have been a moment, Vargas squatted, motionless, on the sand, his legs spread in an even and stable tripod, his eyestalks forming the points of a triangle above his braincase so he had a complete, if somewhat dim and flattened, view of his uniform surroundings. Then he saw it. A glint against the shimmer, a flash of light against the brightness of the horizon. Vargas began to run.

It was closer than it had first appeared, or his sense of time had become as twisted as the land around him. For, in an instant, he stood knee-deep in the clear blue water of a lake, on a planet

that had not seen water flow in ten thousand solars. The water was cold; its rich saltiness tingled against his skin as waves caressed him like fronds in a breeding pool.

There was a sound, the snap of cloth in the wind, the creak of wood against wood, the splash of water meeting water. Vargas looked up. A boat stood at anchor a hundred strides away. At its stern stood Darrin Thal, his hot-headed brother beside him and a multitude behind. Vargas took a quick step but the boat moved away just as fast. Across the water, Vargas could see a far shore with shadows moving along it. He yearned to cross over to the other side, yearned, for the first time in his long and bloody life, to discover the mysteries and joys of peace and contentment. The foolish conquering plans of his foolish people dissolved in a flood of unknown emotion.

Is this peace? thought Vargas. Is this what the Vants call love? He held out his hands, all claws retracted, entreating as no Arakan had ever done before. Water streamed from Darrin Thal's eyes and from his wounds like a river joining the sea. He shrugged and sighed. Vargas took another beseeching step. "We will remember you in our dreams," said Darrin Thal. "I promise we will remember your gift to us."

Thal hesitated, then gave a signal. For one eternal instant, Vargas was content, was one with the People.

The boat moved away and was gone. Vargas' body shuddered as the pods of his ancestors fractured and broke, as his glands withered and died. His eye stalks drooped. Vargas the Mighty, Lord High Slaughtergod of the Dread Arak Imperial Fleetship *Star Crusher*, watched the water coming past his knees as he sank into the welcoming sea. •

AUTHOR: Originally from Nova Scotia, Hayden Trenholm settled in Calgary after living in various parts of Canada ranging from Toronto to the High Arctic. He has had plays produced in Calgary and Edmonton and on CBC Radio. His novel, *A Circle of Birds*, was published in 1993 by Anvil Press but "The Healing Fountain" marks his first short story sale.

ILLUSTRATOR: JAMES BEVERIDGE lives in Edmonton, Alberta, creating aesthetic havoc whenever and wherever he is called upon to do so. He builds his images with pen, ink, paint, and pixel. When not engaged in residential snow removal, he revels in laughter, epicurean debauchery, wrestling with ethical dilemmas, and a little light reading. His NEW website address is:

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The Wastelands: a Beginning

K.V. Johansen

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

He had volunteered for duty on the Wastelands border. No one did that. You were sent in disgrace to the First or Second Acrillian Regiments if you slept with your commander's wife or were too obviously drunk on a ceremonial occasion, or were suspected of dabbling in necromancy. You didn't volunteer.

Jeth Verran did. His wife had been a year dying, and he wanted away. Away from the Capital, and the balls and the theaters and the operas they had enjoyed together. Away from fellow Guards officers who thought it was sad, yes, but there were plenty of women, and what about that nice little brothel down on the Palace Gate Road? Away from the long empty days of parade and paperwork and politics. So he volunteered to go north, and the Minister made him a major and gave him the Second Battalion of the First Acrillian, which had recently lost its commander. It was recorded that Major Gry had disappeared from his bed one night. Things like that happened on the border.

Verran arrived in the rain. Maravon was a small town with one public bath and at least a hundred churches, chapels, and shrines, some of gods and cults he had never encountered in the Capital, even in his days at the University. It was also the seat of the high priestess of the church of the Goddess in Acrill Province, and boasted a large limestone Goddess-House on a hill to the north. On the edge of the swamp to the south sat the fort. His fort. Fort and town alike were built of unpainted wood, gray. The late-fall grass, sodden with rain, was gray, and gray blocks of limestone pushed through the thick clay. Gray, too.

Very fitting, Verran thought, because he had a sense of humor even in melancholy, and he frowned at the gate that sagged on its hinges and stood open. The small thornbush growing against it suggested at least five years since it was last closed. The palisades leaned inward, in no better repair. The sentries were asleep.

The Wastelands garrisons dated from the days of the Empire, and the Republic

had never changed the old treaty, which stated a duty to maintain at least two regiments on the border for the protection of the lands south. No one knew what they guarded against, and these days, no one much cared.

During his first dinner with his officers, Verran ran afoul of the chief priest of Locor. He had known Locorians at the University. A friend involved with the cult had hanged himself one cold midnight. So the major had a grudge and, being tired and discouraged and irritable, made no effort to be polite when Herst, priest of the wishfully-named Locor the Merciful, strode into the officers' mess and demanded speech with the new commander.

Herst looked and smelt rather like one of those romantic prisoners locked away for decades without soap or razor, with an added touch of incense and boiled onion. Verran told him, come back tomorrow, but the priest swept aside a sullen captain and leaned over nearly into Verran's plate.

The fort, he announced, was cursed.

"Ignore him," said the sullen captain, Dogson by name. "He's been going on for months."

Herst, the priest, ignored Dogson. "Locor in his mercy will cleanse this place of evil, major. Don't repeat the folly of your predecessor, and of these fools who refused to take the warning of his death. How many men do you want to lose?"

