

1997
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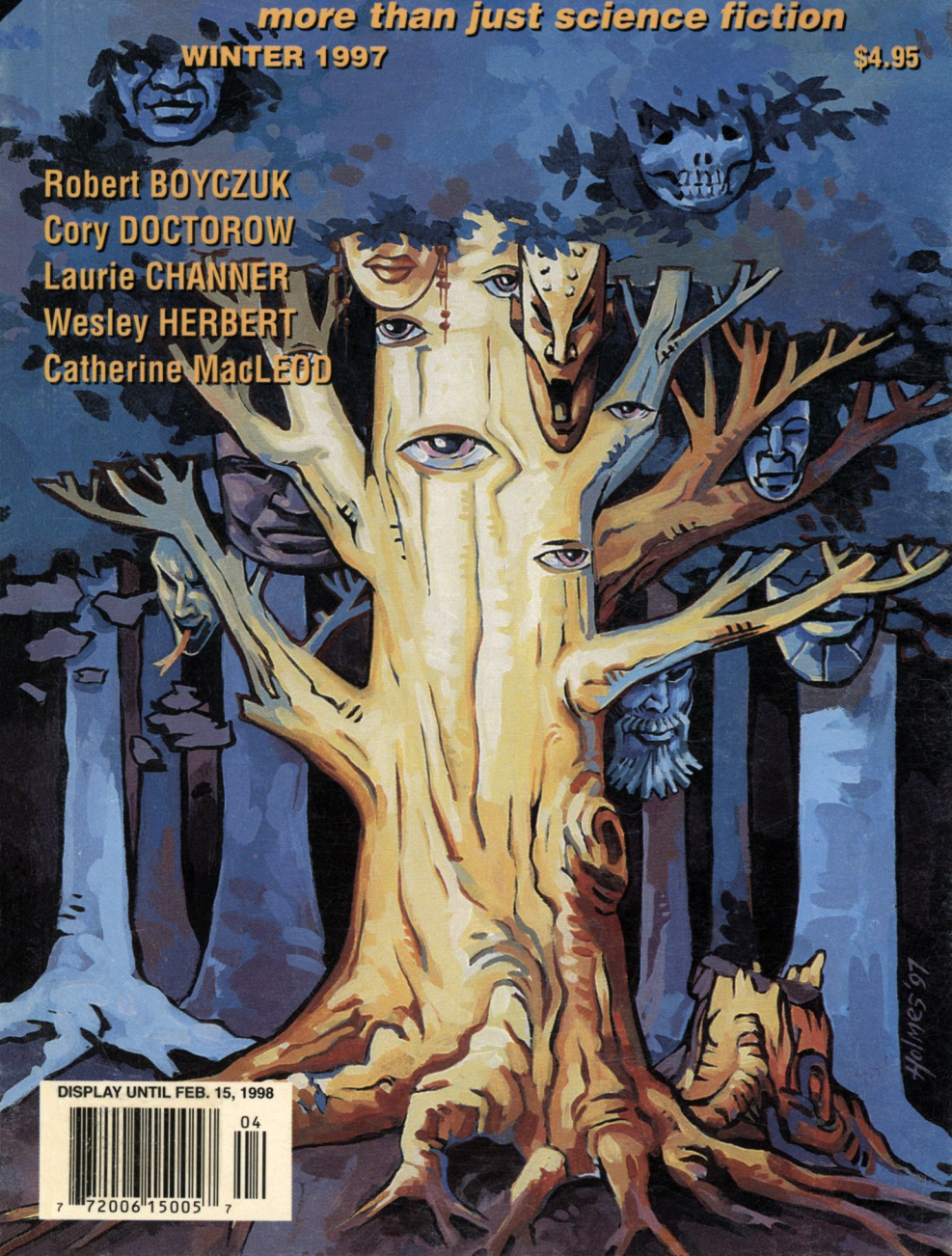
On·Spec

more than just science fiction

WINTER 1997

\$4.95

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Holmes '97

ON SPEC
more than just science fiction

Vol. 9, No. 4, #31

Winter 1997

<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society
<i>The ON SPEC Editorial Collective:</i>	Barry Hammond, Susan MacGregor, Hazel Saangster Jena Snyder, and Diane L. Walton
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ON SPEC is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$19.95 for individuals and \$25.00 for institutions. (This price includes GST. GST # 123625295.) For US and overseas rates, see p. 96. Send SASE for advertising rate card, contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details.

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.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; Canada Council; Advanced Education & Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

ON SPEC is a member of and is distributed by the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association.

Typesetting and layout in PageMaker on a Macintosh PowerPC by Jena Snyder
Body typeface is Optima. Headline typeface is Benguiat Gothic.
Printed in Canada by Alpine Press Ltd.

Publications Mail Registration #10418
Postage Paid at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
Copyright © 1997
ISSN 0843-476X

Website:
www.icomm.ca/onspec/

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ON the inside

Memories of Judy

Derryl Murphy, Guest Editor

The best thing we can keep with us when someone leaves is memory. A collection of remembrances about actions, behaviors, words, smiles, small moments of all sorts. And as writers, we often cultivate friendships with other writers, making memory a less transient thing and more a shared experience, viewed through the lens, in this case, of my own fumblingly incompetent fingers.

I was out of town when the announcement went out on-line that Judith Merrill had died, and only found out through a late-night phone call. I can't share with you the sadness that fell on me that night, but I will share some small, select memories:

Before I was published, I was the program chair for ConText 89 in Edmonton, and somehow got to wangle my way onto a panel as moderator, sitting between Judy and Phyllis Gotlieb. Much humor was evident in the audience that day as the two of them did their best imitation of WWF wrestlers pawing the ground and snorting threats at each other while the beleaguered and bemused referee did his (feeble) best to hold them apart...

...Judy and William Gibson sitting in the lounge at that same convention, talking, drinking, smoking, watching Bill's collection of violent animé on the big screen...

...Canadian in Winnipeg, Judy practically driving over my feet in her new little scooter just so she can brag to me about how cool it is, then insisting I sit down while she eats lunch and tell her how life has been the past few years, seemingly pleased that I've taken the step from fan to writer, aware (!) of the few things I had written up to that point. Which says it all, really: she met you and remembered you and that was that, something I have heard time and again from many writers over the past couple of weeks. If you got inside her radar, you could generally count on staying there, even if life was pretty much guaranteed to lead you in a different direction.

I could share more memories, but many of them involve others and are memories more personal for them (ask Spider Robinson, Steve Fahnstalk, or Randy Reichardt about the music, for instance).

There are other writers who deserve praise for carrying the flag of Canadian SF during the dark years, but really, none have had the impact of Judy. She lit a fire under our butts with her take on *Tesseracts* and nothing has been the same since. I suspect this very magazine is arm's length proof of that.

I'm glad to have known her. And I'll miss her. Hang tight to those memories, everyone. 🍁

ON this issue

Changes in the solar winds

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

It's been a long time since the foolhardy Copper Pigs decided "Sure, let's go for it! Let's publish a magazine!" and the editors began reading the first submissions to On Spec, but some things are still the same:

From the original motley crew, Diane L. Walton and I continue on as editors, as do Barry Hammond and Susan MacGregor. Hazel Sangster, having moved back to Canada, has rejoined the editorial slate, traveling up from her new home in Calgary for business meetings and the ever-popular and ever-contentious Fight Nights.

Many things have changed, however:

Farewell to our Promotions Coordinator, Cath Jackel

Cath, our "Jackel of all trades," decided in September to move on. In her job, first as Administrator and later as Promotions Coordinator, Cath worked tirelessly and enthusiastically on a hundred different jobs at once. She handled most of the business aspects of the magazine, coordinating ads, promotions, sales, distribution, and more while the editors and art director handled the editorial, creative, and production side of *On Spec*. Whatever she decides to do next, we wish her the best, and would like to extend our thanks and appreciation. Thank you, Cath, for everything.

New website!

Although we had a website set up a couple of years ago, the volunteer manning it got too busy to keep it up. We've now set up a new site, courtesy of iComm. Rick LeBlanc of the Infrastructure Network is our talented and creative webmaster. Come visit us at: <http://www.icomm.ca/onspec/>

More than just science fiction

With the Fall 97 issue, we finally dropped "the Canadian magazine of speculative writing" from our name and cover, and became simply "*On Spec*." Our tagline reads "more than just science fiction," which is, after all, the best way to describe us. Our mandate, however, has not changed: our goal is to provide our readers with the best speculative writing we can find, be it science fiction, fantasy, horror, surrealism, magic realism, or any other as yet undiscovered form of SF.

As Barry said back in May of 1995 when we published our anthology, *On Spec: The First Five Years*, there's a future out there and we're exploring it. Why not join us? 🍁



The Hills

William Southey

illustrated by James Beveridge

I don't mix much with my neighbors and I don't waste my breath anymore telling them a story it's plain none of them believe, but anyway, sometimes after selling a few lambs, Bess and I park the truck out front of the hotel and go in for a couple on the way home. The tavern's in the basement and on a bright day like today you can tell the out-of-towners—they're the ones who stop at the bottom of the steps and wait for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. I didn't bother; I've been coming here all my life. Bess didn't need to wait in the doorway, either. She headed straight across the floor to the same table we always pick and curled up under it. She put her white-tipped muzzle onto her two white forepaws and settled to watching the room.

"Hey!" Dave called out when he heard her claws click on the tile. "No dogs or children!" He looked up from the pump. "Oh, it's you. Afternoon. Having the usual? I wondered if you'd be in when I seen you drive in this morning. How's the sheep business?"

"Hell, Dave," I said. "I don't know. Same as always, I guess. Yeah, the usual—a draft for me and a bowl of water for her." There was a stranger at the bar, wearing a jacket and tie on a weekday, which meant he had to be some kind of salesman. I felt his eyes drift over me in a swift appraisal before he turned his full attention back to the kid sitting beside him.

"And no one ever saw the horse or the girl again?" Jim asked.

It's funny. Jim's only maybe three or four years younger than me, but everyone in

town still treats him like a kid, whereas I've been a man ever since Dave Mason decided to sell me my first beer. Jim's mother owns the feed store—Corrigan's Grain and Silage—and the company—Corrigan Trucking—that hauls our produce to market.

"No," the stranger said. "And mind you, when I caught my own mare again, she was pregnant. Her foal turned out to be the fastest horse I've ever owned, but without papers or a pedigree I couldn't race him in any of the tracks down south. It's a foal out of that sire I'm selling today," he added, as if that proved it.

I didn't say anything. Pedigree or no pedigree, if his horse was as fast as all that, he'd have had no trouble finding papers and getting its lip tattooed to match.

"Well," Jim said, elaborately casual, "we've got no track here and no need for racers, but I keep a few saddle horses. I might come and look at him if the price is right." I pictured Jim at the agricultural fair, trying to win every race with a fairy-blooded stallion.

"Donald, here," Dave cut in, bringing me my beer and waving off my money, "had something very like that happen to him not six years ago. Didn't you, Donny?"

The look he gave me was an invitation to help him in changing the subject. He didn't mind seeing Jim Corrigan get fleeced—that was something we all tried to accomplish as often as we could get him away from his mother—but it was plain that Dave didn't like any stranger thinking us so easily shorn.

"Be glad to hear it," the salesman said. He wiped foam from his lip with the back of his hand. "Go ahead. Pleased to meet you. Stegnar," he said. "Walter Stegnar, from Alliston." He

seemed content enough to have his pitch delayed. A beer every half hour, and Jim's judgment wasn't going to improve as the afternoon wore on.

Like I said, there wasn't a man in the room who hadn't one time or another laughed himself silly at my expense, expect for Stegnar, and he was the only one who hadn't heard it yet. But what the hell, I figured. Only an idiot pays for beer he could drink for free.

I don't always tell it the same way each time. There's a few fixed points that never vary, but the stuff in the middle I shift around any old way. What the hell. It's only a story.

"I keep sheep up by the border," I began. "I bought a dozen pregnant ewes and the rights to the grazing when I came out of the army. That was all. I had no money then for a dog. A dog with sheep-sense is expensive and one without is worse than none at all. I made do with my own legs. In those hills every yard is uphill or down from the next, so for a few weeks the muscles in my legs were so sore each morning I could barely get out of bed, in spite of all the drill I was used to. There's plenty of old stone buildings standing empty up there, what with the war and all. Hardly anyone's lived there for years. Who knows what might come over that wall on a dark night? Folk want to be sure of their children, and who'd blame them? Though the truth is that nothing bad's happened in three or four generations. We've stuck pretty much to the terms of the truce, within reason, and so have they. Anyway, with no dog I couldn't afford to be too far from the flock at night, so I moved them into the ground floor of an old house and slept above them.

"The first winter wasn't too bad, and

at New Year's I got my first pay for being a sergeant in the reserves, and I could afford feed for them and me to last out till spring. Come spring the lambing began and even with a small flock I didn't get much sleep. I was raised on a farm, but dairy, not sheep, and that's a whole other animal entirely, as the saying goes. I couldn't afford the vet, but Henry Watson—Wally's uncle—came up and showed me what to do, and I found a book on animal husbandry in the library at the high school that Rita said I could keep for a while."

"Animal husbandry?" snickered Corrigan. "That what you call it in the sheep business? I'm going to be on the school board next year. Maybe I should have a look at what else they got in that library."

"Hell, Jim," Andy sneered. "If you did it'd be the first time you ever troubled them books. What the hell you doing with the school board? Your mamma finally figure you ain't no good at business and she may as well make you mayor?"

"Shut up, MacCormack, y'old fart."

"Damn straight! And don't you forget it."

"Shut up, the both of you. That's enough. Another word and I'm barring you both for a month." Dave isn't above letting two well-matched farmers sort it out out back, but Jim was a Mamma's boy who didn't know how to fight for himself. "Go on, Donny."

"Fish in a barrel, Andy," I said. "Anyway, between the book and Hank Watson and Mother Nature, all the lambs were born properly and none died. More'n half were twins, too, so it was a good year. The sun started shining and the grass started growing and I figured I could start calling myself a shepherd.

"The sun shone and the grass grew and I stopped needing to buy fodder for the sheep and it wasn't too bad a life. A little lonely, maybe—shut up, Jim—but after a five-year hitch in the infantry, I didn't much mind being by myself for a time. Still don't. Anyway, one day in July I decided to see if I couldn't make a few acres of hay that I wouldn't need to buy in the winter. Those old fields are too steep and small and rocky for a tractor, so I borrowed some hand-tools from my brother. Around one or two in the afternoon I was sitting on top of the wall between the field I had the sheep in and the one where I was cutting hay. I had my whetstone out to touch up the edge on the scythe. The moon hung in the sky, and it was one of those days where the sun came down like somebody'd emptied a bucketful on your head. I was thinking that cutting hay was thirsty work—"

I stared down at my glass and Dave took the hint. "...when from up the hillside behind me I heard the sound of barking. I looked up and there was a dog maybe a hundred yards away. A sheepdog. You know, an ordinary border colli: black and dark brown with a white ruff. But a little bigger maybe than most others I'd seen. It got my attention right away—'cause by then I knew the look of every sheepdog for ten miles around, and I was certain that I'd never seen that one before. It barked again, and did that thing that dogs do where it crouched down in the front with its back legs straight and its tail waving and its ass in the air. I've seen that look plenty of times before and since, and its meaning is unmistakable. It means 'come on.' Well, I didn't figure to leave the sheep and go follow a strange dog up the hills. It barked some more and this time didn't look nearly so playful. It

was all business.

"'No, Lass,' I said, thinking of the stories. 'It isn't me you want, but Doctor Anderson down by the forks.' Well, this time it whined a little, as if it knew exactly what I was saying. To tell the truth it was little creepy, but at the same time I started to get worried. I wondered if maybe there was someone hurt up on the fells. It was a nice day, and out by the sheep I tended to lose track—maybe it was a weekend and someone had come out from the city to go for a walk and had broken a leg or something. That would explain why I didn't know the dog. Anyway, life on the border in July wasn't so hard that I couldn't afford to leave the animals alone for an hour or two. They were in a field walled with stone and I had the pickup parked across the gate. I set off up the hillside.

"He—I saw then that I'd been wrong before: the dog was as male as they come—went straight up the side of the valley. It's maybe a three, four mile hike to the top, and I started to get worried. There ain't nothing up there but the border, and I didn't figure to cross it with night on its way. About four o'clock I stopped and I said, 'Look, I'm sorry, but I have to get back to my flock. I can't be leaving them overnight.' It felt a little funny making excuses to a dog, but at the same time it was pretty clear that he got my meaning. He growled a little, low in the chest, and I could see the fur on his shoulders rise. Well, that was alarming, but anyway I turned and started back down the hill. Fifty yards later I felt a blow between my shoulder blades and I was knocked flying. I rolled and cursed and blew on my palms and bushed the gravel out of them. I felt like an idiot. I had forgotten something I knew well—that a collie fights by wheeling and charging in from behind.

If he'd cared to assert himself I'd have been hamstrung. He whined a little and wagged his tail as if, you know, sorry, but there didn't seem to be much option then to following some more. There was no way I'd have been able to back my way down the hill covering my ass in the dark. Half an hour later we got to the border.

"We aren't supposed to cross it, on account of the terms of the truce, but I'm pretty sure that nearly every kid raised around here has been over by the time he finishes high school. The wall's crumbling, and it doesn't seem to be guarded. It runs along the heights; the ground drops away on the other side. Anyway, you get over, and the land doesn't seem much different, except emptier, maybe. And creepy. You get more'n about fifty yards past the wall and the goose-bumps are up and your hair's on end and you turn back. Except nothing has happened. It's just an empty hillside that's scaring you silly."

"I hear someone yelled 'Boo!' and Corrigan pissed hisself. That right, Jim?"

"Leave it alone, Andy," Dave said.

"This time it wasn't the same. The wall was a little crumbled where I was, so I made for the pile of rubble and scrambled up. I lowered myself down the other side, and everything was just as it always is. I hung by my arms and dropped, and my feet hit the ground on the other side, and I wasn't in the same place anymore. I mean, the wall was the same, but when I turned around, everything was different. The lay of the land hadn't changed much, but now it was lush, for one thing. There were all kinds of trees and fruit, some I didn't recognize. And I couldn't tell what season it was. There was a great big chestnut all lit up in flowers like a candelabra in the moonlight, so it had to be May. Except

right beside it were some sumacs and a mountain ash, and they both had fruit, and that meant September.

"Right about then I noticed that there was no sign of the dog. I mean, I've never met a fence that could keep a smart dog out for long, but without arms it couldn't climb over my way, so I had maybe a few minutes, and I began to look for a way out. The only problem was that this side of the wall was in good repair and I couldn't go back. Apart from where I stood, there were thorns and brambles growing up to the base of the wall on both sides, so that was out, too. In front of me there was a path, so I took it. I knew I was being railroaded, but what can you do? When the path went by the chestnut I bent down a branch and took a blossom and put it into the pocket of my jacket. In the other pocket I stuck some of the leaves and berries from the sumac and the ash. If I ever got back home I was going to need some kind of proof.

"I said 'moonlight' earlier, and that was another thing. It was getting dark. The sun had been behind me all afternoon, and now that I was on the other side of the hills it had set. There was this big moon, and it was full full full. Shiny and round as a silver dollar. At home hadn't I been watching the moon all morning, and it was somewhere between half and three-quarters. That was enough. I had to sit on the grass and look at the sky."

"Well," Corrigan belched, "I've been listening to this goddamn story all afternoon, and it's dull dull dull. So you wanta go sell me a horse, or what?"

"Wait," Stegnar said, "I want to hear how it ends, now. There much left?"

"Fuck, if it comes to that I'll give you the ending myself and save us all an earache. I heard it enough goddamn

times. *Oh great fairy prince,*" Corrigan began, his voice a falsetto. *"Give me a dribble of your magic wand..."*

Dave reached out and hauled him half over the bar by the collar of his shirt front. "I told you," he said, "to shut up. Donny's a friend of mine and he's telling the story like I asked him to. Any time you decide the entertainment in this bar isn't to your liking, you can get the fuck out and don't come back. Now shut up and don't say another word until Donny says 'happily ever after.' *Comprende?*"

"Well anyway," I continued after the silence, "I was sitting on the grass, a little dazed maybe, and looking up at the sky. I could see then that all the stars were wrong, too. I sat there until a voice from behind disturbed me.

"'The moon over Faery,' it said, 'is always full. And our stars shape a different history. There gallops the grass-green steed, there flies the falcon, and there grows the crown of thorn. Over here is the huntsman, and there the stag. He's coursed that stag a thousand years, and doesn't know yet that he'll never catch up. The huntsman blows his horn and calls for his hounds, but they're off over the hills, and far away.'

"Well, my heart did a few tricks then, and when it calmed down and I turned around, there was a man standing behind me.

"'My name is Conn,' he said. 'And I apologize for bringing you here so discourteously. Your sheep will be safe tonight, and you yourself with them again before dawn, and it will be your own world's tomorrow. My wife is mortal,' he said, 'and with child. It is a rare thing among my kind, and we have none with the skill to see to the birth.'

"'Me?' I said. 'I know nothing of

childbirth! There's Dr. Anderson, or Mrs. Stewart, or Vera Saddler. I don't know, there must be thirty people down at the forks able to do a better job than I.'

"I have watched you with the sheep. It will be enough. You have the right hands, and the right heart. But come. My home is not far and time is short. It will be you now or no one. I must,' he told me, 'anoint your eyes, so that you will see things in a way that makes sense to you.'

"Will I be changed forever?' I asked. I was thinking of Blind Ewan, who'd begged his fairy lover for magic eyes to see her beauty truly, and finally received his wish when he threatened to leave her and enlist for a soldier. She gave him his sight and, angered, left him to find that he could no longer see his own world save through the edges of his eyes. He wandered the hills calling to her to return, and drowned falling into a well that was right in front of his nose.

"No,' Conn said when I'd explained, 'though it was no wonder she was angered when he said he would join the army to fight her kind. What I give to your eyes I will take back before morn. The memory of what you see here must remain behind you when you leave. It is best if you lie down. What I do will make you dizzy for a time.'

"Whatever it was, it stung a little. The world went all bleary for a minute, and I blinked a bit. When it cleared, the first thing I could see was light. We were in the same place and all, and all the trees and stars and stuff were the same, but it was as if we were standing in a ring of torchlight—there was a circle of flames hovering around us in the glade, and the fires were dancing, but there were no torches at all; just the flame, burning in mid air. I could see Conn, too, clearly

now for the first time in the light. He wasn't dressed like any fairy prince I'd ever heard of. He was wearing ordinary homespun trousers, black or dark grey maybe, and a linen shirt, and over it all a sort of brownish woolen cloak or shawl and a big black hat. He looked, to tell the truth, like any one of my own ancestors. A beard, I think, and large dark eyes. He helped me up, and on we went.

"He kept up his chatter while we walked, but I wasn't paying much attention to the words. I was thinking about what he had said about losing the memory of what I was seeing. That didn't seem fair, and I was trying to fix everything in my mind. I was trying to get a good look at the flames. Maybe I thought that if I could see them for what they were, then I'd be able to figure out how it was done, and I wouldn't have to forget. Thing was, those lights were like the sunspots you get if you're tired and you've been staring at a light-bulb or something—they're there, and you can see them, but if you try to focus on them they shift or dance away.

"Well, the torches kept moving like that, and they followed us through the woods keeping the same sort of circle shape around the two of us. About the only thing I could figure out was that they weren't sunspots and they weren't *in* my eyes at all, 'cause sometimes when we moved they passed behind trees and then they'd cast a shadow.

"If you've got a second, Dave, I'll have one more and that's it.

"A couple minutes walking, perhaps, and we came to a small stone cottage. One story; two rooms, front and back. We went in to the back and the flames followed us somehow so there was light. There was a bed in the back room, and

there was Conn's wife and she was ready to give birth. Well, everyone knows the first part of what you've got to do. I told Conn to boil water and get clean cloth. I was pretty amazed by how clear-headed I was. I checked on the patient. Conn disappeared somewhere, into the kitchen, maybe, by the fire. He hadn't told me her name and she didn't say anything. Oh, she was conscious and all and aware of what I was doing. I spoke to her gently the way they taught in first aid but she didn't answer. Her eyes looked calm but a little frightened, like she'd never done *this* before. She was breathing easily enough and her pulse was steady but fast. She cried out a bit with the contractions, but wordlessly. First I tried to time them and then I realized that I didn't have a watch, so I tried to do it by counting, and then I realized that even if I could count evenly I had no idea what any of the numbers would mean. I didn't know what kind of timing meant that a baby was on its way, so why bother? Anyway, it was plain that they were coming closer together. With sheep you just sort of stand around and if things are taking too long or aren't going well you sometimes have to feel around and make sure that the lamb is positioned right; that the hooves and the head and the tail are in the right order and that the umbilicus isn't in the way. I wasn't about to do anything like that but I decided that it wasn't a bad idea to wash up. In the kitchen I stripped off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves and scrubbed.

"It wasn't long after I got back that the contractions settled in and became pretty much continuous. From the look and sound of the patient there were times that maybe weren't quite so bad and times that were damn near unbear-

able. I got a clean towel ready and set myself to catch the baby. Well, it came, and I cut the cord and everything and wrapped it up and handed Conn's new daughter up to her father. I was sort of mopping up when there was a rush and, almost before I could catch it, another child. *Twins!* I remember thinking, but that wasn't the end either. This part of the evening sort of all blurs together in my memory. Conn frantic, pacing. Holding an armload of babies. The babies crying, some of them, and Conn's wife yelping and screaming in the midst of labor. There are a couple of images that stick out like still moments in the tumult. Frantically tearing one of the sheets into extra cloths, or another time when I found myself idly wondering why the smoke from the flames didn't blacken the ceiling. After—how long?—it was over. The babies stopped coming and I still have no idea how many there were. Five? Six? Some boys and some girls. We nestled them up with their mother and tucked the blanket round and fought to regain our breath.