"They're going over the wall," said Dogson. "Or walking out the gate. Any man with guts would've been out of here long ago."

The man to Herst's right snickered. "So why are you still here, Dogson? But seriously, major, I don't think there'd be any harm in letting Herst go ahead. It won't hurt and might help. We've been

saying all summer, Uisi and I, that we should let him, but no one else will admit that twenty-three men missing without a trace is anything..."

"Shut up, Urlo," said Dogson, and Verran said, "*Gentlemen.*"

Dogson of B Company and Urlo of A glowered, and Dogson muttered under his breath. It sounded like "gold-braided Guards cockerel," but the major chose not to hear.

"What evil?" he asked the priest. "All I've seen so far is a slovenly garrison and a rotting fort, both of which have all-too-evident natural causes. You have no business intruding here, and I suggest you leave before you're removed."

He felt pompous and hated it. But the four captains, Dogson, cheerful Lethid of D, and Urlo and Uisi, a couple Verran was certain, were all older than he was.

"And besides," the major thought to add, "the High Priestess of the Goddess is the highest-ranking clergyperson in Maravon. It would be impolitic of me to authorize an exorcism over which Mother Ampion didn't preside. Will you leave?"

Herst drew rancid satin robes about him and left with what was meant to be outraged dignity. Verran had the gloomy feeling that he had succeeded. Only the doctor raised a glass to the major with an approving nod.

That evening, the doctor, Nev Riall, invited the major for drinks in his quarters. Riall was obviously drunk and getting drunker, but Verran didn't feel like caring, and joined him. Riall told him Urlo and Uisi were running a pool on how long "the cockerel from the Capital" would last.

"Put your money on a year," Verran told him. He'd promised himself, one year. Long enough to do something worthwhile and pull himself together,

then look for a transfer to someplace more civilized and get on with life.

The doctor considered, and mumbled in a professional manner. "Hm, hm hmmm. Six months."

"Why?" asked Verran. "You expect I'll run away?"

Thinking, wasn't that what he had done? Run away from memories, from waking in the night in a bed too large and empty, from walking past a sitting room he couldn't go into, where unfinished embroidery gathered dust?

"Hm. No. Six months, major. It'll drive you mad, the wind up here, and you'll leave. You'll get sick. Consumption, swamp fever. You'll kill yourself. Alternately, you'll start going into the Wastelands. People do. People who read too much. Curiosity. I did, a few times. Sometime you won't come out. It's not the Wastelanders. They're not the enemy. No. You won't come out. Something'll get you."

"What kind of something?"

Verran had read too much, and not just as a child. He had pictures in his mind of reindeer-riding Wastelanders hunting demons, with tigers and owls for hounds and hawks, humans and beasts both hung about with protective amulets. He was already planning trips to study the menhirs that marked the border, to sketch and send copies of the inscriptions back to his scholar sister in the Capital.

"*Something*," the doctor said. "Just something. It happens."

"To Major Gry? Is that what happened? There's nothing official about twenty-three other men missing."

"No, no. Gry... Maybe the wind got to Gry. He used to talk to himself. Dogson's right. Deserters. Who'd stay here, if they could imagine anything better? We've all lost that. We don't

dream of anything other, anymore. Or we'd be over the wall too, like he says. Gone. Right over the wall. Away. Somewhere."

"Safer walking out the gate," said Verran. "The palisade'd come down on you."

"Going to change things?"

"Damn right."

"S'what Gry said too."

Come morning, Verran had a headache, and the first thing he encountered beyond his door was Herst, the priest, prostrate in the corridor in a choking cloud of incense smoke, praying.

"I must perform the ritual, major," he said. "You have to allow it. Locor has no patience with those who obstruct his will."

"Just what is going on here?" Verran asked. Pompous again. "Take your filthy ritual and get out..."

"This? This? I merely pray for the enlightenment of those who refuse to acknowledge the will of Merciful Locor."

"Then do it in your own house," said Verran. And seeing that the priest had arranged an audience, and that the soldiers clustered furtively about as witnesses to their major's intransigence were the filthiest he had ever seen, he ordered them to report to the quartermaster for ladders, brushes, pails and soap.

"Today," he said, "you will scrub the corridors, stairways, and common rooms of this building. Floors, walls, and ceilings. If it's not clean tonight, you will do it again tomorrow."

And once that was done and his point made, he would put the whole battalion to work on the rest of the fort. It was filthy as the worst slums in the Capital, and stank, even without Herst's frankincense and onions.

The dozen soldiers went. Shuffling.

Muttering. He could flog the whole garrison and it wouldn't raise anyone's spirits.

Herst, faced with Verran's folded arms and continued glower, gathered together his censers and rose.

"I warn you, major. I have a responsibility. Locor demands we drive out evil wherever it is encountered, and what you harbor here in the fort may spread to the town. I will not allow that."

"I will not allow you or your priests access to the fort or the men of the fort if you do not remove yourself from this hallway," said Verran, and watched the priest go. Upright. Confident. Condescending in his acquiescence.

Verran had every intention of banning the Locorians from the fort, but first things first. There would be resentment enough among the men at all the scrubbing.