"From somewhere Conn produced two tumblers and a bottle of Scotch that looked as if it might have come from behind this very bar.

" 'I want to thank you,' he said quietly, handing me a generous glass. 'There's not many as would have come, and without your help I would have been lost.'

"I was bursting with questions and I didn't ask them, and to this day I can't tell you why. We stood and listened to mother and babies breathe and stir, and we talked of nothing, nothing at all, trivia. 'It is a clear, still night,' he said.

" 'Nice place you have here,' I told him, and the like.

"At length the glasses were polished

and he finally said, 'Now, if you will, I must restore your mortal vision. You will have no trouble getting home. It would help—' he said (this, after all, was what we weren't talking about, and I'm sure I didn't look too keen), '—if you could sit and tilt your head back and look at the ceiling.'

"I took my time washing my hands and arms, and all the while I was looking around the room trying to get it stuck in my mind. I guess Conn knew what I was doing 'cause he sort of faintly grinned. I figured he knew that it wasn't going to make much difference, but anyway I had to try. Well, finally I couldn't string it out any longer—"

"Alleluia," Jim muttered. Dave was down the other end of the bar.

"—so I put on my jacket and sat on a stool and jammed my hands into my pockets so I wouldn't try to catch Conn's arm or anything embarrassing like that. I leaned my head back and Conn dribbled something cold and wet into my eyes, and when I opened them again I was sitting on a pile of tumbled stone on our side of the border and daylight was breaking.

"I know, I know. I'm sure you're thinking that this is where I say, 'and then I discovered that it was all a dream,' but I didn't and it wasn't. 'Cause that's just the thing. When my eyes opened I still had my hands in the pockets of my jacket, and when I straightened my fingers I found that I was clutching the flowers and berries and leaves and stuff I'd picked earlier.

"All I can figure is that maybe one of the things I was holding had some power as a charm, 'cause when I put my hands into my pockets at Conn's cottage, there had been a moment before the end when everything cleared and I

could see that I wasn't in a cottage at all, that there was no table, no stool, and no bed. That I was in a cave and on a pile of straw against the wall lay a collie bitch nursing a litter of newborn pups."

I didn't want to tell the last part, but Dave knew the story and he wasn't going to let me get away with it. "And was that the last you ever saw of them, then?"

"No," I told the room. "Almost a year later—at the end of the spring, maybe. May or June—I heard a bark from the hills. Those days every time I heard the sound of barking I'd jump. But this time I looked up and it was Bess. She came bounding down the hills, and she's just stayed with me. She was a yearling or thereabouts, so I guess she's one of the pups. I don't know why she's stayed—friendship, maybe, or curiosity. But she took to the herding like ducks to cheese, and these days we work the sheep together.

"That's it. I'm off. Thanks for the beer, Dave. Cheers. C'mon, Bess."

I left Dave telling Stegnar that we'd taken the ribbon at the sheepdog trials the first three times we'd entered and hadn't competed since. I've had plenty of offers but I just tell them she isn't mine to sell.

I still live up by the head of the valley near the border. I've fixed up an old cottage, made of stone from the fields and timber from the valley, and I live there alone with my dog and my sheep. I go home with my dog, and blow out the candle; she stands and she drops her cloak of brindled homespun (though not sheep's wool) and naked we curl up in my grandmother's bedstead and I lie in my collie dog's arms. 🍀

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The Reality War

Robert Boyczuk

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

***Magic!** Bertwold thought, grinding his teeth and staring at the castle wedged neatly—and quite impossibly—in the heart of the pass. **Nothing good ever comes of magic!** Beside him, Lumpkin, his crew chief, mined his nose abstractly, evincing no interest whatsoever in the castle.*

The two men stood at the juncture where the road turned from gravel to dirt. All work had ceased; picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows lay in the long grass next to the idle road crew. Behind them the paving machine huffed in a quiet rhythm, its bellows rising and falling, as if it were a beast drifting off to sleep. The digging and grading machines had already been shut off and lay like giant, inanimate limbs on the road. Bertwold had fashioned them thus—in the shapes of human arms and legs—to assuage the King's distrust of machines. But now their very forms irritated Bertwold, reminding him of all the hoops he had already had to jump through to win the Royal contract.

And now this.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Bertwold stared miserably at the castle.

Its outer walls were fashioned of basalt, rising seamlessly from the ground to a height of nearly ten rods. Each corner boasted a square tower surmounted by an enormous ivory statue. Curiously, all four of the carvings appeared to be of *imperfect* figures, each lacking one or more limbs. The statue on the nearest corner was missing a head and sporting two truncated stumps where there should have been arms. Within the castle itself, visible above the crenelations of the walls, were apical towers of colored emerald and ruby glass; and between them, the tops of ovate domes that shone with the lustre of gold and sparkled with the cool radiance of silver. Thin, attenuated threads, the color of flax, (walkways, Bertwold reckoned, though they were empty) wound round and connected the buildings in an intricate pattern that was both complex and beautiful to behold—and, he thought with a slight degree of irritation in his engineer's mind—altogether impossible.

"How long has it been there?" he asked at last.

"We're not sure, boss," Lumpkin said. "It was there when we came out this morning to start work."

"Have you sent anyone to..." Bertwold hesitated, not sure exactly what might be appropriate in this case. "...to, ah, ring the bell?"

"Well, no, sir. I tried to order a man to do it, but they're scared of its magic, you see...."

Turning to Lumpkin, Bertwold tapped him on the chest with his forefinger. "Then you go find out who lives in that *thing*, and what they're doing there. You, personally. Don't send a laborer." Lumpkin opened his mouth, as if to say something, but Bertwold cut him off. "Or I'll find someone else who's hungry for a promotion." Lumpkin clamped his mouth shut. "In the meantime, I'll get the men back to work. We're still at least half a league from the castle, and there's plenty of road yet to lay. As far I know, there's nothing in the contract that prevents your men from working in the presence of the supernatural."

Lumpkin, now a shade paler, nodded and swallowed hard. Spinning on his heel, he stumbled away, the gravel crunching under his boots.

Bertwold sighed. He had not counted on this when he had won the King's commission to build the greatest road the land had ever seen. He looked at the castle, imagining the pass as it had been yesterday and the day before, and every day before for as long as men remembered: a wide, inviting V of sky that gave onto the tablelands beyond.

Why would anyone want to drop a castle there?

Lady Miranda peered through the arrow slit. *Ants*, she thought, watching as a clutch of figures emerged from a tent and

scattered, busy with their unfathomable, pointless tasks. *Insects*.

She looked at her right hand, then at her left, and pursed her lips. Between the two there weren't enough fingers remaining to end this quickly. Perhaps if she asked Poopsie...

No, she thought, *he'd never agree*. He was still off somewhere sulking. It had been as much as she could do to convince him to move the castle from that horrid swamp to where they were now, even though he'd undershot their destination by over a hundred leagues. If she had been the one with the talent for moving, it would have been done right; but her talent was transubstantiation, of little use in such endeavors. She knew he should have offered his entire leg and not just the shin, for the gods were capricious and not entirely to be trusted. But that was Poopsie, always trying to cut corners, to save a finger here, a toe there, and ending up paying a much higher price for it in the long run. She'd wanted to warn him, but had, with difficulty, held her tongue. Now he'd have to go an entire arm or the other leg to unstick them if they ever wanted to leave this absurd spot.

And they must.

The mortals would never leave them alone until both she and Poopsie had been whittled down to their trunks. Humans *were* ants, swarming over their betters and bearing them down by dint of sheer numbers. Crush a hundred and a thousand would return. Their thick-headedness was simply incomprehensible.

Like the one who had disturbed her sleep yesterday morning. Lumphead, he had called himself. Lumphead, indeed! A thoroughly nasty bug of a man. Imagine the nerve, asking *her* to move the castle! *Never!* she had shouted, outraged at the impudence of the request, though

it was the very thing for which she wished. How dare he! Her anger rekindled for an instant as she remembered his effrontery—and how she had reacted instinctively, without thinking. Then she smiled, recalling the startled look on Lumphead's face as she had reached out and touched his nose, and broccoli had sprouted in its place.

It had been worth her little toe.

Bertwold tried hard not to stare at Lumpkin's nose.

Instead he watched his three sappers wrap burlap around the explosives before carefully packing them on small, two-wheeled carts. Another coiled varying lengths of fuse around his shoulder.

"Ready, sir."

Bertwold nodded at the fusilier who had addressed him. "Then let's get on with it."

"Yes, sir!"

The men lifted the handles to their carts and began jogging along the dirt path towards the castle, the wheels raising small clouds of dust. *Ha!* Bertwold thought as he watched his men draw closer to the base of the wall. *Let them magic their way out of this!*

Lady Miranda's beauty was legendary. At least in her presence.

Studying herself in the mirror, she daubed an exact amount of rouge beneath her eyepatch. She frowned, then turned her head so that her face was in profile, her patch blending in with the dramatic shadows and angles of her sculpted features. She had changed into a slinky black velvet number that matched the color of the patch. *Yes, she decided, perhaps I can use it to good effect.* The patch certainly added to her air of mystery, making her flawless skin appear even more striking. Picking up a silver-handled brush, she began stroking

raven hair that fell to the small of her back. She smiled. *Ya still got it, baby,* she thought. Then, with just a slight degree of irritation: *Lord knows I might need it soon.* She sighed. Certainly she'd been careful, very careful, to dole out her magic in small doses over the years, saving it for only the most pressing occasions. Her appearance had, after all, been her saving grace: it was how she'd attracted Poopsie—and his countless predecessors. She'd managed to remain relatively whole while her suitors had whittled themselves down to slivers of flesh to gain her favor. But Poopsie had reached the point where he was becoming more and more reluctant to do so. He, along with his ardor, was thinning out. That's what had landed them in this cursed mess in the first place.

The mirror chimed, snapping Miranda out of her reverie; its surface shimmered like a windblown lake, distorting her reflection. A moment later, a pasty-faced cherub wearing a headset appeared where her reflection had formerly been. "Ladyship," it intoned in a thin, reedy voice. "The bugs are restless." The cherub disappeared and was replaced by a scene outside the castle. Several figures toiled along the road, dragging wooden carts behind them. The view narrowed, drawing in on the men. Visible, some rods behind, and exhorting the men on loudly, was that hideous Lumpy fellow whose nose she'd transformed the previous day; and beside him stood another man, a head taller, and broad of shoulder. A breeze flicked his locks of golden hair restlessly in the wind. Miranda ordered her mirror cherub to zoom in.

She sucked in a breath. He was a big fellow. A towering bear of man, arms locked defiantly across a barrel chest, a scowl twisting up his face. And a striking face it was. Eyes grey as sea mist,

nose long and straight, cheeks prominent and sculpted like her own. And four perfect, fully-formed limbs. Miranda's heart skipped a beat. *Why*, she wondered with no small amount of bitterness, *couldn't more immortals look like that?*

"Milady, the ants draw nigh..."

A V creased Miranda's brow; she shifted her attention back to the figures dragging the carts. *Explosives*, she suddenly realized with distaste.

She expelled a sharp breath and cursed loudly. They would be at the gates in a few minutes. It was too late to find Pooisie.

Gathering up her skirts, she dashed out of her sitting room and down the stairs, taking them two at a time, emerging in the courtyard. She ran over to the front gate and knelt in the dirt, her velvet gown forgotten. Placing her palm flat on the ground, she concentrated on the two remaining fingers of her left hand and began chanting under her breath. Almost immediately her fingers stretched, then liquefied, soaking into the earth and transmuting the hard-packed, washed-out dirt to a lumpy beige mass centered around her palm. It glistened in the sunlight. The transmutation grew, milk-white circles forming in pockets on its surface. It continued to spread, now moving away from Miranda, following the path under the gate and out towards the men trotting up the road.

Bertwold watched the sapper slip and fall. The man tried to rise, but the more he struggled, the further he sank into the ground. He managed to drag himself up slightly on the protruding edge of his cart, but his efforts only mired the cart deeper. He wiped his face with the back of his arm and spat something from his mouth. "*Oatmeal!*" he screamed.

"What did he say?" asked Bertwold.

"Ootmal," said Lumpkin, his voice altered since his nose had been turned to broccoli. "The rood's ben tooned to ootmal."

"Oh," Bertwold said. "I see."

Two of the men—along with the cart—had already slipped beneath the surface. Another had managed to half-swim, half-crawl to safety at the side of the road where the ground was firmer.

Bertwold stared at the castle and ground his teeth.

A moment later there was a muffled roar. The oatmeal road exploded upwards like a fountain; it showered down in thick droplets splattering all those who had gathered to watch, a large lump narrowly missing Bertwold and plopping wetly atop Lumpkin's skull.

Miranda reached the ramparts just in time to see the ensuing explosion. She laughed aloud as the oatmeal rained down on her enemies. *Chew on that, silly mortals!* she thought. *Vulgar food for vulgar pests!* That big one didn't seem quite so haughty now that he was wearing a suit of oatmeal.

Miranda felt exhilarated, alive. And something else, too. A strange, yet not wholly unpleasant, tingling. Perhaps this was just what she needed. Nothing like a bit of an excitement to shake the dust from your bones.

She clambered onto the thick ledge of the crenel so she would be visible to those below. Then she waved, looking directly at the big man, laughing and knowing her laugh would be carried clearly on the tongue of the wind to those annoyingly perfect ears...

There was no denying she was beautiful.

Bertwold stared through his brass telescope at the infuriating woman. She sat

on the parapet, brushing her hair as if nothing were amiss, acknowledging his presence by blowing him an occasional raspberry. *Cheeky impertinence!* he thought. He was angry at her—and angry at himself for finding that damned eyepatch so fascinating!

“Weel?”

“Well, what?” Bertwold answered irritably. He stepped back from the telescope, and made a mental note that, at a more discreet moment, he would suggest a thorough steaming might help Lumpkin in the preservation of his wilted nose.

“Whoot shuld I teel the mun?”

Bertwold turned. Some of the crew were playing cards, others stood in small groups, talking in low voices. Bertwold stared at a digging machine, its oak bucket cupped in the shape of human hand, resting uselessly on the side of the road.

“Assemble the men,” he said. “I have an idea.”

Bertwold stood behind the machine, pleased that its design and construction had proceeded so smoothly. It had taken only a day, remarkable, really, when he thought about it. Perhaps his men shared the same agitation to get on with things that dogged him; or maybe they were just anxious to complete the road and return to their families. Whatever the case, the guilds had worked cooperatively for once, and would have posted their first injury-free day had it not been for the knifing.

Bertwold walked the length of his new machine, checking the work. Inside the frame from the levelling machine, they had placed the arm from the digging machine, hinged on a massive, metal pin. Bertwold nodded at the end of his inspection, deciding it would make a passable catapult.

He surveyed the castle wall with his telescope, settling on a spot midway between the towers.

The men stood ready.

Bertwold barked an order and three bare-chested men bent to the task of turning a large windlass that drew the catapult’s arm lower. A ratchet snicked in time to the men’s grunts. When the arm would go no lower, a second crew wrestled a round, black bomb into the cupped palm at the end of the arm. Lumpkin, who Bertwold had placed in charge of the catapult, jotted a few quick calculations on a pad he held in his hand, and directed the men to angle the cart ever so slightly. A moment later, he turned to Bertwold and said, “Weady, Sur!”

Bertwold nodded.

“Fur!” Lumpkin shouted at a burly man holding a mallet.

The man raised his eyebrows in a quizzical look.

“Fur, I said!”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Fire,” Bertwold said quietly.

“Oh,” the man said, then turned and knocked the ratchet stay free with his mallet.

The arm flashed upwards, and the cart jerked sharply, its wheels momentarily lifting off the ground. Bertwold watched the bomb arc towards the castle.

It struck near the top of the wall and exploded, the thunderous sound rushing back to them a second after the flash. A section, just above the point at which the missile struck, slowly tumbled backwards and out of sight, leaving a small, but noticeable gap, like a missing front tooth.

The men cheered, and Bertwold turned to look at Lumpkin. Though it was hard to tell, he thought he could detect a smile of satisfaction beneath the

green mass of broccoli.

"Aieeee!" shrieked Miranda, dancing backwards when the wall tumbled down, narrowly missing her and burying Poopsie, who had been seated in the rose garden. "Aieeee!" she said again. Then, recovering her composure, she stamped her feet in indignation. *How dare they!* she thought. *The insolent insects!* "That's it!" she said to the rubble heap that had been Poopsie, "Now, I'm really mad!"

"Now, now, Miranda, better not to get yourself worked up." Poopsie's voice was barely audible from beneath the debris. "They're only doing what mortals usually do. Let's think about this thing rationally..."

"No!" Miranda shouted as a large section of the fallen wall began to stir, loose dirt and stones trickling off its edges. "I will not let this go unpunished!" The chunk of wall floated upwards, then hovered. Another piece began to shift.

"Please, Miranda, before you go throwing away perfectly good body parts on a pointless gesture." Poopsie's voice was clearer now, and Miranda recognized the wheedling tone. She knew it was his own precious body parts he was really worrying about. "After all, we're the ones who landed in the middle of their pass. It's not as if they came here just to raze the castle." A geyser of dirt and stones shot from the hole and fell to the ground, forcing Miranda to hop back two more steps.

"Are you taking their side?"

Poopsie clambered from the pit as best he could on his one good leg, covered in dirt but otherwise unhurt. "No, dearheart. I'm just saying you have to see it from their point of view." The stone slabs suspended in the air dropped back into the hole with a *whump*.

"Hmph," she said. She eyed him

closely, wondering what part of himself he had sacrificed to escape the rubble. He shook his head like a wet dog, and dirt sprayed out in all direction; it was then she saw his left ear was missing.

"Just give me a moment to gather my thoughts, and I'll move the castle like you wanted," he said.

There was another thunderous explosion, and part of the castle wall to Miranda's left cascaded downwards, shattering the glass roof of the aviary. A flock of brightly colored birds, including her favorite gryphon, took wing, rising over the wall and scattering on the wind.

"I've decided that I like it here," Miranda said. "I think we should stay."

"Stay? No, don't be silly." Poopsie bent down and placed his hand on the ground at Miranda's feet. "Brace yourself," he said.

But before he could do anything, Miranda seized his hair and, in an instant—and at the cost of her big toe—transmuted him to a parrot with a tiny wooden leg.

"Awk!" Poopsie squawked, flapping his wings and hopping about on his one good leg.

"There!" Miranda said petulantly. "Now you shan't be able to work your magic until I release you!"

Another explosion rocked the castle, and Miranda stepped up to the wall, placing her palm on it.

"Awk! Miranda, wait!" Poopsie screeched, but it was already too late, for her long raven locks were melting away as she worked her magic, running down her cheeks and neck like trails of blackened butter, leaving streaks that shone darkly in the sun.

Bertwold watched as a fourth projectile misfired, shattering uselessly against the wall and dropping to the ground in a curl of smoke. Already there were two large

gaps near the summit of the wall and a irregular tear where the third bomb had hit beneath the tower. He did a quick count of the remaining ammunition—fourteen missiles—and decided that it would be sufficient to finish the job. He ordered the men to concentrate their fire to the right of the largest breach.

“Fur!” Lumpkin shouted.

The bomb tore up and away, dwindling to a small dot. It struck—but much to Bertwold’s consternation, it neither fell nor detonated. Instead it stretched the dark surface of the wall as if it were made of rubber. A moment later, the wall snapped back in their direction and the black dot began to grow rapidly.

Oh, oh, Bertwold thought.

Lumpkin bolted down the road, leaving a trail of florets in his wake. Bertwold overtook him just before the bomb struck.

He was pitched, head over heels, into a deep ditch they’d been using as a latrine. A series of rapid explosions followed. The ground shook beneath him. Dirt rained down, then smoking bits of debris, sizzling as they extinguished in the fetid water. A moment later a dark cloud boiled around him, choking him and making his eyes water. He struggled to his feet.

“Sur?”

Bertwold blinked back tears.

“Butwuld?”

The smoke dissipated, and Bertwold could make out the blurry face of Lumpkin who stood on the bank above him. Lumpkin’s clothes were singed and torn, and the tip of his broccoli was blackened, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

“The catapult?” Bertwold asked grabbing Lumpkin’s shirt and bunching the material in his fist. Then, before Lumpkin could answer, Bertwold pulled himself up the shallow embankment, throwing

his foreman off balance, so that, with a yelp, Lumpkin tumbled into latrine.

Bertwold staggered up the slope of the bank. Before him, where the catapult and stockpile of ammunition had been, there was an enormous, smoking crater.

“Got them!” Miranda lifted the hem of her gown and did a little jig. “Maybe now he’ll understand who he’s dealing with!”

Poopsie shook his head ruefully, ruffling his feathers, scratching behind his left ear with his tiny wooden leg. “I wouldn’t count on it,” he squawked, and flapped onto Miranda’s shoulder. “Please, Randy, just change me back and I’ll get us out of here. Let’s leave before something serious happens...”

Miranda shooed him away with a wave of her hand. She crossed her arms, and her expression hardened. “No. He started it. Now let him finish it—if he can!”

“What are they doing?” Lady Miranda wondered aloud. For the last five days the annoying humans had left them in relative peace. Poopsie chewed quietly on a cracker, but refrained from commenting.

Miranda leaned forward between the merlons of the parapet, about to drum her fingers in consternation when she remembered her digits were all gone. It only added to her pique.

“Awk, Randy,” Poopsie’s squawked in her ear, “they’re not worth the effort. Awk, awk! Let them be.”

Miranda winced; every time Poopsie talked he was sounding more like a parrot. And it was getting harder and harder to coax him from the trees.

“Awk! Change me back, and let’s be on our way. Awk!”

“No,” she said. “Not until this is finished.” She gave him another cracker.

What were the bugs up to?

She stared down the valley at the mortals' camp and shook her head in bemusement. They'd dismantled all their limb-shaped construction vehicles. At first, Miranda had thought they'd given in, and were simply packing up to leave; but instead of slinking away, they had erected an enormous pavilion and dragged the disassembled parts of the machines underneath its broad canvases. Miranda bit her lip so hard she drew blood. The pain surprised her, made her curse softly under her breath at the waste of a perfectly good blood wish. *It's their fault*, she thought, her anger slowly rising as she dabbed at her lip with a lace handkerchief. *And they shall pay.*

Bertwold admired his latest invention.

It had taken them the better part of a week to build the thing. In the process, they'd had to cannibalize every single construction machine. And they'd also exhausted their supplies. For the last two days his men had worked on empty stomachs and Bertwold had spent almost as much time mollifying their growing discontent as he spent overseeing the construction work. But it had been worth it, he thought. This was the best machine he'd ever built.

"Fire up the boilers," he said to Lumpkin.

At Bertwold's words, Lumpkin jumped. He looked drawn, and more than a little nervous; this Bertwold could understand, having seen the other men eyeing Lumpkin's nose hungrily. Bertwold's own stomach rumbled. For a moment his vision misted over, and he could only see the yellow of a rich cheese sauce running over green of broccoli, and his mouth began to water...

He shook his head to clear it.

Focus, he admonished himself. *You'll*

need all your wits to operate the machine.

"Awk!" Poopsie flapped his wings, screeching as he circled the room in agitated motion. "Awk!"

"What is it?" Miranda sat before her mirror; she had spent the morning in the cellar, rooting through old trunks, trying on wigs.

"Follow me! Follow me!" Poopsie shrieked. Then he darted beneath the door jamb and flew out of sight.

Miranda leapt to her feet and sped after him, out onto the parapet where he perched, his little wooden leg tapping an agitated tattoo on the crenel.

"Look!" he squawked, pointing a wing.

Miranda turned. Her jaw fell open.

The roof of the humans' pavilion had been rolled back, revealing a huge machine fabricated in the form of a man. It was sitting up, as if it had just woken. Steam curled slowly from vents in its neck. As Miranda watched, there was a piercing whistle, and the machine rumbled to its feet, towering over the camp, its face now level with hers. With a grinding noise it teetered, steadied itself, took one lurching step, then another, walking in an exaggerated gait, moving cautiously along the edge of the oatmeal swamp, heading towards the castle.

Poopsie hopped on her shoulder. "Quick!" Poopsie screamed in her ear. "Change me back! Change me back! I'll get us out of here! Awk!"

Miranda raised her arm to bat him away, then stopped abruptly. "Okay," she said. She plucked him from her shoulder with her good arm—the one with two remaining fingers—and he yelped, a strangled sound that Miranda felt vibrate through his windpipe. She closed her eyes and concentrated; her

arm began to dissolve, to fuse with Poopsie.

He grew.

Already larger than Miranda, he continued to grow with each passing second as her arm disintegrated. By the time she was up to her elbow he was a forty foot-high parrot, his wooden leg the size of a small tree. When she finally withdrew, only a small flap of flesh left where her arm used to be, Poopsie's head extended past the castle's highest tower.

"Now!" Miranda shouted, pointing to the man-machine. "Get him!"

Poopsie blinked, once, twice, and cocked his head. His eyes were dull and remote, and Miranda could no longer detect any sign of human intelligence in them. "Poopsie?" she asked. "You there?"