That afternoon, Dogson and Lethid came to blows in the parade square. Both drunk, of course, but at least they had the sense to put aside their weapons. Verran and Captain Uisi had to pull the sweating, cursing pair apart. There was a woman behind it, Uisi said, when neither Dogson nor Lethid would speak. Lethid had learned Dogson was spending evenings with Lethid's girlfriend in town. Dogson had sought her out knowing she was Lethid's, which made it worse.

If they couldn't act like responsible men, why should they have the privileges thereof, Verran demanded of them, and ordered them locked in the cells overnight.

"And may they get swamp fever, or at least rheumatism, out of it," he told Doctor Riall. "How can they expect the men to respect them?"

They were slouching at a table in the doctor's office. Drinking again, or at

least Riall was. Verran had decided to drop a bad habit before it started.

"They don't. Are you planning to scrub the whole fort?"

"Yes."

"You're joking."

"No. It's pointless to expect any kind of morale to exist in a place like this. I don't mean Maravon, I mean this ... this..."

"Cesspool of despair?" offered Riall.

"Sure."

"It'll take more than soap."

"Have to start somewhere. Like you said, no wonder they're all deserting."

"Urlo and Uisi wanted me to ask you about Herst," Riall said abruptly. "Some sergeant says he saw a giant rat in the latrines and refuses to use 'em."

"I'm not having anything to do with the Locorians. What do they think Herst can do about rats, anyway? I'll get a terrier."

The doctor shrugged. "I'm with you on Locorians. I just said I'd pass on the request."

"If they can't be bothered to ask me personally, I didn't even hear it."

Two days later, days in which the sun actually shone and even the barracks began to smell of harsh soap and fresh sweat, Captain Lethid was dead. A poor little trumpeter (avoiding the rumored giant rat) found him lying at the foot of the wall to the south, where the enclosed land sloped down to swamp and there was little traffic. His throat had been cut.

"Practically beheaded," said Verran. "Goddess."

The grass squished beneath his feet as he moved to touch the body. No one else showed any sign of wanting to come near. Lethid lay in a puddle of congealed blood, straight and undisturbed as though laid out. He probably

had been; feet together, hands clasped on his breast. It was indecent, with the neck severed nearly to the spine. There was no sign he'd made any resistance at all. His knife was still in his belt.

A man didn't lie still to have his throat cut. Verran rolled him over, prodded gingerly at the back of the skull. Sticky and soft, very wrong.

"Riall, get over here," he snapped. "This is your business." Gagging a bit. Some smell beyond what he expected. Something sweet, faintly ... perfume?

He'd forbidden Lethid and Dogson both leaving the fort for a month.

"A bloody great whack to the head," said Riall. "He was dead before he sliced him, or as good as."

"Where's Dogson?" Verran asked. And sighed. "Urlo, you come with me. Dogson first, then we go to find this woman. Uisi, last night's sentries were all yours. I'll want to see them when I get back. Riall ... do something about Lethid."

Dogson, stunned, woken drunk in a startlingly tidy bedroom, was roughly hauled away to the cells. It took four men to wrestle him in, once he realized what was being said.

"Dead? Bastard, he isn't! I never! I never! When? Tell me when! I haven't been out of my room! I never."

"Poor bastard," said Urlo. "I always said his temper'd get him some day."

"Would you cut someone's throat in a temper, if you'd already smashed in his skull?" asked Verran.

"I don't have a temper, major," Urlo said, smug.

Lethid's girlfriend, Pet, wasn't at all what Verran expected, although she tried to appear it. She was wearing an evening gown three years out of fashion when the major and Urlo arrived before noon, her hair in ringlets that must have

taken all morning. A skillfully painted face and far too much scent, as Verran expected. Despite her flashiness, though, she struck Verran as a shy young girl in fancy dress. Wanting the feeling of power that comes from being wicked, not quite carrying it off. He suspected she couldn't lie without blushing.

She turned pink, forehead to bosom, just admitting to being Lethid's woman. Urlo's term. Verran was more tactful.

"You're Dogson's friend, too, are you?"

"Oooh," she said, and progressed to crimson. "Oh dear. Are they in trouble?"

"Lethid's dead," said Urlo, and she sat frozen, only her mouth opening wider, and then she was sobbing, gulping like a child, crying, "No, no, liar, no!"

Verran patted her shoulder. There was nothing to say. He knew it. There was nothing anyone could say.

"Shh," he said. "Shh, dear. There."

So like a child. She clutched his unbuttoned jacket, pressed her face to his chest, almost choking on her sobs, and he put an arm around her, pulled her close, patted her hair and glared at Urlo, who shrugged and looked embarrassed.

"Her sister lives next door," he whispered. "Shall I...?"

Verran nodded.

Eventually Pet sat up, mangling a handkerchief scrubbed red and green from her face, making vague, incoherent apologies for the wreck of Verran's shirt. Her sister, all mute hostility, brought wine for her and offered the officers none.

It took an hour, more wine, more handkerchiefs, to get from Pet that it was three nights since she had seen Lethid or Dogson.

"She's lying," said Urlo, out in the

street.

"In the state she's in? I doubt it."

"She's lying to save Dogson. To keep one of them, at least."

Verran shook his head.

They met Herst on their way back through town. He bowed frostily and said not one word.

He's learning, Verran thought.

But when the sentries were questioned, one dirty pair admitted to having seen Lethid come in shortly after midnight, with Dogson just behind him. Which just about finished Dogson, in most minds.

"That's that, then," Riall said gloomily. "Despite what pretty Pet says." The doctor had come by Verran's quarters late in the evening. Only mildly intoxicated, and glum.

"I don't want to hang Dogson," said Verran, more to himself than the doctor. "There's something ... there's no reason for the girl to lie, but why else would Dogson follow Lethid from town?"

"Maybe they both share another girl?" Riall laughed at his own suggestion, and groaned. "I don't envy you, major. Dogson's still denying it?"

Verran nodded.

Riall poked through cupboards till he found a bottle. Took it, and cups, to the writing desk.

"Dogson's never lied, you know. He doesn't bother pretending anything, even common courtesy."

"I'd noticed." Verran accepted the offered cup, fairly certain the sherry was nearly gone, anyhow. "Look Riall, the shortcut down from Maravon's pretty overgrown. Would you follow someone from town to the fort through all that scrub to kill him here, where there's so much risk of someone hearing something?"

"And even the slim chance of the

sentries being awake, to say you followed your victim in?" Riall nodded. "You have a point, major. Several. And may I say your shirt is far more colorful than regulations permit?"

"Pet. I came over all paternal and even patted her head, poor little beast." Verran sniffed. "I should change, if you don't mind? I'll be sick if I go on breathing sandalwood much longer."

"And I thought it was just your fancy city ways."

Verran stopped with one button left to go.

"Sandalwood," he said.

"What?" asked Riall.

Verran resumed taking off his shirt. Slowly. Dropped it on the floor, took a clean one from the wardrobe, put it on. Sniffed his jacket and dropped it on the floor, too.

"Sandalwood."

"You said," Riall pointed out.

"It was frankincense on Lethid."

Riall shook his head. "I don't follow. Perfume, yes."

"Herst," Verran belted on his sword.

"Herst?" Riall was plainly puzzled, and drained the cup of sherry at a gulp, as though that might help.

"He filled the hall outside here with great clouds of incense a few days back. The same you can smell on him. The same that's on Lethid's clothing. It's frankincense. I just assumed, perfume, the woman they'd been fighting over ... Goddess, Riall, it must be midnight. Come on!"

And the major was off. Riall caught up as he left the officer's house for the moonlit grounds.

"Where?" he panted. "Human sacrifice, you're saying? Major, even the Locorians..."

"Infirmary. Where Lethid is. Think, man. Herst's been going on about

Locor's will and ridding us of whatever evil it is he thinks we've got. He believes it. How's he going to do it? Appeal to Locor. You must know Locorians. Their bloody-minded god doesn't do anything without pay. Blood. And the bigger the favor, the bigger the sacrifice. Herst thinks we've got a demon here, and he's going to have his god drive it out; that called for something big, and big Locorian ritual has to be at midnight."

"But why...? Lethid's already dead, and I'm not young, major."

"You're not fit, Riall. There's a difference." But Verran slowed marginally. "A friend of mine killed himself. Sacrifice to Locor. Some ritual guaranteeing paradise. He offered a goose, midnight, spent twenty-four hours fasting and praying and then hanged himself, in Locor's presence, it was supposed to be. Took the scent of blood and the fasting and praying to bring the god. And I just wondered..."

"There's a light in my lab," Riall interrupted. "You better not be right. I put Lethid in there."

They both ran now.

Herst and six other priests, all on their faces. About twenty soldiers, likewise. The lamplit room ringed with censers, blue cloud growing. Frankincense. Perched on Lethid's tightly-shrouded body was something that was not an overgrown black vulture, with a human-featured face that had nothing human about it.

"Save us, Locor," Herst intoned from the floor.

"Locor be merciful," replied the rest in chorus.

"We are weak."

"Locor be merciful."

"We cannot prevail against the evil that stalks this place."

"Locor be merciful."

"Your strength is great against that which defeats us."

"Locor be merciful."

"Save us, who cannot save ourselves. Destroy that which is come here from the place of evil, which preys upon men and hunts in darkness."

"Locor be merciful."

"You have found the sacrifice worthy. You have tasted of blood we have given. We are pure in your sight, great Locor. Defend us."

The god spread his wings and shrieked, and the fort awoke.

Verran and Riall crouched together in the doorway to the lab as the shadow of the wings ran dark over the room, swallowing lamplight, spilling out, eating moonlight, until the entire fort was black and silent, the sound of over four hundred men lying terrified in the dark. And somewhere, down towards the storehouses, something began squealing, rabbit-shrill.

The dark drew back from the lab, allowing lamplight again, and Locor filled the room. The squealing thing was white and cowered on the floor between the talons of the impossibly-grown god. It was a rat the size of a pig. It had no eyes, and its upper canines overhung the lower jaw a good six inches.

"Goddess," breathed Verran, and started into the room, sword in hand. It was an engraving in one of his sister's books.

"Don't!" said Riall, and grabbed at him too late, and Herst looked up and shouted, "Don't! Impious fool!" and also grabbed, but the rat felt the change in the room and whirled and leapt, teeth scything. The god waited.

Verran stabbed and the rat ran onto his sword, slicing the warding arm he flung up, but somehow it heaved itself free, not bleeding, not slowed in the

slightest, and reared up on fat haunches, hissing. Verran felt nothing but wet on his arm, down his hand, then spreading numbness, and he wondered what he was doing, exactly.