Poopsie screeched, an ear-splitting reverberation that shook the castle down to its foundations. He launched himself from the parapet, his wings beating so hard that Miranda was nearly blown from the wall. He swooped past the machine, and dove towards the clutch of workers in the encampment. At the last second he banked and climbed into the sky, a tiny figure with a bright green nose struggling in his talons. In seconds he'd dwindled to a small dot on the horizon.

Oops, Miranda thought.

As if enraged, the man-machine leapt forward, its whistle shrieking in anger.

The parrot was monstrous, huge, large enough to knock even this machine over.

Bertwold watched it dive towards him and he froze, his hands on the levers, unable to move. It grew larger and larger, until he could see nothing else, and he covered his eyes, waiting for the moment of impact that would topple him to his death. But nothing happened.

Or at least nothing dire. The machine rocked gently as the parrot swooped past. When Bertwold lowered his arm the eyeholes showed only empty sky. He pulled a lever, and the head swung round a full circle. But the bird was nowhere to be seen.

"Right," Bertwold said. "That's it for you!" He reached for a lever.

The motors roared; steam vented in screeching whistles. The machine jerked forward, breaking into a mechanical trot. Then it lurched sickeningly. Although the engines continued to bellow, the machine had come to a standstill.

Bertwold grabbed another lever, pulling sharply on it; the machine roared even louder, and this time he could hear its metal joints squeal deafeningly under the stress. A rivet popped out of a plate above his head and shot across the chamber, ricocheting off the opposite wall and clattering noisily to the floor. Bertwold eased up on the lever, and the machine seemed to sigh; then it settled on an awkward angle, the landscape ahead of him tilted a few degrees. *What the...?*

Bertwold unstrapped himself and took two quick steps to the right eyehole. Far below, the machine's feet had already disappeared, swallowed in the golden-brown, lumpy earth.

Bertwold cursed aloud. In his anger, he'd forgotten about the rotting oatmeal!

He dashed back, and worked furiously at the controls, but no matter what he did, no matter how hard he pulled or pushed the groaning levers, he couldn't free the machine's legs. His beautiful new machine continued to sink. As he sweated and cursed and sweated some more, the landscape rose, bit by infuriating bit, before him.

Bertwold stood beside his machine, just beyond the edge of the deadly oatmeal.

Only the machine's head was visible, its chin nestled firmly in the brown morass. Bertwold felt like crying. Instead, he continued to brush oatmeal from his jerkin in as dignified a manner as he could muster. It left sad brown streaks wherever it touched.

Down the road the encampment was deserted; his men had abandoned him. *One giant parrot and they fled like frightened children.* Bertwold shook his head. He had expected better of them, especially of Lumpkin, always faithful Lumpkin. *Oh well,* he thought. *Wherever he's gone, he's probably better off now.*

"Haloooo..." The voice startled Bertwold. It was a woman's voice, a mellifluous, lilting tone that made his blood quicken. It had issued from behind the castle gate. "Is anyone out there?"

Bertwold turned and cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"Um," the voice began, "I'm in a bit of a fix. I was wondering if you could, ah, possibly give me a hand."

Bertwold strode up to the gate. In its centre was a square peephole that was shut. "What sort of help?" When there was no answer, Bertwold said, "Why don't you open the gate?"

"I'm afraid I can't," the voice said. "You see, that's my problem."

"Then at least open the peephole so I can see who it is that I'm addressing."

"Oh, well, if you insist!" The voice sounded annoyed, almost petulant. There was a rasping sound followed by a grunt. Then the small wooden square swung inward. Bertwold's heart faltered. Framed in the opening was the beautiful face he had watched through his telescope, although now a wig sat askew atop her head. Bertwold gaped; the woman blushed. Then she inclined her head in a fetching manner, hiding her eyepatch in half-shadow. Bertwold

sucked in a sharp breath.

"I'm afraid I can't open the door," she said in a forlorn voice that rent Bertwold's heart. "I'm trapped." She stepped back and he could see that she had only one arm, and that arm had no fingers. "I managed to pull the bolt on the peephole with my teeth, but the gate is barred." She gave him a melting look. "I'm afraid you'll have to find your own way in."

Bertwold's heart sang in his chest.

Fall was nearly played out, and winter would soon be upon them; large flakes of snow drifted down and settled on the ground. The pass, paved road and all, would soon be closed until spring. Miranda stared at the castle, at *her* castle, and the causeway that had been cut through it like a tunnel, and felt a brief, almost imperceptible, flash of something that might have been anger.

But it passed quickly.

As if sensing her agitation, Bertwold reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. She turned and smiled at him.

It had been his idea to come back here, and she could see it troubled him no less than her. The way he had looked at his machine, or the head of it, anyway, that poked above the ground in the midst of the inexplicable broccoli patch. It was, she thought, quite clever, still widely regarded as his best work, something of which he could rightly be proud.

"Ready?" she asked and he nodded.

They walked back to their carriage. When she reached out to open the door, he closed his fingers over her wrist. "Problems?" he asked.

She drew her brow up in puzzlement.

"The cold," he tapped her arm. "I was worried about the temperature. How's it holding up?"

She flexed her arm, curling her

fingers, all five of them, into a fist and released them. An almost inaudible whirring followed her movements.

"Works perfectly," she said, reaching out and pulling his head to hers until their lips touched lightly. "Just like magic." ♣

AUTHOR: ROBERT BOYCZUK lives in Toronto and writes sporadically. He has previously published stories in the magazines *Prairie Fire*, *On Spec* and *Transversions*, and the anthologies *On Spec: The First Five Years*, *Vampirica Erotica*, and *Northern Frights*. He wishes he had more stories forthcoming. He lives electronically at:

http://pandora.senecac.on.ca/~boyczuk/writing/writing_main.html

ARTIST: RONN SUTTON of Ottawa is currently drawing the *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* comic book, after having worked on *Draculina*, *Luxura*, *Spinnerette* and others. He hopes that by the time you read this he will have won one of the two Aurora Awards he has been nominated for.



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The Cherry Grove

Aaron V. Humphrey

He'd had the same dream three nights in a row.

[As the car crested the hill, he could see the cherry grove.]

In the dream, he seemed to know what this "car" was, but the concept slipped away soon after he awoke. It was like a cart ... which was like a sled with wheels ... which were like rocks rolling down a hill ... but the chain of references left him with a vague image that eventually dwindled to nothing.

Ethi noticed his haggardness as they foraged for breakfast. "Did you have the sleep-images again?" she asked.

He nodded. The first night, she'd been sleeping with him, so he'd told her right away, but only ended up with her as confused as he after the clarity of the images receded. He'd thought it was odd that neither she, nor any of the others in the grove, knew what "dreams" were, but he couldn't think of why it was strange.

They accepted this strangeness, though. In many things he seemed unfamiliar with the grove and its customs, but in no way he could verbalize, let alone any of the others. But when waking up from the dreams, he could almost put it into words...

[Only another few hours and he'd be home with his wife.]

He staggered as a dream-image struck him in broad daylight. Dreams shouldn't do that, he thought, and then wondered why he thought that. The impressions on his waking mind were more vivid and lasting than those of sleep. Wife ... an odd concept that he had trouble grasping. It was sort of like Ethi, whom he had sex with almost exclusively, and whose company he found himself seeking, but there was another factor too. It...it slipped away like the others, and he realized he was crouched on one knee, his basket half-spilled, and Ethi leaning over him.

"Are you all right?" she asked. He wasn't sure what he expected to find on her face, or why, but it wasn't there, just abstracted interest. And why not? If he wasn't all right, she'd have to gather more herself, and she should get started on it or they'd be hungry later. She should be interested. But ... should there be something more? He shook his head, trying to clear it of these images.

"I'll go on, and come back to you later," Ethi said, and briskly set off with her basket, leaving him to recover the spilled contents of his.

They were all used to doing these kinds of things. They went about efficiently doing their tasks—gathering food, preparing food, having sex—while he was

continually *thinking* about things. Why did he do this, when none of the others did? Would it pass in time, so he could become more than a weak member of the tribe that had to be coddled?

But he couldn't stop. There were more odd things about his dreams. He saw the cherry grove from the *outside*. Ethi had looked at him blankly when he struggled to explain this. She couldn't conceive of it. He barely could, and that only by a strained mental analogy between the grove and a bird's nest, which one could be either inside of or outside. But why should the grove be like a bird's nest? The comparison was forced, but somehow his mind kept returning to it.

There was a part of his mind that was trying to tell him something, something that nobody else in the grove could understand. What if there was more outside the grove? What if—here his mind latched onto another image—what if there were other groves, the same way there were many trees in the grove, with spaces between them?

Now he was caught, and he watched his mind spin glorious possibilities. So there could be ways to travel between groves (trees), the same way he walked on the ground. This "car" might be one of those ways. Perhaps the creatures that lived outside the groves were as different from those inside as butterflies from termites.

And what would happen if a butterfly, larval perhaps, or injured, was brought by accident into a termite nest? Perhaps they would try to make it one of them, making allowances for its non-termite nature.

He laughed. Such silly thoughts he was having. Why should there be anything outside the grove? None of the tribe had even been there.

But none of the tribe had thoughts like he did. Or maybe they once did, but after time passed, they *did* stop thinking about things as much. Suddenly this thought filled him with terror, and he leapt up and ran off through the trees, leaving his basket behind him.

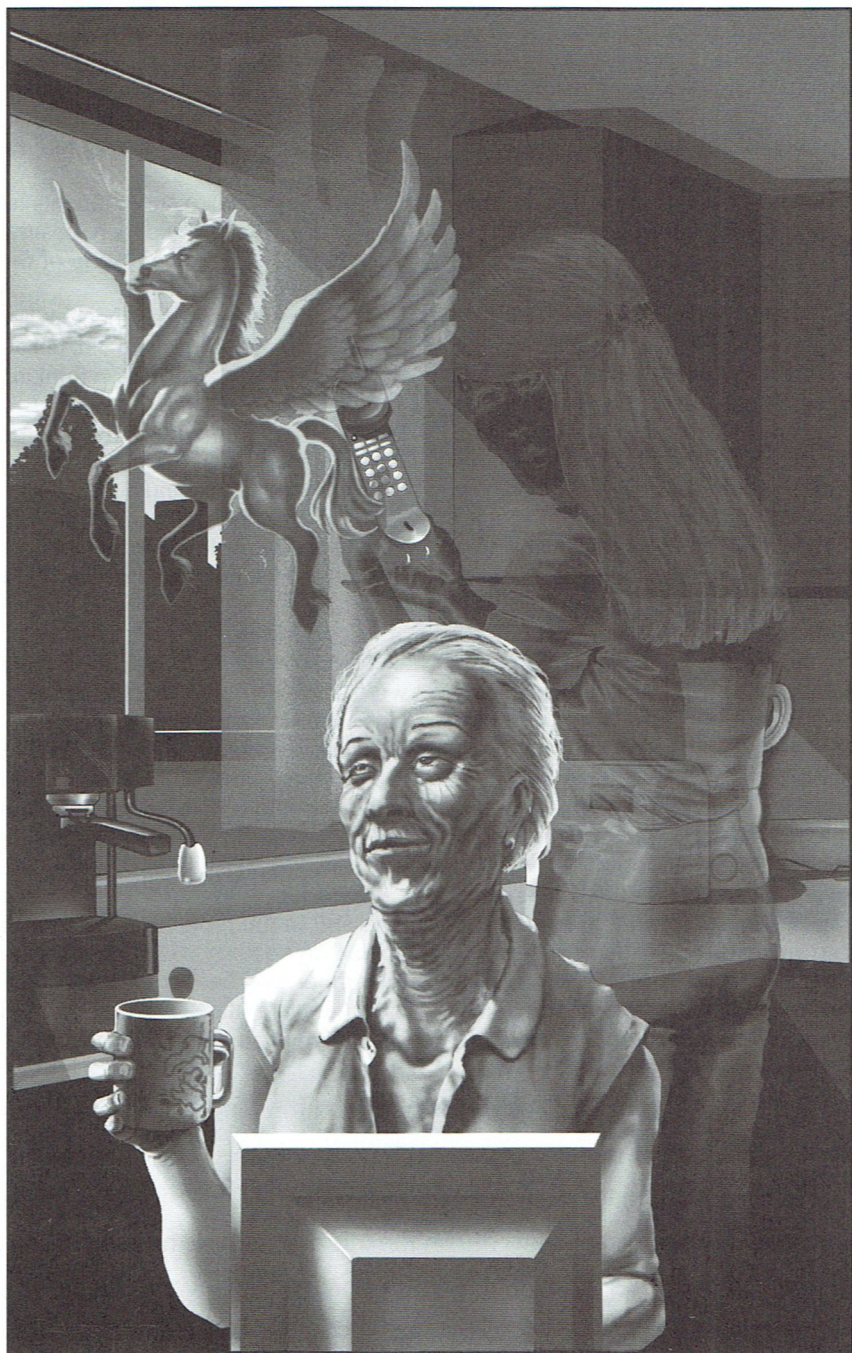
He didn't know how long he ran through the grove in panic, but without warning he felt an unaccustomed light on his face. He stopped and looked around, blinking.

There were no more trees. Well, there were some trees, but far off in the distance. He was at the *edge* of the grove.

There was the hill. If he climbed to the top, he would probably have the same view he had in his dream. And the car—that must be it there, beside that dark strip that passed by the grove.

The doors were unlocked, and the keys still in the ignition. He started it up and drove away. He couldn't quite remember why he'd gotten out of the car in the first place, but at least he'd probably get home before dark. ♣

AUTHOR: AARON V. HUMPHREY has lived in Grande Prairie and Edmonton. He is a computer programmer/system administrator, avid reader, listener to music, amateur actor, and player of Nomic. He has spent much of the last five-odd years of his life on the Internet, where traces of his existence can be found at www.telusplanet.net/public/alfvaen. This story, originally posted on the newsgroup talk.bizarre, was based almost entirely on a dream.



Bullbreaker

Elizabeth Westbrook

illustrated by James Beveridge

A fat golden lab stands on the dining end of my gate leg table, eating my bananas. Already straining under the weight of my computer at the working end, the table's poor spindly legs tremble under the vigor of the dog's greed. The creature's even eaten the skins.

That's how I know definitely that something peculiar is happening in my house.

I'd already discovered the cappuccino maker making cappuccino without my say-so. Old people forget things and I used to think eighty was old before I turned it myself, so I'd thought perhaps the time had come for my mind to be gone. Pity, I thought. It's a funny little thing, but it's mine, and I'm fond of it.

Someone gave it to me. Not my mind, or possibly they did, but that's too metaphysical a question for me. The cappuccino maker. Somebody young gave it to me, somebody who knows how I love clever machines. The same one who gave me this computer. An expensive item this, with all its megs and bytes. It must have been a lover. No, I'd remember a lover, rare breed that they are. Haven't had a lover for forty-five or fifty years, not real and in the flesh, that counted.

John counted differently from the way I do. Less flexibly, so to speak. I liked his inflexibility. Married his inflexibility.

John came here recently. I remember that. After all this time, he wants me to go away with him. I told him about the cappuccino maker and he gave me that patient but immovable John look of his and went away.

Then I saw a girl standing in my kitchen—or some of her. I looked up from my keyboard, where I was framing fantasies for my subscribers (less spontaneous than the telephone, but allows for more sensuous complexity) and saw through her to the counter beyond. I could see the toaster, the pot scrubber, the cappuccino maker, all in a row right through her. I could see her long hair, pastel as frosted dead grass, and, at the same time, her face in reverse relief, like the back side of a mask. And,

over the surface of it, tears running. She was staring at the cappuccino maker, and crying. No sound, though.

So I consider these events, open a new file, and put everything into this machine. That makes it real, somehow. I can come to only one conclusion. I am being haunted. No question of it.

By whom? The young person seems familiar, but it's hard to recognize people seen inside out. John thinks it doesn't matter and I should come away with him. I discovered long ago that there's no point in being exasperated with his lack of interest in life, his limited imagination. He's a sterling man, a rock to me. He anchors my string in safety, and I fly as the wind blows me, secure in the knowledge that he won't let go.

Here's that young person again, more solid this time. Pale, like a badly over-exposed photograph, but I can only see the side that actually faces me. She moves around my kitchen, touching things, looking and weeping, her lips moving silently. Lovely and vulnerable and as if she's lost something. Typical ghost behavior. Now it is my role to discover what she is trying to communicate.

Can a ghost type? I make room for her at the keyboard, but she avoids this end of the table.

Familiar. Definitely. She's talking on the cordless telephone, another gift, from the same young person, to help me with my work, even though she disapproves of it. But why shouldn't I turn a hobby into a paying business? So earnest, my granddaughter.

Sarah! How could I not know her? Even a wisp of her, a fragment should have shouted "I know you!" in my brain. Look at her face, in "communication mode" as she talks on my phone. She is

trying to reach, to teach some man, the latest, no doubt, the "wild, exciting, forceful" one of recent vintage reported in her last sincere and innocent letter. Who else but Sarah could still believe that males and females are human to each other?

Tell him he's the only man you love in the entire city. His ego will reach maximum inflation just as he registers the last word and deflates to instantaneous doubt. What about other cities? It's as good as a sharp pull on the ring in his nose.

Sarah is in central British Columbia with Monkey, her banana-eating dog. She is talking on the telephone in my kitchen in my house in Calgary, her eyes wide and frightened now, her head shaking, her mouth saying no, no. But she is in B.C.

She hangs up, but the receiver makes no click. Her eyes are betrayed. Has she found out about his lies, the way they always say the things they do in order to pin us to their beds? She must learn to turn the weapon in the wound, to seem to be caught, but never really be pinned down. They plunge in and then find themselves embedded in fascination, dragged around by their willies by a will o' the wisp, like dog fastened to dog. All she need do then, when she tires of his insistent adulation, is to relax, and he'll fall away.

I married John because he was not fascinated by me. He was skeptical of my magical soaring flight through the universe, and, when he finally did succumb to my pursuit, he gave me a short list of rules that I had to obey or be evicted from his life. He didn't describe my beauty to me, he didn't explain how I had changed his life. He remained John. Except at night, in the dark of our bedroom. Then he uncovered a passion

so bottomless and profound that it shook me, amazed me into obedience to his rules. So for a few decades, I raised children and plants and if, when he was too busy and distracted to think of me, I indulged just a tiny bit my love of homage, I almost didn't. Infidelity isn't possible over the telephone, though I didn't discuss the issue with John. When I dropped the phone receiver on its rest like the sword and red cape in the dust, a male lay somewhere earless in his own blood, while I remained ungrounded.

Sarah is in B.C. Her letter told of mountains and orchards and this new artist, this man whose charisma inspires her, whose will is hers, who sweeps her high into forever as on the back of a winged stallion. But what input does she have on their flight destination? That's what I asked in my reply. What bearing does this have on her laughable belief in the meeting of equal minds between the sexes? A Pegasus is all very well for passion, but for long term commitment as they call it these days, an earthbound cart horse is best, well-harnessed. Much less likelihood of being bitten, kicked or bucked off at ten thousand feet.

Sarah is in B.C. I must concentrate on this. If she is there, then how can this silent, barely-visible version of her be here? If she is alive. I wrap myself around myself, trying to escape the implication. There must be another meaning, a kinder one. She has always come to me when she is blue, crying into tea or cappuccino until my frightful, hedonistic philosophy startles her back into earnest sincerity. I almost envy that purity. Perhaps Pegasus is turning into a Minotaur, and she is telling me of it, thinking of me so intently that I can actually see her.

How is this? Time must have passed. She's in a nightgown. Trust you to wear

one, Sarah my own darling. She carries the phone before her like the corpse of a dead baby, eyes shocked as if awakened by nightmare. She drops the thing. She is solid with terror. She runs to doors and windows, shutting, locking, pulling drapes. She lifts the telephone, drops it, paces, wrings her hands. I feel death circling the house, closing in.

She hunches at the eating end of the table, shuddering and clutching my thinking mug. Is this a reenactment of what has been? Or is it happening now? Am I watching events from miles away but superimposed on my setting, my table, my mug? I am so futile, so pointless in my existence. I long to hold her, help her, save her. I will embrace this wraith, hold her tight and whisper sedition into her ear until she forgets her fear and leaps to indignant defense of her faith in man.

She burns! She is hot, and slimy. Her unbearable touch hurls me from her. I am sickened, dissolving, or my world is, wavering in the shock blast of discovery. She is not of this world. A demon.

John comes again, urging me, "Come now. This is the time to come. Now."

Her ghost dog growls at us, its fetid breath searing. They think, that demon girl and demon dog, to impersonate my darling Sarah and her Monkey unopposed? To take over my home, our home, that will be Sarah's after me? To desecrate our mug, our phone, our cappuccino maker? I'll get an exorcist. I'll send them back whence they came. I spill the mug. I knock over the cappuccino maker. I hurl the telephone receiver to the ground. I throw oranges and apples at her. There are no bananas. I kick the dog, and it yips and jumps. My foot burns and feels slick but it's worth it. Rage, rage, I howl with it.

She flees, eyes wide and fearful,

toward the front door. John comes in.

"I've run them off," I crow.

"Come *now*," he tells me. Who does he think he is, I ask. I played by his rules, almost completely, anyway, and he up and left me, just left me alone for seven years. He sighs and shakes his head and his magnetic eyes draw me in as always, and I very nearly succumb, but he says "It wasn't my choice, was it?"

Is he saying it was my fault? Seven years, and never a lover, just waiting for John to call me. Me, the flier, the matador?

He says, "The lovers weren't exactly lined up, were they? You were seventy-three when I died."

"You think I've lost the touch?" I demand. "That they can guess at the grooved, drooping breasts, the knee-low thighs? My telephone voice is succulent, fascinating, and elusive. My computer lies glow with sexy sincerity. They have never stopped pawing the ground around me, not ever. I play them like a matador and they keep me well-stocked with brandy and estrogen patches."

"It's dangerous and it's not so wonderful," he says. "Sometimes the bulls win."

"You are so dreary. You are stolid and immovable. Such a cart horse, John."

"Come away. You don't want to see this," he says.

The demon dog is snarling. The girl-thing is standing before the open front door, backing away, her palms up and facing out. A large male charges through the doorway, huge and heavy, bulking shoulders, no neck, rage gusting out of him. Fists close on hanks of her hair, bending back her head so her neck must crack in two. He presses on her, forcing her against the gate leg table, collapsing it beneath them in splayed spindle legs and curved crockery triangles of broken

fruit plate and madly tilted computer monitor still somehow aglow, while the dog dances and howls but accomplishes nothing. His hands close around her neck. He bounces on her body in the rhythm of love, but he is pumping hate into her. It swells her until her face darkens and her tongue protrudes.

I hear her then. Distant, as a cry heard on a dark street through buildings and across blocks, far yet clear on night air.

"Grandma!" she screams. Lost child.

It isn't fair. Sarah never played the risky games I did.

"Come away," John says. "It's not our world. Not anymore. You can't live in two worlds."

Which, of course, decides me. I point my finger at the bullbeast's back and push. Sloppy wet heat, gooey stench clasps my arm, sears me, nearly forces me back. He halts in mid-thrust. His hands loosen on my granddaughter's throat. I hear a last whistle as her breath withdraws from my world and into her lungs. He hears it too. His hands tighten. Living offal pulses around my hand and arm. I feel the rapid stutter of his center. My fingers cage the throbbing meat, tighten on its struggle. A final beat, one convulsive flutter. Then stillness.

He sees me then.

His lips protrude, ridged and round.

"You can't," he moans.

"No, *you* can't," I laugh. "The game has changed. The fight is off. Your kind and mine are dead." He flies away, moaning like an old-fashioned haint.

John looks reproachful. I shrug and kick the cordless telephone toward my wounded grandchild.

"I can live in two worlds," I tell him.

"I always have. Yours and mine. Mostly yours where I see and am seen, but also mine, where I float free."

"Ours," John says. His eyes are

eloquent where his words are not.

I'd have liked him to elaborate, to make our knitted nights and days dance through my memory and to tell me that our life together seemed dull on the outside because it was so full of rainbow within. And that my telephone and computer games came when I let myself become detached from him, became a half of what we were. That I was fascinated by him, and he by me, that we were hooked together, and content to be so. But he always did trust me to extrapolate.

"You were never a cart horse, John," I tell him. "You were Pegasus and we rode on wings." He rolls his eyes up. Hyperbole does not impress him.

"Well, anyhow, I have to stay around

and help her," I insist. "She's still making mistakes. She has to find her Pegasus."