Twenty-three men gone, his men, and Major Gry, and that thing ... in the engraving it nested on a pile of bones. You couldn't kill a demon, not so easily, not with the plain weapons of a soldier of the Republic. Herst and the Locorians were all face down again, a stumbling rapid chant, "Locor be merciful, Locorbemercufillocorbe..." Terrified of their god.

And the demon swayed, snarled, slashed threateningly, but made no move forward, not while Verran stood so, sword raised, defensive. Not the aggressor.

It was already Locor's.

"You have your blood," Verran said, and almost held his voice steady. "Take this thing they called you for, and go."

Locor licked his lips, considering. Drew a foot thoughtfully over the floorboards, leaving gouges an inch deep. Grinned, showing teeth all sabre-like as the rat's, and swooped forward.

Verran fell prostrate like the priest, uninjured arm wrapped around his head. The rat screamed, one final time. It was very dark, and then dark only with the darkness of night. The lamps were out. The wrapped corpse on the table groaned once, a sighing bubble out of its throat, and was silent.

"Locor be thanked," murmured Herst in a voice that shook more than Verran's had, and everyone picked himself up. Soldiers began sidling out, and the priests clumped together.

"No," said Verran, sword in hand again. "You stay." Pointed to Herst's chest. Seven to one, if they felt like protesting.

"You dare?" Herst said, "You presume ... when you have seen with your own eyes the evil that has invaded this fort? That *thing* was the size of a mouse when it escaped the Wastelands, major. Would you have had it devour your battalion? You saw what effect your weapons had."

"Human sacrifice is outlawed," the major said. "There are other ways of dealing with demons."

Because if that fanged rat were true, then the other Wastelands stories were true, and the Wastelanders hunted demons.

Herst must have followed the thought. "Those who deal with heathen are damned with heathen. Be glad I saved you from that fate. Do you appreciate at all the extent of the mercy shown you by Locor?"

"Does Lethid?"

Herst didn't even glance toward the body.

"A sacrifice was necessary. He presented himself. He was violating your order, major, sneaking off intent on sin. I turned him back from the gates."

"Not a very pure sacrifice."

"He was purified by the sacrifice."

One of the priests edged towards the door. Verran didn't care, so long as he kept Herst here. The others could be found later. Where the hell had Riall gone?

Herst started to turn, and Verran leaned on the blade, just a little, pushing in on skin. The priest stood still.

"Major."

Riall, back with torches, and soldiers, and Dogson. More coming; judging by the rising sound, men were finally daring to leave their beds, to find out what had so terrified them.

"Major." Dogson, very respectful. "You mind? Riall wants to look at you."

Verran let Dogson take Herst, with pleasure. The captain of B company hummed, prodding the priest out of the room with Verran's sword like a cow-herd with a stick.

"Nice damp cells," he was saying. "Just the thing for your type. You can abase your body thoroughly there. You, you, you! Bring the rest of 'em."

"I figured he's safer than Urlo and Uisi where religion's concerned," said Riall. "You mind, sir?"

Verran shook his head. "Good. My arm's gone numb. Should it?"

"I know nothing about demons. Sit."

"I want someone sent to ask Mother Ampion to come. We need Lethid buried and safe in the care of a decent god, if he's not out of reach of anything we can do. Herst's beyond my authority to try, but I can send him to the Capital, and if the Goddess' Mother Superior for the province backs that..."

"Then he's dead," said Riall. "Yes. Sergeant! You heard the major."

"Take a horse," Verran said. "And be polite."

"Sir! I would." Actually a clean soldier. He probably would have been polite on his own.

"Even notice how dirty all the Locorians are? Cleanliness and salvation incompatible."

"You're delirious, major. You feel that?"

"Ow!" Verran looked at his left hand, twitched the finger the doctor had pinched, a little.

"Your feeling's coming back anyhow." Riall sat down beside him, on the floor. "Look at your arm, major."

"Do I want to?"

He did, though. Ragged sleeve. Two white scars. Blood old and dried and dusting off.

"I think," said Riall, "I think Locor

must like you."

"Giddy," said Verran. "Not delirious." And he fell into Riall's arms getting up to prove it.

Mother Ampion of the Goddess house did not even wait for daylight before riding to the fort. Vigorous, for seventy. She said a prayer over Verran at Riall's asking; the doctor thought it best to bring a more benevolent deity into contact with the recovering demon-bite. At dawn they buried Lethid.

"Murder is no true dedication," Mother Ampion said. "The soul will find its own place."

And she gave promise of her support when Herst and his fellows should be sent for trial.

They were searching the fort that afternoon for the remains of the missing twenty-three men and Major Gry when Mother Ampion returned with two priestesses and, riding a reindeer, two collar-wearing tigers at her heels and an owl on her wrist, a Wastelander. She carried two swords, two spears, cross-bow and countless knives, Verran noted, and had speech as old-fashioned as her scale armor.

"Thou had'st done better to have sent word to us, to solve thy problem," she said. "Locor is not one to summon."

"I have no intention of letting it come to that again, lady."

"We can be found. Sendest thou by way of Mother Ampion."

"If I'd had any idea how many men disappeared before poor Gry..."

"But we thought they were just running off, Mother," said Riall. "Who expects demons, in this day and age?"

The look the Wastelander gave him was one of absolute disgust. He shrugged.

"You haven't found your bodies yet?" asked the priestess.

"Not yet."

The Wastelander gestured, a flick of a finger only, and the tigers bounded away, heads high. Sniffing the air like bird-dogs. They were back within ten minutes, purring and chirping.