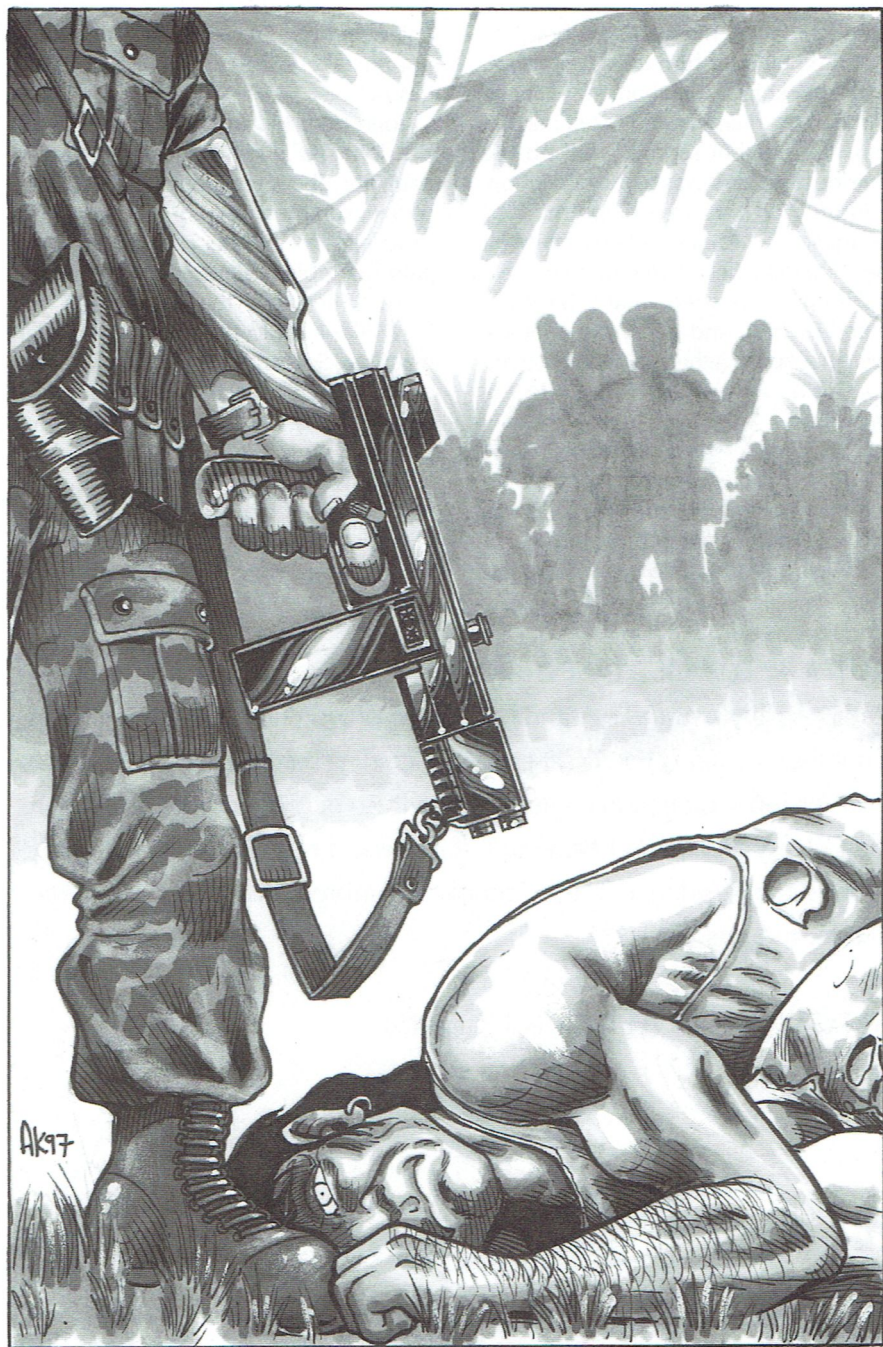
John folds his arms and his lips. He is so John. He jerks his chin at our granddaughter. She is pressing buttons on the phone, summoning help from outside. I can see through her to the pieces of gate leg table. I descend to the hard drive spilled onto the floor, reach in. How like I am to the impulses in this machine. So easy to leave the memory of these, my final acts, in this place. So easy to stay, continue my work, my pleasure.

John wafts impatiently.

Goodbye, beloved and lovers. I go with him to soar. 🍁

AUTHOR: ELIZABETH WESTBROOK has had short fiction aired on CBC Radio's *Alberta Anthology* and has placed or won honorable mention in a number of short fiction competitions, including second place in the 1996 ConVersion short fiction contest. She has also published book reviews in the *Calgary Herald* and *Paragraph Review* and is included on the roster of Artists in Residence in the Schools administered by Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

ARTIST: JAMES BEVERIDGE (see page 15).



Jaime Spanglish in the Nile

Cory Doctorow

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

The Realistas made Jaime Spanglish lie face down in the dirt with the other Nile-swimmers while they smashed the witch's sarcophagus, gagged the witch and bound his hands, then leashed him to the saddle of an ancient mare.

They left then, dragging the witch along behind. The witch, who was as deep in the Nile as any of the other swimmers, showed no alarm as he disappeared into the new jungles that stood where the Realistas' families had picked beans and coffee a generation before. The witch was deep enough in the Nile that he felt himself a wizard pressed into service by a band of dwarves who were taking him to their underground stronghold so that he could prepare his spells, proof against marauding goblins. The witch was from Chicago, but he'd grown up playing games set in an idealized, fantastic Celtic-land on the Net, where such things were commonplace, and with his eyes submerged in the Nile, that's what he saw.

Jaime Spanglish lay in the dirt, watching them, seeing not a band of dirty, bearded guerrillas with antique weapons slung at ready, but a crowd of paparazzi with cameras and fat cigars harrying an aloof film-star as he made his way from the doors of his Manhattan apartment to his waiting limo. Jaime Spanglish grew up in Aguas Claras de Santa Rosa, but the television there showed many scenes such as these, full of glitter and busty, whorish *gringas* and the magic of El Norte. It was to the level of this magic that the waters of the Nile rose in him.

And so when his uncle Federico Arturo came and hauled him to his feet, and half-dragged him along the trail back to Aguas Claras, Jaime Spanglish saw himself dancing gaily through Central Park, dapper in a white tailcoat, his skin as white as the fat snowflakes that fell around him.

•

Jaime Spanglish's grandmother was at his side within moments of his first scream.

She stood at his bedside, still wearing her sweaty blue floral apron, and she gently lifted the mosquito netting, crouched at his side.

She had wept when her son brought Jaime Spanglish home: when he went to the house of the witch, a year before, she had written his parents to say that their son was gone forever, and had lit the votive candles. Now he was returned, stretched thin, his joints grotesquely bulbous in his fragile-twig limbs. His skin was filthy and, when she sponged away the grime, she uncovered angry sprays of acne and flea-bites. All the while, he had talked to her in a broken Spanish overlaid with a terrible American accent, sprinkled heavily with English words. He made no sense, spoke lewd words that she eventually decoded and then understood that he saw her as a beautiful blonde who was giving him a sponge bath. Blessedly, he fell asleep then, and she lowered the patched and patched-again mosquito net over the bed and went to cook dinner for her family.

Jaime Spanglish stared at his hands and screamed and screamed again, jerking every time his grandmother touched his shoulder. At first, his screams were terrified, as he saw his brown skin again without the Nile filtering it to a lily white, and then, as memory rushed over him and he realized that he was delivered from the witch's house and dried of the soothing waters of the Nile, his screams turned to animal rage, blind and hideous, so that his grandmother retreated from him as he tore the net down from the ceiling, kicked over the bed and stood, hands in fists at his sides, wearing only a pair of his uncle's shorts, in the center of the room, his eyes screwed shut

against unfiltered life and his voice raised.

As for his grandmother, she called and called for her son Federico Arturo, too afraid to leave her grandson on his own but terrified by the maniac he had become.

When Federico Arturo came in from his garden, he shooed his mother out of the room, crossed decisively to Jaime Spanglish and slapped him, hard, across each cheek.

Jaime's hysteria deflated and he sat down hard on the rough wooden floor.

Federico Arturo slowly backed away to the wall, lowered himself, his muscles stiff. He stared hard and long at his nephew, who met his stare with defiance in his sunken eyes. Finally, Federico Arturo broke the silence.

"You are behaving like an animal. Your poor grandmother is frightened half to death. Is this why you left us, to become an animal? Look at yourself, you're half-dead, crazy. I should have left you behind at that place."

Jaime Spanglish dropped his gaze and mumbled, "You should have." His carefully cultivated American accent had dried up with the waters of the Nile.

Federico Arturo half-rose then, one hand raised to strike his nephew again. His muscles ached and strained, and he sank back down. "You're disgusting, a filthy animal. How could you be so selfish? To abandon your family to become some kind of drug addict. Do you know how the people talked? Do you know the shame we all felt? Do you know how your parents felt, in the capitol, when they got word that you had gone? They were ready to come back, but I went into Caño Largo and called them, told them that you were gone forever."

"I left?" Jaime Spanglish said, "I left? That's a joke! Your brother and sister-in-law abandoned me to go to the capitol,

to be good little beaners, to be *pictur-
esque* and *diligent* with their little auto-
matic-beaner machines. They left me,
their son, went where I couldn't. Shame?
Imagine the shame of seeing them sell
out their educations and lives to be little
brown people!" And he was thinking,
little brown people, little *mestizo* toad-
ies, when the Nile's waters were high, I
was tall and white and I walked between
silver office towers while the little
beaners scurried past me. I was rich and
handsome and beautiful women came
into my limousine and put their hands
on me, their lips. Jaime Spanglish shut
his eyes again, tried to see those streets,
but the vivid lucid dream state that the
nectar the witch's sarcophagus had
gifted him with was gone, and his unas-
sisted imagination was a frail and useless
thing alongside its memory.

"Do you hear yourself?" Federico
Arturo asked. "Do you hear what you are
saying? Do you hear what you call your
parents, beaners, little brown people?
What are you, nephew? Where were
you born, what do you speak, what color
are you? When you hate, who do you
hate? Do you hate yourself?"

"The priest wants to meet with you.
He has been travelling to each of the
villages where someone has been res-
cued from the witch's house, and will be
here tomorrow after breakfast. Until
then, you will wait in here. You are sick,
and the things you say aren't fit to be
heard by well people. Let the priest talk
to you."

Sometimes the witch had appeared as
a priest to Jaime Spanglish, holding out
thimblefuls of communion wine from the
Nile, smiling as with a benediction.

The witch broke the surface of the Nile
in the camp of the Realistas. He was
well-practiced in the art of lucid dream-
ing and so he could rewind the sequence

of events that had brought him, bound
and leashed, to this place. In recall, he
heard and smelled the guerrillas, parsed
their mountain Spanish and understood
that they were going to kill him.

He allowed himself a moment of de-
licious panic, of total abject misery, saw
the news flicker over wire: LATIN-
AMERICA LICKS THE SARCOPHAGUS,
CHICAGOAN DEAD AT 23. He let his
mind skip to his parents, safe in their
home, listening to the soothing sounds
of bad Motown and crying when the
house machine clipped the story, his
mother fetal with misery, his father grim
with lips set, hating him. What a deli-
cious scene! How marvelous, how
outré!

The witch waited until tears pricked
at his eyelids, then made a conscious
effort to relax and took ten counted
breaths until he was deep in
autohypnotic trance. In this state, his
heart's 120 bpm was a godfucking PA at
the biggest rave ever, and he could mix
it, there in the DJ booth of his mind,
scratch it and trip it and stutter it, until
his brain had been jarred into producing
its own Nile-water.

As he swam up from the trance, the
world sparkled a little. The auto-intoxi-
cation wasn't nearly as powerful as the
one that drinking the pus that the sar-
cophagus' artificial pineal glands pro-
duced. It was enough, though. Enough
to make the world sparkle in hyperreal
clarity, to make each Realista seem a fig-
ure matted in on a chromakeyed back-
ground of surreal, high-altitude cloud-
forest. The vegetation was broody and
dense and low, the canopy close enough
to touch, the giant poor man's umbrella
leaves splayed out to catch the occa-
sional shaft of sunlight.

He struggled to his feet then, one of
his toes stuck through a hole in his
mud-caked sneakers. The Realistas

surrounded him in an instant, moving as silently as jungle-spirits.

They kept their distance, these men with well-oiled guns, and eyed him warily. There must have been a lagoon or stream nearby—some of them were newly shaved, with razor-nicks bright red in Nile's refractive clarity; their clothes were laundered and their hair was cleaner, freshly cut. Seen now, they were heroic: young and idealistic and committed, wholly committed, to a real struggle.

The witch wanted to salute them and throw bunting.

"Sit down," one said, a boy of no more than eighteen, but somehow in charge, that was clear. He wore no uniform, none of them did, and his *campesino* slacks and work shirt were no less worn, but he had an air of confidence that brooked no doubt.

"Of course," the witch said, in accented high-school Spanish. He sat again, an awkward crouch from which he struggled to the ground, his tied hands clumsy.

The Realistas, shocked at this meek and broken demon, said nothing.

"Can I eat? May I use a latrine? I need some water, I think."

The boy pointed and an older man, his face seamed and sun-creased, scurried off to get some water. Another gesture, and the others melted back into the jungle. The boy circled behind the witch and cut the nylon twine with a knife that sawed, the jitter of each tooth against the cord clearly felt by the witch, another divine element in the rhythm-scape. The boy seized the witch's thin wrists as soon as the cord gave, pinning them in a strong grasp.

"You won't be any trouble, will you? We will kill you soon, but it will be sooner if you make trouble. Do you understand me?" He spoke slowly,

enunciating each word with exaggerated clarity, in the manner of one addressing an idiot or a foreigner.

"I wouldn't make trouble. I am a pacifist, my people are pacifists. Where we go, war ends." Which was true enough. The world was a flowerbed, covered in reckless sprays of purples and pinks where the witches had been seeded, bringing along a budget and a sarcophagus and, most important, their ideology.

In a world where clever machines had made fresh water a universal reality, where global warming treaties had outright banned most agriculture, where food was grown in vats and tithed to nations whose economies had been made illegal in the name of the atmosphere, the witches spread a doctrine of joyous auto-genocide.

The Nile, mad river whose waters let you dream real: why prefer banal reality to the most wondrous worlds of your imagination? Why not take the guaranteed income of a civilized society and fritter it away in paradise, where anything, anything at all, is yours for the imagining?

"Where you go, life ends." The Realista didn't seem angry, just tired and serious. The old man returned, with a filter-cup and a tin can of water. The leader thanked him and he trudged off.

The Realista released the witch's wrists and poured water through the microfine membrane stretched over the top of the cup, shook it vigorously to dislodge the grit that clung to the top and to pass any stray bacteria that had been inside the cup back out: the membrane permitted nothing but water to pass in, and anything but water to pass out. He pocketed the membrane and handed the cup to the witch.

The witch fumbled it, his hands numb from lack of circulation, spilled a little, then drank greedily, streams trickling

down his chest, darkening his Black Hawks jersey.

"Are you a hockey fan?"

The witch looked down at his shirt, squinted past the overlaid mystical robes that the Nile made from it. "I suppose. Haven't really watched it in a couple years. Do you know how the Hawks are doing?"

"My brother works in the capitol; he follows the game. When he came back to visit my parents, all he could talk of were the Oilers, who are nearly champions." The Realista sat on a moss-slimed rock and then lost his serious expression and burst out laughing.

The witch laughed too, laughed at the absurdity of it all, of North Americans who had created a growth industry out of videos and interactive games featuring expert systems generated by real, displaced Latinos; and of latinamericans who went to the capitol to answer inane computer-generated questions all day, who became hockey fans.

"What is your name, sir?"

The witch had a moment in which he honestly couldn't remember, in which he nearly said "Clarihew," which was the character he played and lived when he was in the Nile. "I'm Barry Kozynski. What are you called?"

"My name is Victor Rafael Rodriguez de Aguilar."

The witch unfocused for a moment, saw the boy as a Conquistador in tarnished armor, face fuzzed with adolescent beard, hair military short, tired beyond his years.

"Don Victor," the witch said, "when will you kill me?"

Victor looked thoughtful for a moment. "Tonight, I think, before we move on. We need to get some information first."

"I see. Thank you."

"It's nothing."

"How will you kill me, Señor Aguilar?"

"We will shoot you from behind, once we have all the information we need. You won't see it coming. We'll be talking like this and then, *push!* No panic, no pleading. You will die with dignity."

"May I ask one more question?"

"Certainly. I have nothing else to do right now. It is Rafa's turn to cook, and someone else's to clean, and someone else's to stand watch, and so."

"Why are you going to kill me?"

The priest was an old Nica named Figueres, in stiff collar and mud-caked riding boots, with a World Federalists pin on his lapel. He stretched out his vowels like a Nica, had the mountain features of a Nica, preached peace and God like a Nica.

"Jaime, you think you've seen God, but you're wrong. He is here, in the real world, He is in the love of your family and their decent lives."

The priest was old, like a figure out of the heavy bible that they had at the front of Jaime Spanglish's class in *collegio*, where the library had computers that could show you a white, noble Moses parting the Red Sea; a white, twisted Christ forgiving his little brown torturers even as they drove the nails through his palms; and a world of busy white people bustling about their business, watched by the blind eyes of the skyscrapers.

I didn't think I saw God, thought Jaime Spanglish. I was God. Such lovely blasphemy.

"You don't know it, but you are back in His bosom again. I have come to hear your confession." The witch had delighted to his sins; Jaime had shouted them in joyous defiance. "To administer the communion." The witch had doled out thimbles of Nile like sacrament. "To

give you guidance and advice." When in the Nile, his life had been a marvelous dreamtime without worry. "The Realistas have freed all of the slaves of all of the witches, all across latinamerica. The archdiocese contacted all of the priests, told us how to help. There are methods, you know, of readjusting. Exercises to make it more bearable."

Jaime Spanglish, sitting stiff on the bed beneath the mosquito net, said nothing and tried to think himself to somewhere else.

"Son, you're too young to remember when the treaties came into effect, when they made the farmers give up their farms, when they ploughed over the roads and tore down the bridges and planted the jungles. I was there and I saw it with my two eyes. Men who had never done anything but work in all their lives, suddenly without work. Women with their broken husbands, helpless and restless as children. Children, without direction or idea, their worlds shattered. They killed themselves, did you know that? They took their guns and turned them on themselves, on their families, rather than face the new world." The priest was weeping now, but his voice was strong and faraway and mindless of the tears that rolled along the crazy canals of his wrinkles. "And I was there when the new hopes came: we could all go to the capitol and teach the computers who we were, become part of a world of people talking about themselves, and we could then go and play, with the computers, anywhere else in the world where people had done the same. What your parents are doing, it is good, it is important, it will let the world understand how it is to be cut loose from your life and your land."

The priest had a hiccough in his voice now as he spoke. "It will let people out there know that the lungs of the world

are more than dirt and trees: we're human beings! We are a culture, a people, an ancient heritage. The Realistas, they understand. The Euros, they would have you believe that reality is a dead-end, that because *their* world is sunk in decadence and bankruptcy, so must yours be. That because they would retreat from the world and into drugs and their own imaginations, so must you. It is shit," and that woke Jaime Spanglish from his daze, that obscenity off the lips of a priest, and he saw that the priest was rigid with anger. "*It is shit!* You are a proud latinamerican man, you are the honorable descendant of the greatest architects, mathematicians, builders the world has known! What have your white people done? *Shit*. Destroy the atmosphere, then blame it on us. Systematically stripped us of our culture and our dignity and our identity."

"You people are such sore losers," Jaime Spanglish said with vicious flatness.

The priest went silent and deep red, and looked like pure animal murder. He visibly swallowed his anger.

"Jaime, I have some exercises for you to do. They will help you to cope without your drug. They'll let you see the world as it is, full of hope and rewards, not like some kind of fantasy place where everything is easy and meaningless. Will you do learn these exercises from me?"

And Jaime Spanglish, aching across the alien flesh hung over his bones, wishing for a world under his control, nodded.

"We will kill you because you are a virus, a malarial mosquito who spreads poison to people who are made weak already by your meddling. Your forefathers came here, they invaded us and raped us and enslaved us, changed us so

that our lives were the farm, the field, the plantation. When we tried to change our lives, you invaded us again, killed our leaders, murdered our families.

"And so we became your farmers, we made it our lives. And then one morning, you told us, 'You must stop this, you are the lungs of the world, your fields are endangering our world.' *Our* fields. *Your* world. Tell me, who drank the coffee? Who ate the bananas?"

The witch felt the tears prick again at his eyes. "I did. We did." And the vision was strong, this boy glowed with it, a vital and fiery vision as if the boy were a saint or a prophet. The witch felt each word strike a chord in his heart and, with each word, his self-loathing deepened. His white skin was the unhealthy color of maggots, his bony arms and legs were sick and wasted next to the vitality of this noble boy. The Nile swam up within him and he saw a corona of pure white around the boy.

"We will kill you because your movement would have all of our young people replace struggle with surrender. We will kill you because you have struck opportunistically, you have smashed families in their moment of need and disorientation."

"Don Victor," the witch said, and he fell forward onto his knees, crawled through the jungle loam on his belly to rest his forehead at the boy's feet. "I am so sorry." The witch, overcome, lapsed into English. "I thought I was doing right, I thought I was serving the light, bringing joy to a world that held nothing but misery. I thought I was serving the light. I thought the Force was with me. I thought—"

The boy, sickened with the words he understood, stepped back from the cowering witch. "Stop it!" he barked.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the witch said, in Spanish now. "Kill me, I deserve to die."

•

The priest had Jaime Spanglish lie on the bed and close his eyes. Then he spoke in low, even tones, had Jaime take a series of deep breaths, each time visualizing the light of the Lord, each time letting go of his pain. He had Jaime Spanglish listen to the rhythm of his heart, will it to slow, will it to give up its pain. And, very gradually, his brain chemistry altered: trickles of new proteins entered his bloodstream, weird neurotransmitters that made the right shape, just the right shape, to open the same lock that the Nile had lubricated so freely.

And when Jaime Spanglish opened his eyes, he looked down at his hard, thick, white body, the color of the Lord's skin, the color of Rambo's skin, the color of Batman and Superman and Starsky and Hutch, and he smiled as he stood, felt strong, even teeth click together and he laughed just to hear the sound of his voice.

The priest, whom Spanglish knew to be a terrorist collaborator, was seated on the shaky stool by the wall. His old face was slick with sweat and grease, his whole body stooped and hunched as if the evil of years of conspiring with the forces of communism had eked the life out of him.

Spanglish laughed again and delivered a series of kicks to the old man: the first knocked him from the stool, the rest landed on his prone body. The priest let out one yelp as he fell and then was silent except for involuntary grunts as Spanglish's horny, calloused feet found their mark. He bent and grabbed a handful of the priest's shirt, ready to beat him until he told where the terrorists were keeping Spanglish's lieutenant, the kid from Chicago who they'd overwhelmed and taken prisoner. Alive or dead, he'd get the kid back stateside and see to it

that the damned generals knew how a real American man operated in the field.

He bent to haul the priest up, but the priest's shirt ripped in his hands, buttons popping free and ricocheting off the wall. The man's chest was sunken and scarred beneath whorls of thick white hair. He wasn't breathing, and his face was blue, tongue protruding slightly. No matter. Spanglish knew where they hung out. He'd steal clothes, go to the bar, follow them to their camp. And then he'd kick ass.

The witch lay prostrate in the loam, eyes closed. He felt fat raindrops spattering on him, imagined it sizzling off into oblivion as it touched his flesh, hot as the fires of hell. He'd become a devil, with horned forehead and bulging, grotesque erection. His tail was squashed beneath him in the mud, and his voice was hoarse and tortured as he cheerfully answered the Realistas' questions, fired at him from all directions. Who, where, when, how much? Where did he live? Where were their headquarters? Who was in charge? When did operatives fly in? How did they ship the sarcophagi? Each secret unburdened was an angel's kiss on his flesh, a minute purification of his soul.

Spanglish met the beaners in the front of the house where he'd been held. More sympathizers, they jabbered at him in their Spanish, the old woman hysterical and weeping, the middle-aged man angry and shouting and trying to restrain him. The man was deceptively strong, and teased at his memory, like he was someone Spanglish'd known. Maybe he was a local that Spanglish had met as he'd hunted down the terrorists. No matter. Spanglish caught the man's wrists as he lashed out, twisted his hands behind his back, hauled them up until he heard them dislocate. The

man bellowed in pain and the old granny fell on him, fingers curled into claws. A few karate kicks—thank God for basic training!—and she backed off, whimpering. He took the big guy's shirt and sandals, slammed the door on his way out.

The house he'd been held in had no horse tethered outside, but he found one outside another, a worn-out nag tied to a tree with old hemp rope. He mounted it bareback and kicked it to set it moving. The animal's age would be good for camouflage. Not that he wouldn't stand out, anyway: a white face was a rare sight around these parts. These people looked up at you like a god.

The horse trotted through the jungle on a well-trod trail, then broke into a run as it came across a single-lane dirt road. Spanglish let out a rebel yell: "Yee-haw!"

The witch's devil-body had been drained of its red tint. He was white now, free of sin as a newborn, and he opened his eyes and the jungle canopy parted and he saw the clear sky, the rain gone now. A face swam into view. The Hero, Don Victor, still swathed in his corona of purity. Now, he thought. Kill me now. While I'm pure. He would die pure and his body would be returned to Chicago, to his parents, washed forever of the bloodred that had been accumulating since his birth. His parents would see that. Surely they would.

Kill me now.

Spanglish passed locals who stared as he rode towards Caño Largo. None of them moved to stop him, though.

The bar was just as he'd remembered. Roofed over with cracked and filthy solar panels, a microwave antenna like a dirty finger flipping the bird at the sky, at goodness. They'd checked the place out when they saw that antenna. It *looked*

like they only used it for the TV, but who knew? You couldn't trust these people. Trust them, you ended up dead. Or captured. The lieutenant.

He hardly had to wait at all. Just dismounted, pointed the horse down the road, gave it a slap to get it moving, then hunkered down in the bushes. He chilled there, waited for one of narco-gangsters to show.

Three people came into the bar and two came out, noncombatants, all. Then he hit the jackpot. One of them, his face burned into Spanglish's memory from the skirmish where they grabbed the kid, now seemingly drunk, reeling out of the bar and into the brush. Spanglish padded after him.

The witch jabbered now, telling the Realistas where his parents kept the spare keys, telling them his credit card number, telling them his email passwords. Secrets, dirty little secrets, molting and shedding their cocoons and flying away like fat jungle butterflies.

Spanglish discovered that the terrorist's drunkenness was genuine when he flubbed the take-down, nearly losing his grip on the man as he grabbed him in a choke-hold, trying to kick his legs out from beneath him. The man squirmed and fell and they wrestled in the rain for a time, both of them clumsy. Spanglish grabbed the man by the waistband of his pants and a pistol was joggled loose and in a flash he had the gun cocked and pointed at the man's temple. They were close, very close to the camp. He smelled a cookfire and heard low voices somewhere nearby.

The man walked before him. He was small, and brown, and stank of drink. His shoes were government issue, welfare sandals. His hair was long and stringy. Spanglish dug the pistol harder into the

man's ribs. "*El campamento*," he kept whispering. The base camp.

The witch closed his eyes and breathed. He felt the Nile ebbing. You could only do it to yourself for so long before the effect slipped. When would they kill him?

He opened his eyes and watched the boy's halo waver.

Spanglish knocked his hostage to the ground when he caught sight of the clearing. He straddled the man with the gun buried in the greasy knot of his ponytail. "Shhh," Spanglish said, squinting past the trees.

The kid was in there, smack in the center of about eight unfriendlies. He was in a bad way, staggering about, covered in mud, whispering hoarsely, his eyes closed.

And the unfriendly closest to him drew his sidearm and pointed it at the lieutenant.

Spanglish went on autopilot. He shot his hostage in the right hand, the recoil jerking his arm high over his head, the hostage shouting in surprised agony. The unfriendly, a kid of about eighteen with a bad moustache and sinewy muscle along his bare back and arms, spun around just as Spanglish hauled the hostage up by his injured hand. The hostage howled again, head jerking back involuntarily and cracking Spanglish across the bridge of his nose, making his eyes water. He fumbled the gun, then brought it up the hostage's temple.

"*¡Alto!*" Spanglish said, and thanked God for bilingual stop signs. The unfriendly froze in his tracks. "Hey," he said, in English, "get over here. It's the motherfuckin' cavalry!" The lieutenant opened his eyes stupidly and began to shuffle over. What had they *done* to him?

•

The witch saw the devil come to drag him back, holding one of his saviors at gunpoint. The devil was an uncertain splotch of black and stank of sulfur, and it called to him in English that had a Spanish accent. The witch, wishing to preserve these people who had tried to save him, shuffled towards damnation.

“Grab the guy’s gun and let’s move!” Spanglish shouted, finger trembling on the pistol’s trigger.

The lieutenant shuffled over to the kid and took the pistol out of his hand. The kid was calm, controlled, and his eyes clicked back from the lieutenant to Spanglish and calculated odds. That was one cold S.O.B. Spanglish pointed his gun at him, “Don’t get smart or I’ll do you, too.” They all understood English, even the ones who pretended they didn’t.

The witch heard the threat, saw the gun raised at Don Victor, and knew his duty. He’d fired millions of guns in arcades around the world, and the demon fell to the ground.

Victor’s men knew their duty. They had discipline. None of them had fired when the Nile-swimmer had come out the jungle, pointing a gun at Eliomar’s head. None of them had fired on the witch until Victor gave the signal, a hand made fist and then unclosed. When he did signal, they drew and fired as a man, and the witch died with a triumphant shout.

Victor detailed four men to break out shovels and bury the bodies. They had dug this jungle before, as children, working with their fathers in the fields, and they fell into an easy, familiar rhythm.

Victor cleaned and bandaged Eliomar’s hand himself. 🍁

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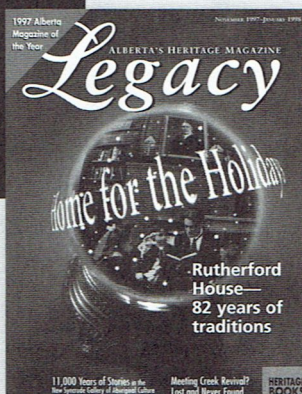
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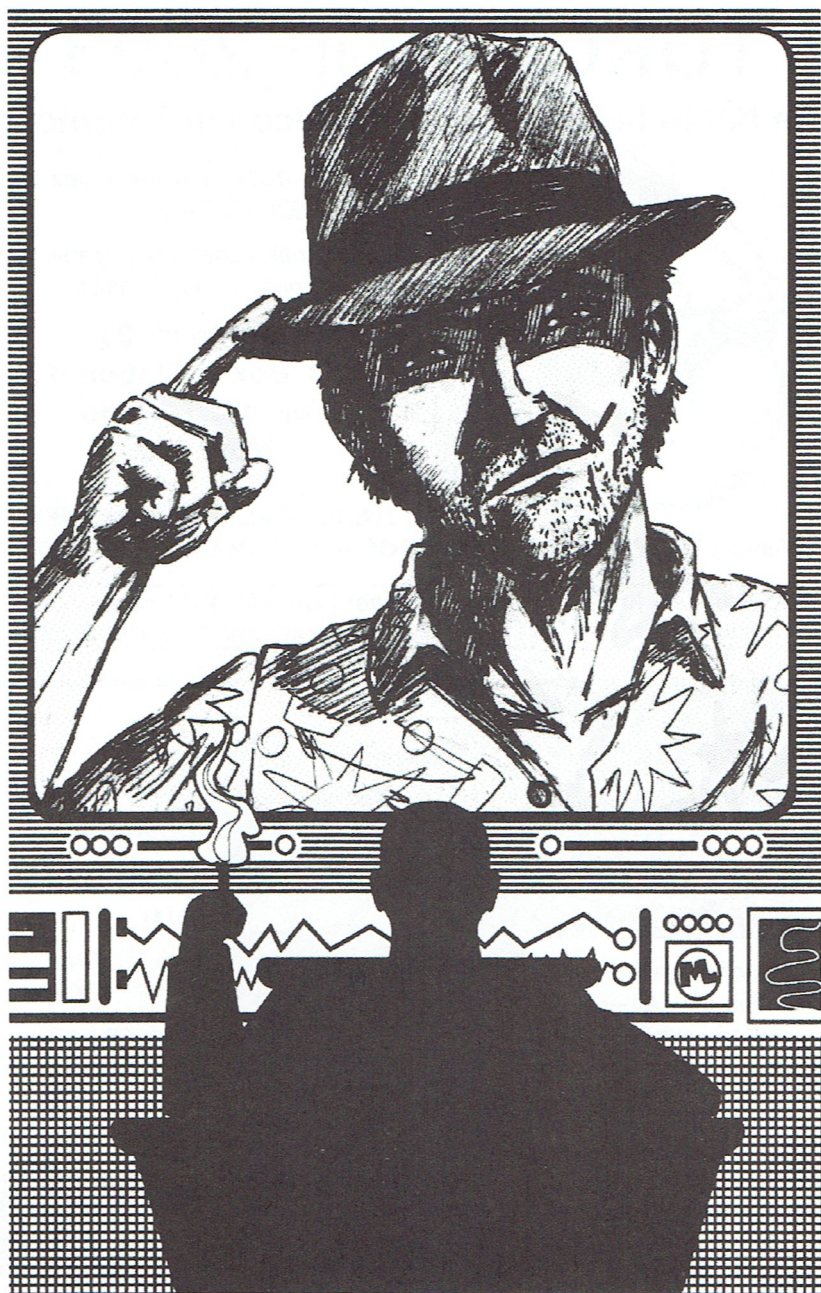


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Selected by editors from the *Globe and Mail*, *Chatelaine*, and *Western Living* in the 15th annual Western Canada Magazine Awards competition.



The PlayTime Case

by David Chato

illustrated by Murray Lindsay

Gordon Drake snored beneath the frayed brim of his antique fedora. The fluorescent bulb above his desk flickered with a last sign of life. If it wasn't for the rent he usually didn't pay on the cramped office, he'd be working out of his apartment. If he hadn't been evicted from his apartment last month.

At least the heat was good. In the ten years since the turn of the millennium, it was getting nothing but colder. Drake knew the value of an old place with heat. He knew it just like the rest of the huddled suckers who got stuck in the northern latitudes before the turn. You couldn't afford the ticket, let alone a place to stay anywhere south of the mid-Atlantic states. Better to stay home and stay warm.

The tone from his comline warbled an incoming call. Drake blinked before pushing back his hat and dropping his feet from the edge of the old wooden desk. He brought his unshaven face up square with the comline's flat panel display, his one concession to the modern world. If an old plastic phone had still worked he would have used one, but they were dumped seven years ago when G-net fixed their monopoly on comlines.

"Yeah. This is Gordon Drake, private investigator," he said, running his fingers back through his hair and adjusting his hat. He waited.

The terminal recognized his voice and passed the call through. A face appeared momentarily on the display.

"Mr. Dra—"

It blinked out.

Drake leaned forward and slapped the side of the box beneath the display. The image and sound reappeared.

"Mr. Drake, are you there? Can you hear me?"

The voice had the hint of a schooled English accent. That and the \$3,000 suit under

the well-groomed greying hair made Drake a bit uneasy. He had nothing in common with this stranger.

"I'm here."

"Mr. Drake, my name is Simon Orvesco, president of NewsCorp here in Atlanta. I need to speak with you about an investigative contract."

Drake coughed to clear the dryness from his throat. Orvesco wasn't a person he'd ever imagine needing a marginal PI like himself. He knew the name, though the face wasn't exactly in the public domain. Orvesco existed like a legend. He ran the largest news gathering organization on the planet. He was a big guy and, judging by his image on the display ... he was a big guy.

NewsCorp had pioneered virtual reporting. Their people traveled the globe fully wired with complete biosensor inputs. Sight, sound, taste, smell, anything they experienced, they could upload from any corner of the world. You could see through their eyes, hear through their ears. Every sensation was available. G-net would distribute these experiences as they happened. With a link on a comline and a Vitus virtual headset, you were there. You were the reporter in the field. In fact, that's what NewsCorp claimed in unending self-promotion: *You Are There*.

Drake took a mug of day-old coffee and had a gulp. The taste hit his tongue like a bad stain on an old rug.

"I don't want to put you off, Mr. Orvesco, but I don't do contracts over comlines. Don't trust 'em. My dad and my dad's dad all worked the same way. You want to talk, we talk in the same room."

The chance at a free ride to Atlanta waltzed through Drake's mind. Even if nothing came of it, he'd get a couple of

days away from the frozen ditch water glazing the streets near his office building. With fuel prices costing more than a good heart surgeon, tickets like that might as well be printed on gold.

"Yes, of course. There is a plane ticket under your name waiting at the Trans-America counter." Orvesco's tone was accommodating. "You may use NewsCorp's suite at the Meridian Hotel. I'll contact you there. Can I expect you tomorrow, then?"

A golden ticket.

"Excuse me." Drake swung the display out of view. He choked back the aftertaste from the coffee and brought the knot in his tie up to the missing button at his shirt collar. Few people wore ties any more, but Drake liked the look. This one had been his dad's, vintage '68, with a horseshoe motif printed down the front.

He looked back at the display. "Sure. I've got time, Mr. Orvesco. A few questions though, before I head out."

"Yes?"

"Who's the ... uh ... other party?"

"It's not a 'who,' Mr. Drake. It's PlayTime. You know PlayTime, don't you?"

The world knew PlayTime. The world used PlayTime. The company had a headlock on the entertainment business. Everything from live theater to theme parks to their biggest service, the PlayTime Thrill Channels. What NewsCorp was to real world events, PlayTime was to everything else.

Like NewsCorp, PlayTime had people fully wired with biosensors, too. The "Vicars," as they called themselves, were independents, however. They lived on the extreme edge of the real world, uploading their daily escapades in real time to the orbiting satellites of G-net. PlayTime then relayed the signals

through over 600 Thrill Channels to hungry viewers below—the Clans. There the Clans would sit, filling their empty lives, electronically hooked on the sensations of their Vicars. The possibilities were endless. If you wanted it, PlayTime would get it for you. PlayTime was big, even bigger than NewsCorp.

“Yeah, I know ‘em. Don’t use ‘em, though. I get enough thrills in my life.”

Drake couldn’t afford a PlayTime account or the gear required to use it. Even if he could, he was being honest. He had a stake in the lifestyle he’d chosen.

“As I do in mine, Mr. Drake. Other questions?”

“Just one. Why me? NewsCorp’s got to have a couple of thousand investigative types on your roll. And they’ll all have biosensors on board. You know I’m not wired, right?”

Drake fought off a cringe. He could have saved that fact until he was finished inflating the tab at the Meridian. Maybe Orvesco just assumed he’d be fully wired for PI work. Maybe he didn’t know the Gordon Drake approach. Low tech, hands on, the human touch. You didn’t get the same details any other way. That and the fact Drake couldn’t afford a decent coffee machine, let alone a biosensor implant.

“I am fully aware of your archaic methods, Mr. Drake. I believe they will be necessary for the task, in fact. People such as yourself are ... rare. I feel lucky to have found you.”

“Hey, and I feel lucky too, Mr. Orvesco. See you tomorrow.”

“Till then, Mr. Drake.” Orvesco gave a nod before the comline went off.

Something itched at the back of Gordon Drake’s mind. He felt Orvesco needed him like a dog needs a fire

hydrant. It needs it, but not for putting out fires.

Atlanta was hot. Muggy and hot. Drake checked in at the Meridian and followed a bellhop to the NewsCorp suite. What he entered was a place so foreign in its luxury he had to stifle a giggle.

The foyer looked down on an expanse of space, appointed with a leather sofa and chairs, a dining area and personal kitchen. A baby grand sat in front of a wall of windows looking out over the mid-afternoon smog of Atlanta.

“The NewsCorp suite is fully equipped, Mr. Drake. We’ve taken the liberty of stocking the kitchen with your favorite foods and beverages.”

How they got that information, Drake was afraid to know. The real test would be the brand of deli mayo he claimed as his own. You couldn’t get it outside his home town. He tossed his jacket over the back of a chair and set his bag down.

“Hey, uh ... Tony,” he said, recalling the name on the brass tag pinned to the bellhop’s lapel.

“Sir?”

“What’s behind the door over by the bedroom?”

“That is a fully equipped Vitus facility, Mr. Drake.” Tony walked towards the slightly opened door. “It’s state of the art, the newest upgrade. The Vitus headset has full sensory inputs; high resolution deep 3D visuals; omni-aural; and the latest in smell and taste probes.

“The headset gyros have been calibrated to give you the best possible sense of motion. And you can link to any service on G-net you want. NewsCorp has set the defaults on the rate limits to max...” Tony hesitated. There was more, but he looked a bit uncomfortable.

"Anything else?" Drake prodded.

"Well, if you're looking for something ... special, there's also a full complement of tactile stimulators."

Virtual sex. Drake knew about it but hadn't personally investigated. In fact, he'd never really spent much time in a Vitus. Gordon Drake was a man of substance and, where sex was involved, he needed a substantial woman and a romantic mood. Not some hockey helmet and mechanical fingers wired to Lucky Lucy's G-net love experience.

"Thanks for the tip, Tony."

The bellhop left, backing out and pulling the door closed. Drake removed his cherished fedora and found a place for it on the kitchen counter. He sauntered over to the refrigerator and opened the door. It was packed with everything he'd normally have in his fridge back home—only here, everything was fresh. A tube of bologna, some cold sauerkraut, a couple of kaisers and a six pack of Rolling Rock beer.

And there in the door was a jar of Berman's Mayonnaise.

"I'll be damned." Drake said to himself, picking up the jar to take a closer look. "I'll be ... damned."

The next morning, a message came over the suite's comline. It was an itinerary for the day. Not much to read, just five items with times set out.

"Print it," Drake said as he adjusted his tie in the mirrored wall of the bedroom. A small sheet of paper exited a slot from beneath the display.

- 10:30 Depart Meridian Hotel.
—NewsCorp driver will meet you
- 10:45 Arrive NewsCorp Building—Ms. Shanlee

Prescott, head of security, will escort you

- 10:55 Meeting with Mr. Orvesco
- 12:00 Depart NewsCorp Building
- 13:45 Depart Atlanta for Caracas, Venezuela

It took a second for the last item on the list to register. Venezuela? Orvesco had nerve assuming Drake would take on the case, whatever the fee.

Or maybe not. From all the signs being pitched around, Orvesco knew more about Drake than was fair or legal. He knew Drake would probably be on a jet to Caracas that afternoon. He definitely knew why. Bucks could buy information in this world, and Simon Orvesco owned the bank.

"Mr. Orvesco's office is right this way, Mr. Drake."

Shanlee Prescott was a tight package. By Drake's estimate, one size too big in a skirt one size too small. But he wasn't complaining, and he wasn't about to strike up small talk. As head of security, she no doubt had a complete biosensor implant on board. Orvesco was probably watching and listening to everything through her, from the moment they'd met on the ground floor.

They arrived at a pair of large, double doors. "May I take your hat?" Prescott said.

He never checked his hat, no matter how classy the establishment. But he didn't feel right having to explain. He handed it over before entering alone.

Simon Orvesco stood waiting in front of his desk, his hands clenched behind his back. A cigar stunk up the inner sanctum of his office. He held it in his teeth, to one side and high in the air,

where the blue smoke floated up out of his line of sight. He stared straight at Drake as he entered.

"Gordon Drake, in the flesh." Orvesco greeted him with a hearty shake, using both hands. Ash fell from the end of his cigar and landed in a grey puff on the deep plush carpeting. Orvesco was a good half-foot shorter than Drake, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in width.

"Mr. Simon Orvesco." Drake returned the greeting and looked around the richly paneled room. "So this is it. NewsCorp HQ. Looks a lot bigger in real life."

"Yes, well, it's all just a pretty frock really," Orvesco replied pleasantly. "There's an office identical to this one in London—the original—and at least a dozen more scattered around the globe. I suppose the interior designer is compensating for imagination by sheer output!"

Orvesco moved to behind his desk and stubbed the cigar on a small dish. He sat down, raised his folded hands to his chin, and waited in silence. Apparently it was up to Drake to throw the first card.

"So what's Venezuela got to do with PlayTime?"

"Sit down, Mr. Drake. This will take a bit of your time." Orvesco motioned to a large red leather chair in front of the desk.

"NewsCorp is a news and documentary communications company. We give the people reality. Occasionally we record history. Our purpose is to reveal what happens in the world. Why it happens ... how. Most importantly, we do all this as it is happening. Nothing is staged or ... recreated. Our reputation is based on it."

"Yeah, I know, NewsCorp's a class outfit," Drake said.

"PlayTime takes a different approach," Orvesco continued, his voice rising. "Their Thrill Channels and these ... these Vicars, are nothing more than dealers in mind drugs. I abhor them." He paused to regain his composure. "The human potential lost in all the wasted time, the dreary half-lives of the Clans ... it's very sad indeed."

"Hey, you don't have to convince me the stuff from PlayTime is mostly crap. I don't even own a Vitus. But I have to tell you, Mr. Orvesco, I don't subscribe to NewsCorp either. In my line of work, I got to be objective, I..."

"That is why I need you, Mr. Drake," Orvesco interrupted. "It is obvious PlayTime is not in the same corporate 'club' as we are. We don't cover events staged by them. We don't 'cross their path,' as it were. But we believe we might have stumbled onto something. We need a truly objective person with the right kind of credentials to insure we report the truth, the reality."

"And I assume you stumbled over their path somewhere in Venezuela?"

"Exactly."

"And I got these objective credentials?"

"Yes."

"So what's the case?"

"For that, it would be best for you to see for yourself." Orvesco swiveled his chair to face a large, high resolution display mounted in a darkened corner of the office. "This is a recording of a session from a PlayTime Jump Thrill channel taken a couple of weeks ago. You could experience it through a Vitus, but I'll spare you the visceral details. Watch and listen..."

The display came to life. Its viewpoint

was through the eyes of one of the Thrill Channel's more popular Star Vicars, Andrew Borton. He and his female partner, Martina Sarasti, had built a solid Clan following using free fall parachuting as the hook: the Jump Thrill. The fact that they were a pair let viewers join from a male or female perspective. The occasional crossover to athletic sex didn't hurt their popularity either.

A solid blue sky and the surrounding lush vegetation hinted a tropical location. Sounds and an occasional rise of mist above the edge of a nearby cliff placed them on a coast. Drake listened intently as the session began.

"Star Vicar Andy Borton here. Marty and I are somewhere along the coast and, as you can see, the scenery is pretty damn spectacular. We've found what's gotta be the highest potential clear cliff face for a freefall that I've ever seen in my three years on the road. We bounced a laser ranger off the beach below, and it's close to 700 meters straight down to sea level."

"Right, Andy. That's a couple hundred more than Bakra Chasm. And for you Clan members who were with us on that one, you know it was some wild drop."

"The wind looks good today, and Marty and I are going to try something a bit different. It's Valentine's Day and, well, we're going to jump the edge hand in hand. We'll drop about 500 meters, giving you a good view of the cliff face on the way down, then pop the chutes and land on the beach. After that, you'd better set your rate limits high, boys and girls. Marty's looking romantic and this session could get kind of expensive."

Marty stepped into Borton's view. Her eyes looked up from beneath the brim of a sun-bleached, sweat-stained

cap. The harness of the neon-colored pack containing her chute clung seductively to a body covered by a tan, a T-shirt, nylon shorts and little else. "Let's do it!" she yelled.

The image of the leap from the edge of the cliff and the following drop made Drake unconsciously grab the arms of his chair.

Seconds passed. Borton released Marty's hand, and she drifted away. A moment later, her chute lifted her from the fall and up out of his view.

"Andy, no!"

It was Marty's voice screaming and quickly fading. The images through Andrew Borton's eyes frantically tumbled between sky, the cliff and the green foaming sea rushing up from below.

The final view was of his hand gripping a rip cord flapping uselessly in the stream of air, just before impact.

The session ended.

Orvesco turned his chair to face Drake. "Andrew Borton's body was supposedly crushed on the rocks lining the shore. Martina Sarasti stopped uploading and closed her G-net account within hours of the supposed accident. We haven't been able to locate her."

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"Let's just say we have reason to believe things aren't what they seem. I'd rather you do the investigation without any prejudice from me or NewsCorp. We cannot be seen as snooping on our major competition. You are the independent investigator, Mr. Drake. All I ask is that you report back to me once you've come up with a supportable theory."

Drake summed up the situation. Orvesco was ringing clear as a bell. He couldn't find any obvious reason not to

trust him. The motive for NewsCorp to go outside the organization made sense. The question now was, how much was it worth?

"Tickets anywhere aren't cheap, Simon."

Orvesco pushed a small envelope across the surface of the desktop. "You will find an itinerary, tickets, reservations, et cetera, all here along with a NewsCorp account card for your personal use. We'll double your normal daily rate, seeing as you'll be out of the country and all that. I trust that is satisfactory?"

"Double, huh?" Drake would have worked for expenses only, if it meant catching some sun near the equator. He feigned a compromised look. "Yeah, sure. I've always had a plan to visit South America. Guess I'll just work your case into it."

"Very good then." Orvesco stood and walked him to the doors.

Two hours later, Gordon Drake was on a southbound jet.

The airport at Caracas smelled of wet concrete, bus exhaust, and tropical air. Drake checked his schedule and looked around for the car rentals.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gordon Drake?" A female voice broke through the drone of the arrival area.

He turned to look and met the sun-worn, fine-featured face of a young woman extending her hand to greet him. Her short black hair framed a pair of eyes that stopped him cold, despite the heat.

"Gordon Drake right here, Miss...?"

"Dr. Valerie Schumann. Please call me Val. There's been a slight change of plans. I'll be escorting you down the coast to Puerto Carlos."

"Lucky me." Drake was a bit disoriented and relieved that NewsCorp had arranged someone who knew the territory. They began walking to the parking area. "You spend time around here, huh?"

"Oh yes. My research has taken me around the continent for the last two years now. I'm a pharmacobotanist looking for new drug hopefuls from plant species native to this part of the world." She took his bag and placed it in the back of a small, four-wheel-drive truck.

"You're not with NewsCorp?"

"I have a relationship with NewsCorp. Some of the work I do makes good documentary. When I've got something, I upload and schedule a session for them. It helps support the research." She started the engine and sped away from the lot.

So Dr. Val is wired, Drake thought to himself.

Schumann quickly rounded an exit ramp, rode up over a curb, sped across a narrow dirt walkway and back onto a road. Drake grabbed a hand grip conveniently bolted to the dash.

"We insured?" he asked.

"They don't insure drivers in this country."

"Why am I not surprised?" Drake shot back.

Schumann pulled onto the main highway leading out of Caracas. "Oh, don't worry. The truck's brand new, a perk from the institute; I just picked it up yesterday. Look: CBW." She pointed at three letters stamped prominently on the dash in front of him.

"Oh, yeah?" he nodded. He had no idea what it meant.

"Watch this." She punched a few buttons, then let go of the steering

wheel. Magically, the truck began directing itself through traffic, swerving, accelerating to find the best place to cruise among the other vehicles.

Drake held on tightly. He didn't feel any safer.

NewsCorp had arranged a villa which sat high above the small coastal village of Puerto Carlos. Its whitewashed walls and deep-red tile floors were palatial by local standards. The place was clean, quiet, and comfortable. Drake had slept soundly after the long plane trip and tortuous drive up the coast.

He dragged himself from his bed, put on his hat, dressed, and headed for the kitchen. He opened the fridge, and there amongst the other stock sat a six-pack of Rolling Rock beer.