They led the Wastelander, and the others followed. A hole in the stone foundation of one of the store sheds, and in the empty space beneath, bones.

Verran ordered the shed down to take them out.

Twenty-two skulls in the end. Two genuine deserters. Another funeral, and a sober dinner after, with the priestesses.

The Wastelander had left once the bones were laid out in the sun, telling Verran, "Thy demon is gone, major. It is unlikely another will come: they do not often discover how to cross the border. But be vigilant nonetheless. They know their enemies, and that was once, and should be now, the border forts. They will seek thy soldiers out before the townsfolk."

"I will watch," he assured her, and thought, he had to. Not likely any other border commanders bothered, more than Dogson had, about such minor matters as missing men.

And Verran made plans, with Riall and Dogson, Urlo and Uisi. The lying sentries to be tried for perjury. Discharge them, and the most fervent Locorians. Urlo and Uisi weren't comfortable with that much meddling in religious choice, but Verran was in no mood to soothe anyone. Barracks, grounds, and soldiers to be kept clean. Weekly trips to the public baths obligatory. All the officers approved that, at least. They would repair the palisades, hang new gates, which would be closed at night. Dogson groaned. Verran grinned, and ignored him. Punishment by the book for sleeping on sentry duty. Flogging. Those so punished could count themselves lucky: in Imperial times it had been death. And they would start patrolling the border, as they were meant to.

They didn't know how to fight demons and they could be the best-prepared battalion in the entire army of the Republic without that changing, but, Verran considered, it would give some purpose to his existence, and maybe some pride to the men. It was a beginning.

The Wastelander woman had a friendly smile. •

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ON the edge

Warren Layberry



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Frog Gods

Carl Sieber

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

It was soon after Mom died that Dad said God had given up on the world and tossed it to the frogs. "Bullshit," I said to myself, and went out to the pool to prove again that Dad lied through his teeth when he was drunk. But shit. Watching the frogs, I could see it was true.

Out in the backyard, dangling my feet over the edge of the pool, watching the frogs cavort, I realized that never mind how ridiculous it might sound—Dad had told me THE TRUTH. Sure at first it didn't seem there was any way that the frogs had the upper hand; I mean look at the way they were jumping around in the dead leaves and scum that clotted up the deeper end of our backyard pool—was that any way for the lords of creation to behave? But—on the other hand—if they were in charge, couldn't they do whatever they damn well pleased?

And for sure they were in charge. They weren't obvious about it but, with enough concentration, I saw through their carefully maintained illusion. Watch a frog for long enough and you'll see too. They hop—right? Wrong.

What's taken for granted as frogs hopping is really a game of catch. Believe for a moment that the frog is the fixed point, and you will penetrate the mystery. The frog is not hopping, he's playing catch with the world—kicking it in the teeth—catching it a lazy moment later in his webbed hands.

Throw. Catch. Throw. Catch. Terrifying to realize.

"Am I right?" called Dad from the kitchen when I went back inside. "Come here, princess, and tell me I'm right. Tell me I know who's really in charge."

"Dad," I said, "I'm in shock."

"Join the club, now you know, now you believe. Hallelujah. That's my little girl."

"Sixteen, Dad. Not so little anymore," I said reaching for his bottle of vodka. He closed his fingers around the neck and held it against my pull.

"Just how grown up do you suppose you are?"

"Very grown up, Dad. Very."

"Good," he said, surrendering the bottle. "You're not so little anymore. Not too little," he repeated and then held something else out to me; offered it to me on his open palm. A small yellow ball? No, not yellow. Gold.

And I started backing away, because even then I guessed something was very

wrong, like I'd heard this story before, and hadn't liked it the first time.

"It's your dowry," he said. "Don't you want it?"

"No, I don't. I don't need it, I don't want it. I'm not getting married."

"You are. It's been arranged. I've married you off right, like I promised your mother I would."

"And who did you promise me to?"

He looked away from me and out the kitchen window, then pulled something else from his pocket. This he didn't offer to me; instead, he kept a tight grip on it and explained: "They gave me this: the numbers for the next draw. Six million. This is the ticket. Six million."

"Who, Dad? Spit it out. Who?"

He was looking out the window again, into the backyard. "Don't yell. You don't want to make them angry."

"No."

He nodded.

"No way, Dad. No. You didn't."

He nodded again. "Ribbit."

I took the rest of the vodka to my bedroom to help me cry, but even with that help, I couldn't howl loud enough to drown out the chorus of frogs from the backyard, or the sound of my fiancé climbing the outside wall with his wet slapping feet till he found my window and pressed his face up against the glass.

"Ribbit?"

"No. I've got a headache."

In the morning, I had to endure bulging eyes tracking my every move as I got out of bed. "Stop it," I said, pressing my face up to the glass, pupil to pupil with his eyes, my mouth just opposite his, my tongue sliming my side of the glass; coiling and slapping just as his was doing. It wasn't any thrill, so I left to make

breakfast.

I had to be careful when I stepped between the fridge and the toaster—Dad hadn't made it to bed, and his hangover had to be at least as bad as mine. Since I was suspicious, I pried open his fingers to get a good look at the golden ball. It didn't weigh as much as it should, and sure enough, when I scratched it, the gold flaked off to show balled up tinfoil underneath.

Then: *Tap. Tap. Tap.* Against the kitchen window glass. Another frog. Another stupid grin. "Ribbit."