"Damn, they're good to their people," he said as he snapped open a bottle and took more than a sip.

"So early," Schumann admonished from the front door. She entered and dropped a small backpack on the floor.

"Morning, Val." He tipped the brim of his fedora up with the bottle. "Let's hit the trail. I want to check something at the cliff by 1:15."

"We'll be there by one. You sure you want to wear what you've got on? It's going to be hot."

Drake looked down at his baggy beige pants, wrinkled long-sleeved white shirt and narrow tie. "Don't like the style, huh? Guess I could go a bit native." He walked to his bedroom and returned. In his hand was one of the loudest mistakes of a Hawaiian print shirt ever seen.

"Well, we shouldn't have any problems with predators. Except maybe the color blind ones," Schumann remarked.

He proudly replaced his city shirt

with the new one, and they left for the trail.

Drake stumbled through dense tropical undergrowth, trying to keep up with the surefooted lead of his guide. She took a hand-held electronic locator from her back pack and punched a few keys.

"We're about forty meters from the edge of the forest and the clearing. Not too much further, Gordon. Tell me, why do you need to get there before 1:15?"

"The time when the little thrill show went live was at 1:15 P.M. on the fourteenth. I made a mental note of some shadow marks from the recording, and I want to compare them to reality. Make sure everything happened when it was supposed to have happened."

He followed her out into the clearing. The ground and stubby grass were parched by the glaring equatorial sun. Little grew in the shallow soil leading to the bare rock of the cliff. Drake held his hat against the occasional gust of wind and peered cautiously over the edge. He turned to Schumann.

"How tall are you?" he said, taking her by the shoulders and walking her over to a specific spot.

"Five foot six."

"Here..." Drake had her stand in place while he gathered a few flat stones and placed them under her heels. "...now you're five-seven. Marty Sarasti was five-seven. You be her, okay?"

"What do you want me to do?" Schumann replied, teetering.

"Nothing. Just give me a bit of time to see you the way Borton saw Marty that day." Drake took a long, close look. He remembered the images from Orvesco's office and interlaced them with the reality in front of him. He would be the eyes of Andrew Borton.

"Gordon ... I, I need to tell you something," she stuttered. "I've been uploading since we left the truck. It's only fair you know."

The idea that, through her deep, dark eyes, he was staring at the chubby, cigar-stoking face of Simon Orvesco back in Atlanta made him shudder. He looked down to the shadows cast by her body and turned his thoughts back to the investigation.

Drake knelt down to take a closer measure of the shadows and checked his wrist watch. "Well, it's 1:15 now, and it was 1:15 then. Something's just not right, though. Something in the background." He walked behind Schumann to the edge of the vegetation near the path. "This bush here."

"Can I step off these stones?" She twisted awkwardly.

"Sorry? Oh yeah, sure. This bush, do you know it?"

She walked over and took a leaf in her hand. "It's *Sucassia grandiflora*, a common flowering plant in this region. Why?"

"Deep red, sort of bell-shaped flowers hanging down?" Drake asked.

"Yes," she replied in a questioning tone.

"So where are the flowers?"

"*Sucassia* doesn't flower this time of year. It blooms for a couple of months just after the rainy season, later in the year. There's a propagation advantage over the competing plants in that..."

"Hold it," Drake interrupted. "It doesn't bloom this time of year?"

"That's right."

"Listen," Drake said, "I'd like to get back to town and have a talk with the local doc who signed off on Borton's death certificate. Think you can arrange that?"

"Dr. Nigel Folkstone."

"You know him?" Drake said, surprised

"I've met him. You'd like him, Gordon. He likes his beer in the morning, too. Problem is, he likes it in the afternoon, evening, anytime. At least he did last time I saw him several months ago."

Drake could feel the chill as Schumann strode by him towards the path. It was apparent she wasn't looking forward to the visit.

"Come on. He lives above the town clinic, and I'm pretty sure the doctor will be in."

Nigel Folkstone looked like a starving gibbon in British army shorts. His lanky torso was draped in a green tank top that had mellowed like some unfortunate cheese left too long without refrigeration. An ancient, tattered lab coat with a small, inked hospital crest gave the only evidence of his credentials. Drake reminded himself not to get sick.

Folkstone was Drake's kind of human. After a couple of bottles of Corveza, they both knew it. Folkstone hadn't as much settled in Puerto Carlos as he had crash landed there. Modern medicine and its technology had squeezed practitioners like him to the fringes and beyond. The locals in this part of the world were more accommodating and, despite all outward appearances, he looked after his flock.

"So, you no doubt are here to query a bit on Andrew Borton, I suppose? Hmm? It's the only recent event which anyone from the outside might be remotely interested in. Unless you'd care to hear about Valerie's sprained ankle from last year."

"You signed Borton's death certificate?" Drake got to the point.

"Yes. A young lady, his young lady my guess, had dragged the body up from a parachuting accident off one of the cliffs. She was in a panic. Wanted me to save the poor bastard. Nothing I could do, of course. He was dead as my doorstep. The fall had killed him instantly."

"You do an autopsy?"

"Autopsy? The man jumped off a cliff and his parachute didn't open. It was my considered medical opinion that bouncing off rocks at over a hundred miles per hour caused death. No, Gordon, an autopsy wasn't called for."

"How'd you ID the guy? How'd you know who he was for sure?"

"Well, the young lady, a Martina Sarasti, gave me his name. That and his tags."

"Tags?" Drake looked puzzled.

Schumann unbuttoned the top of her shirt and reached carefully between the folds to retrieve a pair of small, silver-colored metal tags suspended by a fine chain. "A new innovation, Gordon. People who travel a lot carry personal and medical information on two memory wafers. One carries a passport, banking data, and so on. The other has a complete medical record, including a DNA fingerprint, of course."

"Of course." Drake shook off the sight of Schumann's slightly unfastened top. "And you, doc, you got a way to read these tags?"

"The medical one, yes. I did a DNA scan of his tissue on my clinic analyzer and it matched his tag. It was Andrew Borton, all right."

Drake pondered it all while taking a sip of beer.

"Did you look at the actual fall, doc?"

"I don't follow," Folkstone answered.

"Andy and Marty, they were Vicars.

The whole deal was recorded. You know, the PlayTime Thrill channels? You got a Vitus?"

Folkstone leaned back in a chair rubbing his eyes and chuckling quietly. "A Vitus? Take a look around. If I had the cash, I might consider some cheap air conditioning. No, no Vitus. However..."

"Yes?" Drake said.

"If you're willing to pay for it, I can download from G-net to my medical monitor. It'd be like watching old-fashioned television, but we'd get the same basic sight and sound."

"No need to download," Schumann said. She fanned out the tags to reveal a third memory wafer. "I've got the whole session right here."

"How convenient." Drake looked sideways at her as the three made their way to the clinic's monitor.

The session played in its full view-point mode; both Vicars' experiences were shown, split screen, with the final image being Andrew Borton's as he plunged to his death. Folkstone sat silently the entire time, slouched low in a chair, arms folded tightly on his chest.

"Very interesting." Folkstone finally broke the silence. "It would appear that what happened to Mr. Borton in that little... Jump Thrill, they called it? ...is consistent with how he ended up on my table at the clinic. One minor detail though..."

"What's that?" Drake said.

"The Martina Sarasti who was with him during the jump ... that was not the woman who showed up here with his body."

Drake stood to leave. "Doc, I owe you a beer. Let's go, Val."

The coastal road out of Puerto Carlos

was barely paved with asphalt in some places and barely a road in others. It snaked precariously, dropping away on one side to bottom out in an eroded landscape of broken boulders and sandy beach. Schumann aimed to keep the vehicle somewhere near the middle of the road as they raced back to the villa.

"Nice scenery," Drake said, holding on tightly to the hand grips. "We in a hurry?"

"If we don't get back before dark, these roads get a bit dangerous." She swerved to miss a fallen boulder.

"Yeah?" Drake sunk his head into his shoulders to ride out a crater-sized pot-hole.

Suddenly, the four wheeler took an inside curve and accelerated uncontrollably towards a wall of solid granite.

"Jeeesus, Val!" Drake shot both arms rigidly outward.

"Not me! My foot's off the pedal!"

Schumann pumped the brakes and turned the steering wheel wildly with little effect. A jagged outcrop of rock caught the front fender, peeling back sheet metal like a dull can opener. Seconds later she regained control, directed the truck back onto the road and stopped.

"It's like I ... I couldn't control anything, no steering, no brakes. Then boom, it's all back."

The truck lurched forward slowly, then gathered speed.

"It's doing it again!"

Drake's eyes darted around. "You said this thing's new?"

"Yeah," Schumann said as a rear wheel spun freely off the edge of paved surface, making salad out of roadside vegetation.

"What is CBW?" Drake shouted, tapping the letters on the dash.

"Shit! That's it, Gordon, Control-By-Wire. There's no mechanics or hydraulics. Steering, braking, acceleration—everything's done electronically by signals through wire. Feels like it's been screwed with."

The truck accelerated, heading straight for the edge of the road and the sheer drop to the ocean below.

"Oh yeah? Great invention. I'd give my daddy's hat for an old '68 Ford right now."

"Hold on!"

The steering wheel jerked back to life and Schumann spun it against all rules of driving school to bring them around 180 degrees in a skidding halt. Reaching under the dash, she quickly found and switched off the main breaker, cutting the vehicle's electrical supply.

Drake bolted from his seat, unlatched the hood and searched the engine compartment. He yanked a strange, small metal cylinder from its location, taped hastily to a coolant hose. A set of torn wires dangled from one end. "This doesn't look like standard equipment."

"A receiver. Somebody was trying to take remote control." Schumann took a closer look. "They were going to create an accident. Make me look like a really bad driver, huh?" She took the cylinder and hurled it hard against a nearby boulder.

Drake thought to himself: The wrong Marty Sarasti with the right body. A suicidal ghost-driver on the way back to the villa.

It was all beginning to smell like a dumpster at high noon.

"Looks like we're getting somebody's attention, Val. Tell me, when we were visiting the doc, were you uploading?"

"Yes. Sorry I ... It's my job, Gordon. NewsCorp wants second-by-second

updates on everything.”

“You sure your bioimplant stuff is secure?”

“Absolutely. I can prove it. Let’s get back to the villa.” She switched the breaker back on and restarted the motor.

Schumann brought the truck quickly into the small courtyard of the villa, stopping inches away from a concrete wall. Drake made his way through the front door and glued himself to a sofa.

Val brought over a small computer. “My portable has a diagnostic that can monitor bioimplant data streams. I use it occasionally to check up on what I’m transmitting.”

“Data streams, huh?” Drake looked over her shoulder as the screen came up to a full color glow. “Let’s go fishing.”

“Strange...”

“What?” Drake leaned closer.

“The program says there’s a channel open right here, right now. Uploading audio/visual. It’s weak, but it’s there.”

“And don’t tell me ... you’re not ‘on,’ right?”

Drake combed his fingers back through his hair, removing then replacing his hat while squinting to concentrate.

“Wait. Do that again,” Schumann said quickly, staring at the screen.

Drake slowly removed his hat.

The mystery signal slowly disappeared to zero.

They sat staring at the fedora. Drake gently squeezed the headband between two fingers and ran them around, coming to a stop at a small bump stitched inconspicuously into the liner. Carefully, he unraveled the thread to expose a small black chip.

“Damn!” he said to the hat. He

dropped the chip to the tile floor and crushed it like some tropical bug beneath his heel. “I’ve been bugged all along. Orvesco wanted somebody who wasn’t wired. I’d have kept the investigation under my hat. We just didn’t count on the hat itself.”

“But how?” Schumann asked.

Drake quickly retraced the last few days. He remembered the only time his hat had been out of sight. “Seems that NewsCorp’s head of security is working for the wrong people. Let Orvesco know, will ya?”

“Done.”

“And let’s get some sleep. I want to get back to the cliff early. Orvesco was right. Things aren’t what they seem, and I’m pretty sure I can prove it.”

Early-morning sun baked the clearing near the cliff, heating the dew to a steamy mist where it lifted off in the stiff coastal breeze. Drake prepared for his virtual report back to Atlanta, adjusting his fedora and tugging at the shoulders of his sweat-stained, tropical-print shirt.

“You on, Val?”

“You can make your report now, Gordon. NewsCorp is watching and listening.”

“A cozy thought.” Drake snapped a piece from the bush he’d noticed on their first visit. “Well, NewsCorp, it seems PlayTime’s got some explaining to do.” He walked slowly back toward the edge of the cliff.

“On February fourteenth, Andrew Borton and Martina Sarasti did not take a romantic leap from this cliff. The record of their session shows *Succassia grandiflora* here in full color.” Drake held up the dark leaves. “Dr. Valerie Schumann says that’s impossible. It doesn’t bloom this time of year. There

were no flowers for Valentines day."

"But everyone saw them jump," Schumann said.

"It began to click after the doc made his announcement about the Marty Sarasti stand-in. The session took place, yeah, but it wasn't real. It was a fabrication. A fantasy. Andy, and probably Marty too, were already dead by the fourteenth. What all their Clans saw was something generated purely by PlayTime to fill the need. An accident to stand in place of the murder. And with a real body dragged in by a fake Marty, the story was complete."

"But why would PlayTime kill off its Star Vicars?" Schumann asked.

"The motive? That's the easy piece. Seems PlayTime isn't content with being the biggest communications company in the world. They still have one expense they can do without. The Vicars, all of them eventually, could be replaced by electronic Stars. Virtual heroes in a world that doesn't exist. The Clans still pay to get their vicarious fix, but PlayTime pockets all the cash. The problem for PlayTime is the psychology of the market. It's unpredictable. Would the Clans have the same attitude if they knew their Stars were fakes? More importantly, would the remaining Vicars continue uploading if they knew they were about to be knocked off in favor of a better bottom line?"

Schumann circled around Drake, her eyes fixed on him. He felt eerie knowing she was wired. It could be a couple of people watching, it could be a thousand, it could be more. He clammed up.

"That's it, then." Schumann closed her eyes briefly. "I'm off-line now, Gordon. Forgive me. I know this makes you uncomfortable. It's the way NewsCorp works. You know, 'You Are There' and,

well, here you are."

"You knew, didn't you?" Drake said flatly. "You were watching the Andy and Marty show and saw the flowers, made the connection weeks ago. Orvesco saw an opportunity, his big chance to be number one."

"Gordon ... I'm sorry," Schumann said, resigned.

Drake felt used. Here he was toppling NewsCorp's only competition for them. They could have reported it all themselves, but for the suspicions it might have raised. No, when you take out the garbage, it's a good idea to wear some old gloves, preferably not your own.

The news was breaking just as Drake's flight touched down on the frozen tarmac of home. It was hard to pick out details, but the buzz at the terminal suggested NewsCorp had just dumped the whole story about PlayTime in the lap of the public. He found an empty stool at a bar in the terminal, ordered a beer and sat down to watch the news.

"...with officials at PlayTime denying any knowledge of the circumstances involving the death of the Star Vicar, other than what was available through the session records.

"No doubt related to the theory put forward by Mr. Drake, hundreds of PlayTime Thrill Channels have been empty of sessions as Vicars stop uploading experiences. Contacts made by NewsCorp agents in the field state a predominating mood of fear as the reason. Clans globally are also questioning the veracity of the remaining service provided by PlayTime, many of them choosing to close their accounts.

"Stand by for a summary session with private investigator Gordon Drake as he explains his theory to NewsCorp's Dr.

Valerie Schumann. A full Vitus session can be found on channel 200. With NewsCorp, You Are There..."

Drake slowly lowered the beer from his mouth as he gaped at the image on display. There he was on the cliff, Schumann's questions leading him through the details, his voice and words explaining, the key evidence in his hand.

Only problem was, it wasn't Drake.

Going through the exact same motions was a blonde-haired, square-jawed model for truth. The hat was gone. The clothes and body in it had been replaced with something more worthy of NewsCorp's style. Reality, it seemed, had needed a make-over.

"Hey ... I liked that Hawaiian shirt," Drake said, and returned to his beer. 🍀

AUTHOR: After a fifteen-year career in high technology, DAVID CHATO decided to plant himself in front of his computer and grow. He believes that we are all being squeezed between the converging lines of science fiction and science fact. He continues to seek a way out.

ARTIST: MURRAY LINDSAY — Artist's Log, personal entry: "Have learned much more about the Internet. Have even completed a realio-trulio website of my very own! (www.cadvision.com/mlindsay) Have slowly made some contacts and sales across cyber-Canada. It has been Very Keen in expediting contact and communications with established clients (this assignment from *On Spec*, to name one)."

A S K .

M R .

S C I E N C E !

Ms. JS, of Edmonton, AB, asks by email:

Q: How many chemical elements are now known to exist?

A: By 1940, the Periodic Table of the chemical elements was thought to be complete, with 92 neatly arranged elements. All were found in nature but two: technetium and astatine, which have been produced synthetically. Although neptunium and plutonium, elements 93 and 94, respectively, do occur in very small, trace amounts on Earth, they are still considered with the man-made heavy elements. There are currently 112 known elements. Many of the heavy, transuranium elements were created by nuclear physicists and nuclear chemists at the University of California, and named by them. Now, because of a desire to name element 106 "seaborgium," after Glen Seaborg, co-discoverer of many of these elements and who is still alive (many think one should be dead to receive such an honor), the IUPAC has instituted a ridiculous naming scheme that would call element 109 "unnillennium," instead of the much more friendly meitnerium. The Berkeley group, in an unmatched act of chemical rebellion, plans to name its next element after a well known California feature. It will be called "sanandreasfaultium."

VOLUNTEER NEEDED FOR EXPERIMENT

It is thought that just before dying from having eaten an excess of polar bear liver, human vision becomes exquisitely sensitive and is capable of seeing to the edge of the universe. Mr. Science is looking for a volunteer to help test this theory. The volunteer must be able to give very good technical descriptions in a very brief period of time, and not just keep repeating "wow!" Send particulars to Mr. Science, in care of this publication.

Mr. TL, of Burnaby, BC, asks:

A: If half a byte is a nibble, what is half a nibble?

A: Two bits.

HELP CELEBRATE A NEW HOLIDAY

You are invited to join the happy throngs at your nearby high-energy physics laboratory on Saturday, January 31st, 1998. There will be many demonstrations of atom-smashing and the effects of ultra-high voltages. See fast neutrons created before your very eyes! Be the first to stand on a metal terminal charged to eighteen million volts!

All this fun and much, much more will take place in celebration of National Van de Graaff Generator Day, our newest scientific holiday. 🍁

Send your questions to: Ask Mr. Science! c/o On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton AB T6E 5G6.



The illustration for "Family Melodies" (opposite) is upside down due to printer error, and Alpine Press wishes to offer sincere apologies to illustrator Kenneth Scott and to On Spec readers and staff.

Family Melodies

Laurie Channer

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

Heavy organ chords shook the whole house, waking Sage up. Her Barbie digital watch said 12:00 as the music thundered on in the dark. Sage had peeked at the music sheets with "Bach" on the cover before and it was a mystery how anybody could make sense out of all the lines and notes that went on for so many pages. It was a bigger mystery to her how Boyd, her couch potato brother, could do it so easily when he avoided everything else that required even a teeny bit of effort.

"SHUT UP!" Belinda screamed from her room, just like she did every time. "Stop it right now, Boyd!"

Boyd played louder. He was sixteen and did whatever he wanted. Sage got up and closed her bedroom door, which was vibrating.

"I'm telling Mom as soon as she gets home from work!" Belinda shrieked. "I'm gonna tell her that you play with your organ all night!"

That was a new one. The music stopped abruptly. Usually, they went at it for hours. A second later, Boyd slammed the front door hard on his way out, but it wasn't nearly as loud as the Bach.

"Where were you all day?" Mom said at dinner, which was breakfast for her. She tapped her knife handle on the TV table. "Belinda said you weren't home."

"Playing in the park," Sage said. It wasn't a lie. The trees by the creek still counted as part of the park.

Boyd made a face at her. He hadn't returned to the house until after Mom had already come home and gone to bed at eight a.m. "With all your friends?" he said.

"Shut up," Sage said.

"Don't say shut up," Mom said. "And you'd have some friends, Sage, if you made a little effort to get out of the house instead of sitting inside by yourself doing jigsaw

puzzles all the time. That's no way to spend the summer."

"I was out," Sage stuck out her lower lip. "And I do so have friends. I found a new friend in the park this morning, so there. Her name's Melody. We played Barbies."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Here we go again. Did your little imaginary friend move with us, too? I don't remember seeing her stuff in the moving van."

"It's not that Melody," Sage said. "This Melody's real and she's a teenager, and she's pretty and has long, blonde hair—" She stopped quickly with a sideways glance at Belinda, whose eyes were riveted on John Stamos on the *Full House* reruns they watched over dinner every night. If Belinda knew about Melody, she might try to steal her away, since they were about the same age.

"Is that why you were in my room sneaking my hair things when you came home for lunch?" Belinda said.

"They're my hair things, too," Sage said.

"They were," Belinda said. Mom had insisted that Sage get a pixie cut two weeks ago so her hair would be short and cool for the summer. Sage hated it.

"Share the hair things," Mom said automatically as she flipped through the TV Guide and marked her shows with a highlighter.

Sage gave up and took her plate to the kitchen, then went back to the rec room with her dessert.

"What's that?" Boyd said. "Mom, she took the last piece of Snackin' Cake."

"So? I went and got it."

"Share the cake," Mom said. Now she was riveted to *Jeopardy*. Mom thought Alex Trebek was a hunk.

"It's just a little piece," Sage protested. "He had some at lunch and I

didn't. Plus he woke us up again last night."

"Tattletale," Boyd said. "Belinda already snitched."

"Both of you shut up and share the cake," Mom said.

In all of her ten years, Sage didn't think she'd had anything good all to herself, not even if she deserved it, earned it, asked for it first, or bought it with her own money. If she came into the house with a chocolate bar she'd paid for out of her allowance, all Boyd or Belinda had to say was "Let me have some," not even "please" and without looking up from her crossword, Mom would say, "Give them some, Sage." Sage didn't do it back to them so much. She kept thinking that if she let them have their things to themselves, they'd let her have her things, but so far it hadn't worked out that way.

Melody couldn't eat cake, but Sage would have been happy to share with her.

She went into the bathroom and started looking through the cabinet under the sink. It didn't take two minutes for Belinda to come and pound on the door. "Hurry up!" she called. She was always annoyed when anybody but her was in the bathroom. "I'm going out and I have to curl my hair!" Unlike Boyd and Sage, Belinda had made lots of friends since they'd moved.

"We have to share the bathroom!" Sage hollered back. She finally found the insect repellent she was looking for, behind the extra rolls of toilet paper, and Belinda's mysteriously pink and blue boxes of tampons and stuff. Sage was supposed to have learned all about that kind of thing next year in grade six in her old school, until they moved. But the only girl her age on the street that Sage

had spoken to told her that they already did it in grade five in her new school, so Sage had missed out.

Sage gave the bathroom up to Belinda and went to the rec room doorway. "I'm going out to play again," she announced.

"What's that you've got?" Mom asked, glancing away from Final Jeopardy.

"What? I want some—" Boyd started to say, lifting his head off the arm of the couch until he saw what it was.

Sage held up the can of Off. "There's lots of bugs where me and Melody play. Can I bring it? She doesn't have any."

"Just don't forget it over there," Mom said, "and be home before it gets dark."

There were still hours of light left, but Sage hurried to the park anyway. Melody would be waiting for her, watching over the Barbies Sage had left behind.

She crossed over the neatly-cut grass in the playground area to the trees that bordered the park. Here it became sort of woodsy and led down to a creek. A ways into the woods, there was a little natural clearing. It wasn't very big, which might have been why there hadn't been any beer bottles or piles of cigarette butts or other evidence of teenagers' parties, like there were in several places on the creek bank. To Sage's relief, Melody was still where Sage had left her, sitting up against the fallen log with one of Sage's Barbies on her lap and the other one in her hand, and the hair things: scrunchies, clips, elastics and a comb, lined up on the log.

"Hi, Melody," Sage said. Her name probably wasn't really Melody, but Sage wasn't using it any more for her pretend friend from the old house, so she'd thought it would be good to give it to her new, real friend. The pretend Melody

had had blond hair, too. Sage sat down right close, her knee touching the older girl's. Melody's skin was cooler to the touch now, even cooler than from just being in the shade all day. There were a lot of flies and mosquitoes around, and Sage sprayed the Off all around the clearing as well as on hers and Melody's arms and legs.

Sage could see the edges of the big, dark reddy-purple patches on the backs of Melody's legs and they didn't go white any more when Sage poked them with a finger. They went all the way up under the leg holes of Melody's shorts. Sage tried to bend Melody's leg up to take a better look at it, but Melody was too stiff all over now, like her head and neck had been before. It was really easy to play with Melody's hair when her head stayed in one place. Since Sage didn't feel like doing Barbies any more, she pried the one doll out of Melody's grip. Then Sage sat behind Melody on the log and combed the tangles and bits of twigs and dried yucky stuff out of her hair, while she told Melody all about what a pain in the butt Boyd and Belinda were. Then she practiced French-braiding Melody's hair over and over until she got really good at it. Belinda would never take the time to let Sage practice on her. Sage liked having a big girl friend like Melody, who didn't mind. She wished Melody was her sister. Sage made extra sure that the French braid covered the big scabby wound on the back of Melody's head.

By the time it started to get dark, Sage had made Melody's hair beautiful, even though her face wasn't looking too good anymore, and there was kind of a smell that wasn't just the bug juice. When she had to leave to go back home, Sage told herself to remember to bring some of Belinda's perfume tomorrow.

•

The next morning, after Mom went to bed and before Belinda was up, Sage borrowed the perfume as well as some of Belinda's cosmetics from the bathroom cupboard. Then she went to the park and pretended to be a lady-in-waiting to Princess Melody, making up a whole fairy tale around it. Once she sprayed the Off again, the mosquitos stayed away, but there were still a lot of flies around. Sage tried to ignore them, and pretended to be getting Melody ready to meet a handsome prince who would come riding through the forest. Melody's neck was loosening up again, so Sage could turn it this way and that to look at her results. She used a lot of foundation to cover up the fact that Melody's skin was getting sort of greeny-red. There was also lipstick and blusher and eyeliner and eye shadow. Sage didn't even want to try them on herself. It was more fun to do it for somebody else, putting the powder and stuff onto real skin. She tried to remember how Belinda did it, but made some mistakes anyway. The lipstick was hardest, because Sage knew from watching Belinda that you had to hold your lips one way, and then another way to do it right, and Melody couldn't do anything with her lips at all. But Sage had pockets full of Kleenex, and just wiped off anything that looked wrong. Melody's eyes were looking kind of funny and cloudy and brown along the bottoms of the white parts, but once Sage had put the eye shadow on her and stood back and squinted a little, she could hardly even tell. Even though Sage wasn't as expert at makeup as Belinda, Melody was looking a lot better by the time Sage was done.

Sage had sneaked out some nail polish as well. Melody's fingernails looked

all white and funny, so they really needed it. She worked very painstakingly, so as not to mess things up. It was hard work, but still fun to use the little brush in the bottle top and watch the glossy pink liquid spread out. Once she'd done all ten fingers, Sage took off Melody's sneakers and socks and did her toenails, too. And when it was all dry, she did everything all over again, just because she could. As careful as she was, though, she still got the pink on some parts around the nails where it shouldn't have gone, but if Sage didn't look too close, it was really hard to notice.

The final touch was a couple of big squirts of perfume, which Melody needed very badly now. Sage sat back and admired her efforts. It wasn't as nice as Belinda could have done, but Sage thought Melody looked better than before. Feeling suddenly very hungry, Sage looked at her watch and realized that not only had she missed lunch, but it was getting on toward dinnertime. She picked up everything in a hurry and headed home.

"You stink," Boyd said.

"And you're ugly." Sage stuck out her tongue. Over the years, they'd all learned to fight in low voices so as not to wake Mom. Mom would get up when dinner was ready, just in time for *Full House*.

Belinda turned from the potatoes she was peeling. "He's right, Oregano," she said, "you smell."

"Shut up," Sage said. "I'm not a spice. Sage means wise. Mom said so."

"Don't say 'shut up,'" Belinda mimicked Mom.

"Mom just didn't want you to know that she ran out of good names," Boyd said to Sage. "When it was time to have

you, she looked around the kitchen on her way out to the hospital and named you after the first thing she saw. Just be glad she saw the spice rack first and not the garberator."

"Like your name's any better, *Boyd*," Belinda said. "I guess she had to put the word *boy* right in, otherwise we'd never know."

"Yeah," Sage chimed in. "Especially since you never have any *girlfriends*." Belinda laughed and they high-fived. Belinda was still ragging on Boyd when Sage went off to the bathroom to wash up for dinner. While she was in there, she smuggled Belinda's makeup and stuff back into the cupboard. She noticed the pink and blue boxes again, with their neat rows of mysterious little tubes and bundles wrapped in paper. She snuck a couple of those into her pockets to look at in her room later, along with a folded, printed sheet out of one box that had some diagrams on it. One side had a drawing, all in nice pink and blue, of a woman with her top off and a heading that said "Breast Self-Exams" and the other side had a different drawing of the parts that her underwear covered and said "How to Insert." There was also lots of printing on both sides, but Sage was suddenly too embarrassed to read it. She stuffed the paper into her pocket and scooted back out to the kitchen again.

"Hey, Baldy," Boyd said when she got there, "Belinda took a piece from your jigsaw puzzle today."

Sage just stood there. "Give it back! I can't finish it without all the pieces!"

"She can't," Boyd grinned. "She flushed it."

"Because you dared me!" Belinda said to him.

Sage looked from one to the other, and her lip started to quiver. She'd been

working on that huge, hard puzzle for three weeks and was finally nearly done. She tried to think of the worst possible thing she could threaten both of them with.

"I'm telling!" Sage said.

It was only one piece out of a thousand, Mom had said, so she didn't give Boyd and Belinda that much heck. But later on, after Mom had gone to work, Belinda screamed at Boyd and Boyd shook the house playing Bach all night.

Barbie said three A.M. Sage decided to go out. She slipped out of bed and put her clothes on. She didn't know why she'd never thought of it all the other times before. Maybe it was because she hadn't had any good place to go. Belinda was yelling from her bed, so she didn't even notice when Sage went past her door and down the stairs. Sage stopped in the kitchen and groped around in the junk drawer for a flashlight she'd seen there. Boyd had his head down over the keyboard, playing vigorously, so he didn't see Sage finally go out the front door. And, of course, no one heard her.

Outside, when the door shut behind her, she could still hear the music and the hollering. As Sage went down the street-lit sidewalk, she saw lights go on at the neighbors' house. She kept on toward the park and didn't turn the flashlight on till she was well away from the street.

When she got to the clearing, Melody had fallen over sideways along the log, and was getting too limp again to stay propped up when Sage lifted her back. So Sage pretended Melody was Sleeping Beauty and pulled her by the ankles until she was lying flat on the forest floor. Then Sage arranged Melody's arms at her sides, making sure the nail polish

showed, shining a bit in the moonlight, and straightened her head. Melody's shirt had ridden up, like it was when Sage had found her first thing yesterday morning. Then, her shorts and underpants had been down, too, but Sage had fixed them on her properly right away.

She went to pull Melody's T-shirt down now, but stopped. She reached into her pocket and the paper with the diagrams was still there. It had been confusing to read, like picking up a textbook for the older grades at school. But Mom was never home, or awake at the right time, and Sage just knew she couldn't ask Belinda to explain things. Sage knew she was going to be the only girl in her class who didn't know anything about that stuff.

She hunkered down in the damp grass. Maybe Melody would help her.

Noise woke Sage up again, only this time it wasn't Bach. People were calling her name, Mom and Boyd and some men's voices, too. Sage started to get up, but she was stiff from the cold ground beside Melody, and could hardly move. It was still dark.

There were close-by sounds in the trees and then suddenly, a big, bright light swept over her.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" said a man's voice. Sage squinted in the flashlight beam, which had been joined by a second, but then had to look away. She looked at the ground instead, all lit up by the broad beam. That was when she saw the mess of wrappers from Belinda's paper things scattered on the ground between Melody's feet. It looked really untidy in all the bright light, especially with Melody's clothes all lying around, too. Sage suddenly remembered a sign in the park that said "Fine for Littering." "Are you the police?" she said in a small

voice.

"Just stay right there," said a second man. "I'll call this in," he said to his partner.

Mom's voice came floating closer through the trees. "—bad enough I get called away from work by the cops to settle you two down, but to let your sister wander off—"

"Oh, shut up," Boyd said rudely.

"Don't say shut—" Mom's voice stopped right where the policemen were. "Oh, my God!"

Sage blinked up at the light and everybody just stared at her and Melody. There was silence for a moment, except for the quiet muttering of one of the cops into his radio.

"You gonna take her away?" Boyd's voice finally broke in.

The cop who wasn't on the radio stepped forward and took Sage gently but very firmly by the arm and towed her away from Melody. "We're certainly going to have to ask some questions—there may be some professional help—"

"No, I mean *her*." Boyd was pointing into the pool of light. "You don't have to take her away, do you?"

The cop gave him a funny look. "Of course we do. My partner's calling the coroner."

Suddenly Boyd lunged forward with an outraged bellow. "You little wretch!" he shrieked, knocking Sage down and shaking her, hard. "You miserable freak!"

Sage's head hurt where it banged the ground, but she was too stunned to cry even as Mom and the policemen were dragging Boyd off. Boyd didn't seem like he even noticed them. He kept flailing and trying to get at Sage. "I'm gonna get you!" he yelled.

Sage was getting really scared and confused about everything, but this was

one thing she knew how to deal with. "No way, Boyd!" she hollered back. "She's not even your friend, she's mine!"

"Is not, I had her first!"

"Did not!"

"Did too, did too!" Boyd outshouted her. "I put her there, you brat!"

The cops and Mom were suddenly staring at Boyd.

Now it was Sage's turn to wail. It

wasn't fair. Just when she thought she'd had something good all to herself. Boyd started to howl and struggle as the police took hold of him. Their flashlights were going every which way. Nobody was paying any attention to her.

So Sage sat up and hollered as loud as she could to be heard. "Shut up, Boyd!" she shouted through angry tears. "Mom says 'SHARE'!" 🍁

AUTHOR: By day, LAURIE CHANNER is a crusader against atrocities done to screenwriters. In her own time, she writes fiction that is only slightly less disturbing and horrific.

ARTIST: KENNETH SCOTT has moved to Dallas, Texas, to join the elite game developing team of ION Storm, fronted by the designer of DOOM and QUAKE himself, John Romero. He is currently working 16 hour days to help bring Daikatana to the gaming Arena.

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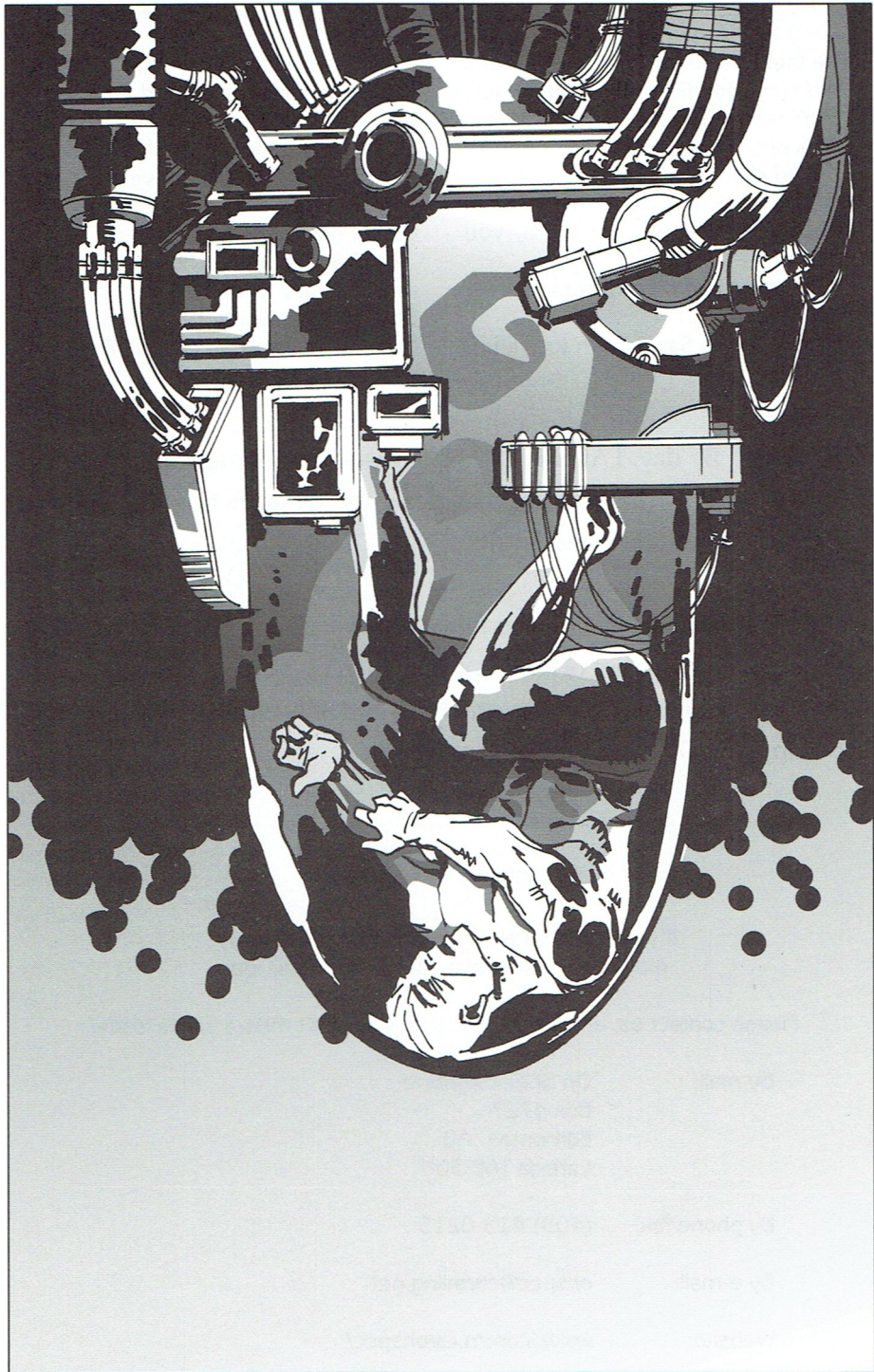
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Twilight of the Real

Wesley Herbert

illustrated by Marc Holmes

Tin Star broke me out of the shell when it was time for the next job. Bright white light shining through my eyelids. Showing the pattern of veins and blood. It's the first thing I saw, and it let me know I hadn't turned into a Tommy, hadn't gone mechnik, hadn't gone robo.

It's what I always asked for. White light, hot water, those thick, plush, towels and a doctored hemplock. The shell is cold. They've been working on the solvent, the universal solvent, that will keep a cell wall from rupturing when frozen but they don't have it yet. When you go into the shell, they dose you, put the bucks in, and lower your temperature until your body slows down to something a little on the plus side of nil. Not frozen, but colder than the freezer section of the meatbuck department.

Eyes still closed against the white light, I stretched my hand out for Kita. Kita my faithful servant, Kita my Girl Friday, Kita my boss, Kita my fetish, Kita my slink. So cold, wherever it was, so cold. Hairs on end, gooseflesh up my arm like mad messages in braille. Snowstorm of words riding my flesh. Hand out for that plush towel. Hand out for her.

"Kita, sweetness, dollop, help me out here," I said into the blood of my vision. I took one step, toes touching cold cement. Gritty and wet like wet sand underfoot. Scratching against the floor.

"There is no Kita, Mister Blue, but it's time. Tin Star's work."

I opened my eyes. Black warehouse. Nothing but green lights off the surface controls of my shell, a big white coffin. Reflecting green off the abandoned machines and wings of ruined spiderwebs, coated in layers of diesel dust. Wetness under my feet where the buck fluid had run out of my shell, dripping down a grate in the cement floor. Glowing green in reflected light.

"Mister Blue?" I said.

"Code prefix, B for blue, code 11 888," she said. Shorter than me by two inches, optimal height for a dollop/boytoy couple. Not Kita. Kita was the same height, black

hair, brown eyes. Always wore latex to break me out of my shell. This one was a Devi; blue-black skin tint, white hair, barefoot with rings on every toe, through her nose, through the brows over lidded eyes. All my time in the shell, I'd missed another fashion change. "Should I call you Nikola Babbett, Corto Armstrong, Wylie D. Bill?" She recited my past names from an internal file. She paused at the last one, a small smile, "Wild Bill?"

"My numbers," I wrapped my arms around me. "B11 888: aces over eights, the dead man's hand. It was the hand of cards Bill Hickok had when he died."

"Obscure," she nodded. Approved. Her kind loved trivia. She padded across the two steps between us. Reached one hand out of her robe to wrap behind my neck. Hot flesh. She'd upped her temperature for me. "No more Kita. I'll be your new therapist." She kissed me, dry tongue forcing inside my mouth until my saliva dampened both our mouths. She broke away, "I have a car waiting."

No more Kita.

She had a car and drove us to a hotel. Fifty-story bronzeplex shaped like a crucifix. She drove with a jumper cable interface, legs crossed on the seat in front of her, steering wheel in the forward locked position. Her external port was on the wrist, hard to spot under the silver bangles she wore. Ghost of fishing line between the wrist and the socket on the dash of the car. Kita always drove manual, just for me. We had that kind of relationship. Used to have.

In the hotel she wrapped me in her robe. Held my arm and marched us past the night desk. She closed the suite door behind us and said "Lock, full security, do not disturb. Lights, off," the door clicking, bolts thudding, lights switching

off as she spoke. I heard her in the dark, opening the blackout shade on the window so city light poured in. Twenty-meter tall signboards dusting the room interior like candles from blocks away. Advertising water filters, a new kind of air-pressure controlled prosthetic muscle, chewing gum contraceptive for men.

I laughed as I saw the contraceptive. Nothing funnier when you're a dollop queer. Laughing when she pushed me into the shower. "Hot shower, thirty-eight point five degrees Celsius," she said and the water came on. One degree higher than my body temperature: she knew I was warmer than most people. She gave me plush towels when I came out. Naked except for the rings, she spread herself on the bed. Slid the lingam-shaped lube dispenser into my hand as I lay on top of her.

"Kita won't be coming back. I've downloaded your file from Tin Star; it has another mission for you," she said before I slipped the lingam into her mouth and squeezed some lube inside. "Everywhere," she moaned, pulling her knees to her chest. "Slink me, Blue, I know you want to. I've read your file."

So I did, lubing her 300-grade synthskin inside and out. Mounted her frontways and then turned her over. The only way to travel. I'd been in the cold shell for long enough, I had a lot stored up. She couldn't get enough. It's easy for a dollop to get off. Certainly she had amped the synthetic nerve receptors in my favorite orifice. The kind of thing that used to be bad fantasy. I let my thoughts go slightly before I let my body go. A long time ago I'd seen a vid, the flatworld kind, where a man said to his friend, "Machines sure are the servants of man."

Now that, that is so much bullshit.

•
 Afterwards, tangled in bed, she took the cellophane off a new pack of Bella Donnas, Italian hemplocks. Some people prefer straight THC in a stab or a popper, but there's a ritual to actually smoking. The blinking light of the air-scrubber over the bed came on; silent because of the white-noise machine attached to it. As I smoked the first one down, I felt the veil of forgetfulness come over me. Relaxing into the slight disorientation.

"We need you for a job, Blue. It's someone you know. Heather and Mallet."

I tried to struggle against the idea but it wouldn't come. Fucking hemplocks. Fucking spiked hemplocks.

"Not snuff, Blue, we know you, we know your file. But you'll be just like you were before. You'll be our hidden camera." She plucked the hemplock from between my fingers and I didn't move. I just went gently into that good night.

She ordered clothes for me over the vid. She knew my size, what I liked. She wasn't Kita, but there wasn't anything special about Kita. They were dollops. I watched her eat a five-course meal with me in a restaurant, cost .3K for two of us to eat, and later I found it in the toilet when she forgot to flush. Not digested, just masticated. She knew how to eat, she even enjoyed the taste, but it all went inside a reservoir in her abdomen. Later, she emptied it.

Shaving one day, I took out my razor from behind the mirror. The only thing of hers in the medicine cabinet was a six-pack of special cleaning solution. It had a long tube for a nozzle; she'd put it at the back of her throat and swallow the contents. It fed through her tubes,

washing everything, including the remains of our sex, out of her. It was the same brand Kita had used. I smiled. It made me feel at home.

They must've been satisfied with my psych profile shortly after that. Tin Star gave me my mission.

Tin Star. That's the Bureau name for the AI think tank that collates all the data. Learned a long time ago that networking was the key to catching a lot of criminals. Being able to collate and sift millions of pieces of data let you put together things that normally would be missed in a piecemeal method of police work. Tin Star sent me the file on Heather and Mallet because it was able to put together some key clues from the nuances of their lives. Captured half-second glimpses of their intentions through thousands of semi-sentient autonomous agents swimming the world-wide computer nets.

Tin Star had cross-referenced Heather and Mallet with the facts for someone suitable to do the job. Me because of the bucky-ball incident that had left me unstoppable all those years ago, me because I was there with Heather and Mallet in Nigeria, me because it looked like Mallet and Heather were going back to the Dark Red Continent.

No, I never knew where Tin Star was housed. The Bureau? I couldn't tell you what Bureau or for which country. If Tin Star did work for a country. All I knew was the shell and the job. Once upon a time I used to know the shell and the job and Kita, but now I had a new dollop. Or I should say, I had a new boss. Tin Star and the dollops were the same thing; if Tin Star was the Queen bee, the dollop robos were the drones. It took a special sort of guy to be queer for a Tommy.

I was that sort of guy.

Working for the Bureau isn't so bad. You do crime-lab stuff, expense accounts, big cars and cell phones and airplanes all across the country when you want. Silk suit from worms in China and a leather coat that actually grew on a cow. Starting pay is better than regular cops make after ten years on the force getting shot at by perps in the 7-eleven every day.

Every time they cracked my shell, I had a compiler routine go through all the major news stories while I was cold. I suppose I was just like the Doom Generation of my world: I couldn't let go of what happened in the past because I couldn't stand the thought of the future.

She was watching over my shoulder as I went through the files onscreen, her white hair flowing over my shoulders. "You know what Tin Star said about you? 'If at first you don't succeed, send in the wild boys.' "

Tin Star made my bank account good for 30K. I was like Dracula, waking up from the grave, living a false life for myself. For this job I'd need a cover to fool Mallet and Heather; they were people who actually knew me. Tin Star cooked up my story. Sent the Devi up to the hotel with it in a metal case of syringes. I lay back on the bed and she put a local anesthetic on my right eye. The needles were curved. I could watch as she pushed the metal point into my socket, heard it click through my skull. After that, I gripped the sheets and absorbed it.

Bucks. Nanotech. They built memories. Years ago, there'd been a woman, a musical genius who'd played violin with the world's greatest orchestras. She never made first chair because she suffered from epilepsy so severe that even

the highest doses of drugs couldn't control the seizures. She had brain surgery, four times, to remove the affected area. They removed nearly forty percent of her right lobe to control the seizures only to find out the woman was still fully functional. Her brain had, over the years, learned to reroute activities to the part of her brain unaffected by seizures. She was a medical miracle. They studied her for the rest of her life. They found out how the brain worked. How it learns, how it stores memories. The bucks went into my brain and built false memories for me, neuron by neuron.

It wasn't complete memories. Just enough to fake it. Too much and they'd run the risk of spillover: having memories of two things at the same point in time. A lot of my life had been spent in the shell, and that made it easier. After Nigeria, I was in Japan. From there, a ticket up the gravity well to NHK, New Hong Kong. Ran out of cash and got a labor job on Luna, mining iron. Working the big iron was one way to explain the lack of muscle atrophy from time spent in low-gee. From there, back earthside to Israel, working on a kibbutz, living for free, traveling on two dollars a day. The head full of false data was some textbook biochem, a little aikido, Japanese language, Hebrew/Arabic language and culture. I knew what it was like to fuck in freefall. Spent a week getting used to it all floating back in there. Kept trying to do things with my dollop that you could only do in zero gravity.

She brought me everything. Car keys to a secondhand convertible that still ran on gasohol, and an unregistered firearm. My favorite, a micro-wave pistol; tight beam, superconductor battery good for 10 shots, worked in vacuum, made things e-x-p-l-o-d-e.

Papers, ID, passport, health insurance, inoculation card, my Blue Card that showed I was free of the plague: the Red Death.

One dark night I put the microwave in my jacket pocket and put on my leather coat. The Devi rested against the doorframe to the bedroom. Hands pressed to her belly, balanced on one bare foot, white hair falling over the robe she wore. I picked up my car keys and batted my lashes at her.

"I'll be back."

"Will you?" She was sad. "I always wonder. My last one didn't. Died."

I crossed the floor to her and wetted my lips for both of us. Kissed her. "What is your name?" Her eyes were green. You had to be close to tell. The irises were square. Windows to what she really was. A stack of synthetic muscles on steel bones. An artifice brain inside a titanium skull: a stack of superconductors pieced together one at a time by bucks. She was a Tommy, an automaton. Not a human brain cell inside that head. Maybe once upon a time she'd been human, but whoever, whatever she'd started as, now she was all mechnik. A ghost recording, a download of someone else's personality, or maybe only an edited version of someone. Maybe they'd stolen someone's intelligence and kindness and stitched it with a PhD's education, an assassin's skill at murder, and a nun's compassion. Maybe she was a second generation of that composite, maybe a fifth, or a tenth. I'd never know. It wouldn't matter. She wasn't perfect, but she was perfect for me; they'd be sure of that.

"Grace," she whispered.

I drove my convertible with the top down over to the Cherry. Strange how they came back there. Like salmon

spawning. For six months after we got back from Nigeria, before Heather got her next contract up cyberspace and Mallet was working the media circuits off the Nigeria scandal he'd help break, we hung out at the Cherry a lot. Neither one of them had known that I'd been recruited by the Bureau by then. Recruited meant I was sleeping with Kita. One day I just didn't wake up. I dropped off the planet. Woke up when Tin Star told me to go to work, and found out six months had passed.

I ordered four shots of tequila at the bar and drank them all one after another, chewing back a slice of lemon with each one. That first dose of bucks I ever took, it's never going to go away, and it metabolizes alcohol a lot faster. I have to drink that much just to feel it. After the first four, I turned around and watched them. Two of them in the booth. Flatworld palmtop on the table between them. Studying something. I stayed steady on them, recording like a camera. It would make some memoir about my life I'd edit someday: this scene, the return of the prodigal son.