Even when I took my toast and jam into the living room so I could eat without some frog watching me I heard: *Tap. Tap. Tap.* And there against the window glass was another frog with another stupid grin. "Ribbit. Ribbit." I yanked the curtains shut and turned on the TV for light—but a moment later, there was a series of thumps overhead and then a frog fell into the fireplace. "Ribbit?"

By afternoon, the frogs had moved in, and I had to watch where I stepped. And sat. One ended up flushed down the toilet because of that. Even Dad was a little overwhelmed, and spent the rest of the day trying to match them stare for stare. "Common law," he mumbled at one point.

"Pardon?" I said.

"Married, living together. It's the same thing."

"The hell it is."

Dad found me later by the pool. It was probably the snap sound, and the ping sound, that told him where I was.

"Don't you think a slingshot's a childish thing for a married woman to be playing with?" he asked me.

"I'm not playing." *Snap. Ping.* "I'm trying to kill the frogs."

"Hit any yet?"

"No." *Snap. Ping.* "But I'm still trying."

"You know that you are risking recession, unemployment, nuclear winter, dandruff, tornadoes, brain aneurysms. The whole world's in their hands—I'd be careful about annoying them."

I tried a few more shots even after he left. It was almost dark by then, but I kept firing into the gloom. Even though I knew they wouldn't let me hit them—it still helped to try.

"So," asked Dad at breakfast, twisting the lottery ticket between his fingers, "getting along?"

"No."

"You did try a kiss, didn't you?"

"Actually—I threw them out of my bed last night. Several times. They'd hop in and I'd throw them out. Bounce them against the wall. Hard. 'Ribbit,' they'd say, like they liked it rough."

He looked shocked and fidgeted with his ticket some more.

I poked at my cereal. Something squirmed beneath the flakes, and two eyes poked through the milk. "Dad—there's a frog in my cereal."

He leaned over and scooped it out. "Happy?"

I pushed back my chair. "No." The frog managed one blink before I grabbed

it and walked to my room. There I grabbed the slingshot—opened the window, took aim at the sky, and shot that frog into the biggest jump he'd ever known.

Snap. Wizz. And no impact. No impact? That's right: the frog didn't come back to hit the ground.

Next frog—same thing.

Snap. Wizz. Straight up into the sky.

Dad stood in the doorway, gape-mouthed. "What are you doing?"

"Kiss your six million good-bye, Dad, I'm taking over."

And I did, too. Frog by frog. I made them drop the world and then I grabbed it. It's mine now, all mine.

"Bullshit," you say?

Well, I don't care if you believe in me or not. That's up to you, and really depends upon how perceptive you are when you meet me. Maybe you'll recognize me, but probably you won't. You might see my bandanna spread out on the sidewalk for spare change and think that I'm doing the somersaults, dive rolls, handstands, backflips, and cartwheels just to amuse you. Well, I'm not. It's myself I'm amusing.

Throw. Catch. Throw. Catch.

When you've got the whole world in your hands, you can't help playing with it. •

AUTHOR: CARL SIEBER is a writer and a fire fighter born in North Carolina and raised in the Canadian Arctic. His latest dream is to achieve some sort of harmony living in temperate Victoria writing fiery prose.

ILLUSTRATOR: LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK is a professional artist who works full-time for an independent bookstore. She spends her time convincing customers "it's really O.K. to read science fiction... honest!" She lives in Coquitlam, BC, where she just watched her tomato plants die from acid rain.

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ON Writing:

Self-promotion

Robert J. Sawyer

At the science-fiction convention ConText '91 in Edmonton, I gave a talk on self-promotion. The room was packed, and the talk seemed to make a big splash. Audio tapes of it have been circulating for the intervening six years, and people still ask me questions about self-promotion. More: large numbers of Canadian writers now seem to be doing the things I discussed.

I say “seem to,” because although much energy is going into their self-promotion, these writers aren’t getting the results they want. So, this time out, I thought I’d give you Rob’s Six Rules of Self-Promotion.

Rule One: You’ve got break eggs to make eggs

Self-promotion costs money. If you were starting a dental practice, you’d expect to spend tens of thousands of dollars getting your business off the ground. Why should a new writer balk at spending some money, too? I met one wannabe recently who said he couldn’t afford to do any promotion while he was starting up, but would do some once he got established. He was missing the whole point: promotion is a large part of *how* you get established.

On the other hand, your promotional efforts have to be cost-effective. I do a newsletter a couple of times a year called *Soul/wave*. It goes to the media, booksellers,

and librarians, but I normally *don't* send it to individual readers (although I do put a small supply out on the freebie tables at SF conventions). Printing and mailing costs me about a buck an issue—meaning if I mail the newsletter to someone, and that person decides to buy my latest paperback because of it, I've *lost* about fifty cents on the deal. Which brings us to...

Rule Two: Let the media leverage your efforts

It's pointless to try to promote your book one-on-one to readers—and it's also irritating for the reader. They call it "mass-market" publishing for a reason: a U.S. publisher will want to sell a minimum of 3,000 hardcovers or 15,000 paperbacks. With real perseverance, you might persuade thirty people to drop the thirty-odd bucks on your hardcover, and maybe even 150 people to spend eight bucks on your paperback. But for all that making a pest of yourself, you've only reached one percent of the number of people you need to make the book even marginally successful.

Instead of going after individual book-buyers, almost all of your promotional efforts should be aimed at the media: newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. They'll get word of your work out to thousands of people for you. Learn to do press releases (there are samples on my web page, and you'll find some more in the wonderful book *The Writer's Guide to Self-Promotion and Publicity* by Elane Feldman, published by Writer's Digest Books).

Also, learn to send your press releases effectively. The cheapest, fastest, and easiest way is with a fax modem: I write my press releases on my computer and,

while I'm sleeping, I have my fax modem send them to a list of forty or so media outlets including CBC's *Midday*, CTV's *Canada AM*, *The Globe and Mail*, other daily papers across Canada, my local community papers, and the Canadian Press wire service. Note that press releases must be timely: I've seen many writers win awards, then, a month later, decided to snail-mail out a press release. Of course, they end up getting no coverage at all.

Rule Three: Quality counts

Still, you may want to do some flyers or bookmarks—although, in my experience, these are the least effective marketing tool. But if you *are* going to do them, they have to look professional. If you don't know anything about layout and design—learn. I'm lucky enough to have a wife who worked for years in the printing industry, but for those who don't, get a copy of the book *Looking Good in Print: A Guide to Basic Design for Desktop Publishing* by Roger C. Parker (Ventana Press).

Print your promotional material on fancy paper. The best selection (but also the priciest) is from the mail-order firm Paper Direct (1-800-A-PAPERS); most office-supply stores also carry desktop-publishing papers from GeoPaper, GreatPapers!, and other suppliers.

Rule Four: Promotion is cumulative

The first time you send out a press release, you won't get much response—maybe a couple of column-inches in the local weekly paper, and that only if you're lucky.

But it's just like sending out short sto-

ries. You can't give up after the first rejection. A little while ago, *Imprint* (a weekly book program produced by TVOntario and also carried nationally on CBC Newsworld) phoned me and said, "We've got a thick file folder about you, and we've been meaning to do a piece on you for a long time. Now's the time." Unless you win a major award, or a movie is made of your novel, not much will happen around the publication of a single book—but if you draw attention to your work on a regular basis, you *will* become a media presence ... and that translates directly into book sales.

Rule Five: Become comfortable with yourself

I've sat on both sides of the interviewer's table: as of this writing, I've done sixty-six TV appearances, countless radio programs, and have been interviewed over a hundred times for print—but I've also conducted a lot of interviews with other people, and I'm constantly amazed at how poorly most writers present themselves.

Be expansive, expressive, and bubbly. If you're on TV, talk with your hands, smile, laugh—have a good time. The only way you can come off looking bad is if you're nervous and defensive. (One Canadian SF author recently scored quite a coup—an appearance on a network talk show. But the first thing he did was try to distance himself from the proceedings, and throughout, he looked uncomfortable. What could have sold thousands of books probably ended up selling only a few hundred.)

Take every opportunity you can to hone your public persona. Do readings, talks, classroom appearances, and so on. Take a public-speaking course or

join Toastmasters. Record yourself with a camcorder. (Me, I did a degree in Radio and Television Arts at Ryerson; after that, there was no conceivable circumstance under which I could be uncomfortable on camera or in front of a microphone.)

Never take offense at the interviewer's questions (you'll turn him or her right off if you start quibbling over the use of the term "sci-fi") and never talk over the interviewer's head. You know who Olaf Stapledon is, what an ansible is, and so on—but the interviewer won't, and neither will the audience.

Indeed, almost every interviewer you'll ever speak to will know almost nothing about science fiction, and probably won't have read your work. The single most important thing you can give in an answer is *context*; producers have repeatedly cited my ability to do this as the reason they keep asking me back on their shows.

The interviewer might say, "I guess SF books are riding the coattails of the success of *The X-Files* and the re-release of *Star Wars*." Don't reply with a simple yes or no; instead, give an interesting, context-rich response: "Actually, I don't think that has much to do with it. We're about to enter the 21st century; in the past year or so we've discovered evidence that there was once life on Mars, and we've found planets orbiting other stars. What could be more natural than for readers to be turning to a literature that devotes itself to exploring these issues?" Note that I say "literature"—in interviews, I always refer to SF as literature, and myself as an artist. Connect yourself and your work to the larger arts community that the interviewer is already familiar with: you'll find you get much less smarmy coverage.

Note, too, that I didn't force any reference to my own work; such references will come up naturally in the conversation, but you'll seem pushy and insecure if you keep mentioning your own books.

Rule Six: Write really well

All the self-promotion in the world is pointless if you don't have a great product. I spend maybe a day a month on

self-promotion activities—and the other twenty-nine days working very hard at my craft. I received the most publicity I've ever had when I won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year. Sure, I did everything I could to capitalize on the win, but winning the award happened because I wrote a good story—and that's the real key to getting people's attention. •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's seventh novel, *Starplex*, is a current finalist for the Hugo Award. His eighth novel, *Frameshift*, is now out in hardcover from Tor, and his ninth, *Illegal Alien*, will be a December hardcover from Ace. Rob has been interviewed on *The Arts Tonight*, *Benmergui Live*, *Canada A.M.*, *The CBC Evening News*, *The CTV National News*, *Imprint*, *Midday*, *Morningside*, *Pamela Wallin Live*, *W-Five*, 16 times on *Prisoners of Gravity*, and 18 times on The Discovery Channel's *@discovery.ca*.

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