They were a lot like I remembered. Mallet was a disaster of long hair and unkempt clothes. He had on a suit jacket but the pockets were full of bulky gear that made it hang off one shoulder. Looked like shit. Heather, tiny Heather. About five feet tall, hair permanently standing on end like she'd been electrocuted. Fright marks of black paintstick around her eyes and mouth. Pale skin tinted even paler since the old days. Black tights, black boots, black jacket, black dress. The only color the violent blue of her nails and the glowing blue strips of animated tattoos running around each wrist. Tiny flatworld video woven just beneath her skin. Dragons and patterns running around the band of

her wrist.

Stopping time. The holo-video was in the middle of an electric koto band selling motorcycles on ten different tanks down the length of the bar. A three-minute music video for Kawasaki. Under the blur and the redflash of the speed-slick cowlings, I crossed the floor. Watched Mallet swivel his unshaved chin up at me, grin coming up, falling on his lips like rain. Heather a china doll, not even looking, staring at the reflection on her glass at a funhouse image of me. Then I saw the gun in her hand, half-hidden under the table. Not moving.

"Well, well, well." Mallet spoke, the words coming out half-drowned by the Kawasaki drums.

And Heather looked up, stood up and dipped the gun back into her jacket. One of those little hands taking my hand, her blue wrists shimmering against the leather of my coat. "Mark," she said. A little girl's voice, still. She took hormones; they'd pushed back her aging to prepubescence. "Mark One, the man who can't be stopped." She squeezed. Happy.

"You'd better sit down for a drink," Mallet said, out of his chair, slapping my shoulder.

Heather was out of the booth, on her toes to hug me. The barrel of the gun was against my nose. "Do the trick," she said, laughing.

"Heather," Mallet said.

"C'mon, Mark, it's been so long. Do the thing with the hand." She took the gun away and pressed it against the palm of my hand. It was an antique. An automatic pistol that fired lead bullets in brass shells. Not even self-guided bullets. It was like throwing rocks. But she liked .45s. "It was the greatest party trick ever. C'mon, Mark. Just for me?"

I nodded, smiled. "Anything for you, Jetgirl."

She cheered and sat back in the booth, cocked the automatic and leveled it at me. I held up my hand, palm towards her, like a Republic Picture movie Indian saying, "How." She aimed and fired.

For a moment, the whole bar turned our way, stunned into silence. Heather was cheering, both hands over her head with the gun still smoking while I gripped my wounded hand in the other. Gritting my teeth, I held it up again, the ring finger missing, for everyone to see.

Mallet was nosing around on the floor by the bar, a shot glass of vodka in hand. "I got it," he called, bent over and picked up my finger. Dropped it into the shot glass.

"Do it, Mark," Heather yelled as I took the glass away. Swirling the bloody end in the drink I sipped the glass dry, shook off my finger and carefully put the two stumps together. "One one-thousand," Heather yelled.

"Two one-thousand," Mallet called.

"Three one-thousand," I finished, and flourished my hand. Made a fist with all five fingers. Nothing but a pink line where the digit had been blown off. In the old days I used to play piano after it grafted back on. Bucks. Flowing through my veins. It's a gift.

We drank all night and the sky was getting pink when the last bar closed. The three of us walking down ash-filled streets. Grey dust blowing into devils around our feet. Heather between us, holding hands. Mallet went into a corner store to buy a pack of hemplocks and road beers while Heather and I got my convertible out of the parking lot. I was cold sober. We climbed in and I started the engine. The car had

character. Throaty engine. Heather rolled her hands over the vat-grown leather of the seat upholstery.

"This is a sexy machine." She rolled her head back against the headrest. Drunk. "But you always had a thing for sexy machines." She looked straight into my eyes. "Why are the good ones always queer?"

She was on me then, her mouth open to me, hands grasping my shirt. When I didn't respond back, she stopped. Wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Just look in my eyes," she pleaded. "I've got mechnik eyes, at least."

It was true. Somewhere along the way she'd lost her real ones. The new ones were amber. Golden-brown. Metal and plastics.

"Not Tommy enough for you, eh?" She rolled off me. "You'd be surprised, Mark. You hate the stuff in yourself, you ever wonder why you love it in a woman?"

"Just born this way," I smiled. "I guess."

"But that's the beauty of it, Mark. You don't have to be the way you're born."

I wanted to tell her to stop. Wanted to tell her about Kita and Grace, about how little she'd end up being in the end. Wanted to say I was a boytoy queer for mechniks because it helped keep the desire at bay. Screwing one was enough to maintain my habit without getting hooked; it kept me from wanting to be one.

But Mallet was back by then. A bottle brown-bagged in one fist. And when he climbed into the back seat, Heather slithered in with him and curled up next to him. They gave me directions like I was a Tommy hack and I pulled up under the empty awning of a house in the beaches. A little cottage that backed

onto the boardwalk and the sand. I got them inside, the bottle unopen on the kitchen table. Saw Mallet's clothes in the laundry mixed with hers. Helped guide Heather to the bathroom where she crawled to the tub and started running water.

Saw the photos and clippings on the walls. Some of them from Nigeria, some of them ones I'd taken. Mallet and Heather, together.

On my way to the front door, Mallet stepped in front of me from the kitchen.

"You knew, didn't you?" He was upset, embarrassed. "About Heather and me, I mean."

I shrugged. "I figured."

"Tomorrow night," he went on, forgetting it. "Tomorrow, we've got some people for you to meet. About things. About the old days. About Africa."

"Africa?" I asked.

He put a finger to his lips. "Trust me. Tomorrow night."

He closed the front door when I got into my car. I drove back to the hotel as the sun came up. My eyes strained for a moment at the glare, then darkened enough to compensate. The crucifix was a dark outline against the sun, streets deserted. Dust and yellowed hardcopy floating on the wind currents. I stopped at an empty intersection, pulling up to another car waiting for the green. Noticed the car idling beside me had two corpses in it. Death grins. Bloated, decaying bodies still upright in their seatbelts. It'd been there days, obviously, and still no one had gotten around to picking up the stiff. Sometimes so much changed when I was in the shell. Never would've seen that a year ago.

Grace was waiting inside the hotel room. Cross-legged on the bed, naked. Gold ring of her clit-hood pierce

sticking out between bare lips.

"I'm in," I told her.

After Nigeria, the others took their splice of the pie and did what they did. I read the reports about when they started buying up bodymods. Not illegal purchases, but Tin Star had monitored them. Heather had started jacking up brain augments. Microprocessors in the corpus callosum, rerouting the traffic between the halves of the brain, learning, getting faster. Loaded with data downloads of smarts she hadn't learned naturally. Running semi-volitional non-sentient AIs inside the vast superconductor memory in her head. I stopped reading the reports after a while.

Current breakdown of subject
H.S. Austin: body modifications
with percentages shown:

arms, standard, (R and L);
Lazlo & Mercer (12%)
leg, bio-augment (L);
Cartier-Biologique (06%)
optics, standard, (R and L);
Leica light compensation
augment targeting
heads-up-display night vision
amplification (15%)
aural replacement, (R and L);
Telestar AM/FM/SW radio
receiver personal stereo;
Sony tele-net link;
Bell Northern (10%)
radiation and electronic counter-
measures shielding (01%)
subcutaneous torso armor,
6 thicknesses of Kevlar
18 (05%)
shark-collagen breast implant (R
and L);
Lazlo & Mercer (02%)
corpus callosum brain

augmentation;

Telestar (07%)

8 Pin external link port;

Telestar (03%)

sheathed nervous system (copper
wire); Telestar (03%)

64% modified

Subject suffered loss of reproduc-
tive organs in Nigerian "Bucky Balls"
incident. Refused replacement or or-
ganic parts or synthetic glands.

Brain augmentation originally com-
missioned to monitor and maintain
hormone levels within acceptable
ranges.

I hadn't seen them in two days when I
got a holomessage from Heather in my
video-fax. Just her from the neck up,
smiling into the camera. A time and a
location. I checked it. A gun club.

I signed in my firearms at the desk
and paid for a pair of protective goggles
and earwear. Back in the range I found
Heather and Mallet in adjoining stalls.
Mallet had a collection of pistols and
submachine guns he was trying for
weight. Face immobile as he inspected
the guns. His eyes, at least, weren't
lenses. An opaque membrane clicked
down over each one as he turned back
to the range and started squeezing shots
at his target.

Heather was in black jeans and a
white T-shirt. Firing with a two-handed
stance; I got a good view of both arms.
Bodymods. Ropes of poly-muscle fiber
with reinforced metal joints. Not even a
synthetic skin covering. I waited until
she was done and she gave me a thumbs
up. Pointed down the hall to the end of
the stalls.

There was a lounge behind a sound-
proof window. In a minute she came in

with a shooter's bag slung over one shoulder. "Mark," she smiled. "I'll be a few minutes. You might as well come with me."

I followed her into the change rooms. Nobody there but us. Inside the door she peeled off her T-shirt and dropped it on a bench. Turned to face me bare-chested.

"What do you think?" She vogued her arms over her head.

"Those are supposed to impress me? Why don't you try putting some skin on instead of running around naked?"

She pouted. "I get skin next week. I meant these." She lowered her arms and cupped her breasts. "Notice anything different?"

I shrugged. Tighter, rounder. Not like I remembered.

"Had subcutaneous body armor implanted from here—" She touched the hollow of her throat. "—to here." She prodded her pubic bone through her jeans. "They had to replace my breasts with mods, but they're so good these days, I think they're better than the originals. What about you?"

I walked closer and touched them. Tweaked her nipple until she shuddered. "Do you have to try so hard?" I whispered.

She smiled, eyes half closed. "Since you've been back, you've just been a good influence on me, I guess."

I ran my free hand down her stomach. "Just because you got it chopped out in here—" I pressed, "—doesn't mean you have to get it chopped out down here—" and I grabbed her crotch through her jeans. "You'll turn yourself into silicon valley," I fingered her crotch, "for something that happened a long time ago." I stepped back and put my hands in my pockets. "I've had better than you. Don't do me any favors."

Heather went dark. "Fuck you!" she yelled. "You fucking queer!" She punched me in the stomach, again and again, until something snapped. Grabbed my wrist and bent it backwards until it broke, and I screamed. "You fucking queer, you fucking, you fuck!" She had me on the ground, kicking my face, my testicles, the small of my back. After a minute, she slowed down. Stopped.

I managed to use my unbroken arm to sit up. Coughed blood. Face swollen shut. Then the heat started. Steam coming out of my mouth with every breath. Then the sounds of my body knitting. Bones snapping and cartilage popping as it moved back into place. Vision returning as my eyelids smoothed out. Ribs pulling out of my lung. The blood drooling out my mouth crawled back up my chin and inside before the broken skin knitted together. Healed, I stood up.

"It's been swell," I staggered back from her, "but the swelling's gone down now."

My telefax rang and I let it. The only sound inside the hotel room. I'd been living alone for the last two weeks. Grace would find me when she wanted me, but she would never call. I spent the time with the jumper-cable umbilicus plugged into my navel, letting ProNet programming live my life for me. Tuned in for 20 hours per, getting infotainment, realtime drama shows, erotica from level X to level XXXX, and whatever else ProNet had in file shunted straight to my optic and aural nerves. A long time since I'd been able to do that. I didn't eat and, after a few days, the bucks in my system would rebel and attack the hunger center of my brain. I'd run for the kitchenette and eat anything, the first thing, I found. One time it was a stick of butter

and a jar of hot peppers. After that I made sure to leave only cans of cold spaghetti with pull-tab openers on the counter.

As my answering machine picked up on the telefax, I glanced to see who it was; ghost image of "Anal Intruder: It Came From Outer Space" superimposed over the RL image of my apartment.

"*Moshi-moshi.*" Heather's smiling face filled the holotank of the fax. "We picked up a lead from a data-bank theft. A way of doing business in Africa, our data acquisitions geek says. You there, Mark? Africa, hear? We could be going back to where it started. There isn't room for all of us in the collective to go, so I'm trying to save a spot for you. Call me. *Arigato.*" Click, off. Gone.

Grace the Devi was in disguise. Standing under the fossilized skeleton of brachiosaurus in the dinosaur section of the museum, dressed like a schoolgirl. Bare feet in thin canvas sneakers. Hip-hugger jeans. White T-shirt and black sunglasses. Her hair pulled back in knots on the sides of her head. Busloads of the kids were everywhere in the halls. Rich kids from private schools who could afford real excursions instead of interactive discs in the classroom. She'd blended herself in. Our eyes met through a crowd and she grinned, cracked her gum at me. I felt like a professor banging one of his students.

The kids passed. I met her under the skeleton and she took my arm. We walked further into the exhibit.

"Daddy, are you sure we should be doing this?" she whispered to me.

I smiled. Delighted that a dollop could be so perverse. She knew me. Up on the third floor, it was almost deserted. We found an isolated corner among the

Primitive Man exhibits; a maze of life-size dioramas in glass booths. She pulled down her jeans and bent over. We had a fast move before anyone came by.

"I've missed you," she said. "I want to come back to live with you."

"Too dangerous." I put my arm around her as we wandered into the big echoes of the Medieval Times displays. Dark halls of period dresses on lady mannequins. Rows of steel-shell suits of armor. Nothing but polished metal and segmented plates that were empty on the inside. "I don't like mixing it up while I'm on an op. They might have me under surveillance."

"How long since you even saw one of them last?" She didn't wait for an answer because she already knew. "I need you, Blue. I'm lonely."

"Just for tonight," I said.

A week later and she was still there. We spent all day sleeping and fucking. Went out around nine and caught a show. Some late dinner. Went to a club. The night before, we'd taken the convertible to a few shops on the strip and bought new clothes to get dressed in. I had a blue suit, kind of acidic aquamarine. Grace in a black halter top and skintight shorts with a black jersey-cloth cardigan that brushed the floor as she walked. It was open down the front with just her long dark legs and body rolling like machine tools. We caught the Boudoir's nine P.M. liftoff; an entire club and restaurant inside a small zeppelin, only half a kilometer long, that circled the city all night. Touching down every few hours to disgorge and take on passengers, diners and clubbers. There was a pharmacy, six bars, three dining rooms and a fitness club on board. The only thing it didn't have were sleeper cabins. You

had to rent private dining rooms with attached trysting lounges. We rode above the city all night, one wall of our lounge a flatworld high-res projection from a camera mounted on the hull of the zeppelin. The city was only a connect-the-dots of lights far below. Drifting over streamers of light in yellow and red. My last time out of the shell, there'd been more lights. Fewer every year. The Doom Generation succumbing to the Red Death. Maybe next time only the Tommys would be left, and people who had turned themselves into mechniks. It was the twilight of the real.

We crawled into the apartment at dawn. Grace was never tired, but she could imitate me almost to perfection. She picked up the clues in my body language. Played at being drowsy and satiated for my benefit. Just because I knew it wasn't real doesn't mean I don't appreciate it. I went to bed in my clothes and so did Grace.

I woke up in the middle of the day. Hard lines of sunlight around the edges of the dark curtains. Grace was asleep beside me. Or sort of. She'd shut herself down by several levels to a standby mode; entering an approximation of alpha waves in her artifice brain. She was still conscious to a point, but part of her mind recognized my movements as something normal and harmless, and didn't arouse her. I squinted past the light and into the bathroom. Standing over the toilet I could still smell the sex on me. On the way out, I saw the light on the fax. New Message. I clicked play-back.

"Mark." Heather's tone sounded worried. A little frown on her forehead. "Things are heating up. I keep telling my people I've talked to you and you're on board with us, and it's only two days until we go. If I'd have known you were

going to get so moody, I wouldn't have teased you so much." She paused. "Mark, listen, I'm sorry. KO? You've always been so serious. But a job's a job. I'm sorry about the last time ... when I ... went too far. But you come with us to Africa. I'll make it up, I swear. We need you there, boytoy. I can't go back without thinking about Nigeria. Mallet's coming, but he never really understood Africa. You did." She looked away from the camera. "Don't make me go alone.

"You remember when it all started." She blinked her little girl eyes. "I found you in that British field hospital when you were still rolling in agony and they had you strapped to the bed. Blind and deaf. I stayed with you. You only knew it was me because I spelled letters on the palm of your hand, one at a time. You were lucky, though. Those bucky balls in your blood were making your life hell, but they fought off the Red Death. You didn't know I had it. I didn't know I had it."

The Red Death. Vectored like HIV. It showed first as high fever. Cramps, chills. Then it leveled out. Hours, days, months later it came back. Internal hemorrhaging. The stomach and intestine in men. In women it was uterine bleeding, spontaneous abortion if they were carrying, and finally a full hysterectomy. It had been designed by the French, originally as a manufactured micro-surgeon to sterilize women. Either nature or human madness had modified it. Made a wild culture that got loose in Nigeria. Ninety-five percent fatal.

"We found out who did it. Who let the Death loose. Our data geek has a way into Africa too. Maybe we can find them, still. Maybe there's a cure. Maybe not. We're going, Mark. Call me."

Grace was still sleeping when I got back to bed. I lay awake for hours with

her not moving. She was curled up like a person would be, but she was motionless. Dollops don't breathe. The only reason I can stand to sleep with them is because they're like part of the furniture. She began to stir a few hours later, then was suddenly and completely awake.

"You up?" she asked from the pillow. I nodded.

"You knew about Africa. That they want me to go. Why is this important to Tin Star?"

"Tin Star always knew who did it." She sat up, her white hair flowing like unstrung bowstrings. "Or has for a long time, anyway."

I knew then, just who had made the Red Death. No mistake there were fewer of us every year and more of them. Would I be a pet, I wondered, in the future? Would Tin Star thaw me out like some living Brachiosaurus? Someday would I just never wake up?

"Go to Africa, Blue. For me."

"You mean, for Tin Star," I whispered.

"No," she shook her head. "We know you wouldn't do anything for Tin Star. But me, you'd do it for me, wouldn't you? You love me, don't you?" She rolled her eyes back and nuzzled my neck.

It was true. A dollop is nothing without her boytoy. While Grace was mine, everything she did was for me. She couldn't help it; that was part of the personality they built into her. Of course I loved her: she loved me like a woman couldn't. Her entire creation was defined by being in love with me.

"I'll go to Africa," I whispered in her ear. I held her close and let her bury her face in my shoulder. "I love you," I said.

I put the microwave pistol against her stomach, over the superconductor storage coil, and fired. The explosion threw us apart, me against the far wall, Grace against the headboard of the bed. Killed us both. Blackened. Steaming. I had almost an hour before my bucks repaired me. Watching her. Propped sitting up, the middle of her body melted and charcoaled down to the titanium bones of her spine. No light in her eyes. Tangle of white hair around her shoulders. When I could, I stood up and closed her eyes. Kissed them both.

Driving the convertible away from the bronzeplex I saw the giant crucifix glowing in the twilight of the rearview.

"You know," I whispered, afraid of my own voice. "You know, sweetness, it's times like these, I am the resurrection." 🍁

AUTHOR: WESLEY HERBERT writes the birth of the new. The new age of babes, boobs 'n' bombs, bullets buttfucks 'n' bastards. It's bitchin. Yes, my future. Where my animus/anima are incestuous lovers; coupling like a one-eyed Wodanesque mercenary and a ten-foot armored cyborg. No unholy union of flesh and machine, but an embrace of the asexual survivors of the holocaust of literature as we know it. There is no sex in the aftermath, only differing levels of crazy, self-destructive rage. (September, 1992)

ARTIST: Illustrator MARC HOLMES (our cover artist this issue) practices his dark arts deep within a subterranean studio located on the edge of Calgary. He is obsessed with painting, and really ought to get out more often.

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The Bone House

Catherine MacLeod

illustrated by Peter Francis

They came to The Bone House at dusk, limos puffing dust on those who walked the mountain road. Buyers came to The Bone House in August, having run out of possibilities; drove through forests of tinder, risking incineration and finding the risk acceptable: The Bone House offered second chances for a price.

The House gleamed whitely, even at night, and was warm to the touch, even in winter. Those who conducted business there tried not to think about it.

Once a year the Keels held an auction. They didn't advertise, but buyers found them. All things were for sale. Sometimes money was optional.

The House stood on the edge of a cliff. The back door opened on a thousand-foot drop. Devin Keel had thoughtfully posted a sign that said *Watch Your Step*, but there were no protests when a client chose that way out.

Now it was August, it was dusk, and it was time. The auction began at eight. Marissa opened the front door and tasted the night air.

"A full house," she told her husband. "I can smell the want."

Devin Bone Keel smiled and unlocked the back door.

They came to The Bone House, necks creased in the hunch of those craving calm. It amused Marissa, who knew how they made their money. She thought the buyers must hate this night, hate being reminded they could have almost anything they wanted.

It was the *almost* that brought them here.

She glanced around the auction hall, counting heads. She came to this room once a year, and never failed to marvel at the illusions contained here. The walls were paneled in pale wood. Exposed beams ran from one side of the peaked ceiling to the other. High windows shone with early starlight. The effect was one of space, and therefore freedom.

She loved the joke.

She watched her husband emerge from the crowd and move to the front of the room. He was dark and lean, and walked as though someone had wrapped human flesh around the bones of an animal. What kind of animal she didn't know, only that it was one even she wouldn't turn her back on.

Devin lifted a gavel from the obligatory podium and brought it down firmly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Bone House. If you'll find your seats, our auction will begin shortly. Please keep your admission slips, as our Bone prize will be drawn for later this evening."

There was a quiet scuffling as the patrons sat. Marissa moved among them, hearing familiar whispers about the prize. They said the Keels would grant your fondest wish, free of charge.

They said there were no winners left to confirm it.

She took her place behind Devin as he spoke. "Before we begin, I'd like to introduce my wife, Marissa, who assisted me in collecting this evening's rarities. If you have any questions about the items on the block, please direct them to her." She passed him a small satin bag. He placed it on the podium. "First up, diamonds from the mines of Pluto. Bidding will begin at thirty million."

Marissa waited out the little silence, knowing the buyers' thoughts. There were no mines on Pluto—at least, not in this time. But there were no questions. There never were.

A woman in the front row raised her hand.

"We have thirty million. And we have thirty-one."

Marissa recognized this woman, Caroline Terry. Money she had in abundance; life she did not. She owned diamonds. She owned the mine they came from. But not diamonds like these, bright

stones unearthed in darkness, born of cold mystery, knowing old secrets.

"We have thirty-two."

Caroline said, "Fifty," and the bidding stopped. There was a brief smatter of applause as she stood.

Marissa picked up the diamonds and walked out, beckoning Caroline to follow. She did, at a distance.

Marissa closed Devin's office door behind them. "You can write your check at the desk," she said. Caroline moved around her, keeping a space between them. Marissa gazed into the mirrored tile of the far wall, understanding Caroline's discomfort even if Caroline didn't: Marissa's hair rippled in a dozen shades of bronze. Her body was supple and quick. Her eyes were wide, her smile slight and perpetual. Some people found her beautiful.

But some were afraid of snakes.

She took the check without reading it and gave Caroline the bag.

"May I see them now?"

"Of course—they're yours."

Caroline hesitated. "I'm nervous," she said. "Isn't that funny?"

Marissa shook her head. "You just spent a fortune for an item you haven't seen. I'd say you had a reason to wonder."

"But that's what I paid for!" Caroline said suddenly, and slapped her fingers across her mouth. "I'm sorry. Why am I telling you this?"

"Because you can?"

Caroline nodded slowly. "Please understand. I'm not unhappy. I don't mind my grey hair, and I'm not ashamed of being wealthy. And I've always thought if I'm lonely, I'm in the company of a million other women. I've filled my time with charity work, and no one could call my life ordinary, but..."

"But sometimes it feels that way?"

"Yes!"

"Your life is without magic."

"Exactly. I used to believe the universe was full of magic." Caroline spoke without self-pity. She spoke a long-known truth. "I grew up and discovered that none of it had my name on it." She considered the bag of diamonds, weighing it on her palm. "Have you ever wanted one truth known to you alone?"

Marissa, whose memories of Eden were still clear, knew many. She nodded politely. "You just paid fifty million for that possibility. But I confess to some curiosity. We have other items for consideration. Why did you want these?"

"Because they were the first things you offered. I've spent my whole life wanting a moment of wonder, and I'm tired of waiting."

She suited action to the words and slipped the drawstring.

There were a dozen diamonds, cut in shapes Marissa didn't recognize and could barely look at. Light crawled on their facets. There was a knowing about them, a *life*.

Suddenly coldness flared from Caroline's body. Marissa watched as she glimpsed the unthinkable, saw pain fill her eyes and witnessed the truth behind them: *darkness is all*. Then the room was without human life.

Of course, Marissa thought, what else would they know on Pluto?

In Caroline's place a woman carved of ebony, fashioned of night: a statue with a handful of stones, her face a study in wonder.

Next year's buyers might be curious about the sculptor, but Caroline Terry would fetch a fine price.

They sold Lady Macbeth's dagger. They sold the planet Harana. They sold a calendar that marked days no one had ever heard of.

"Next up," Devin said, "a soul."

Marissa held up a jar. The soul writhed like a fetus in acid. The hall went very quiet.

"Bidding will begin at twenty-five million."

In the second row a hand went up. Marissa knew him.

Joel McLaren *needed* a soul. Some who'd dealt with his law firm would swear he'd never had one, but he had—and a year ago tonight he'd sold it. Bartered it for what he'd always wanted.

Devin had told her about it, how the scent of brimstone was lost in the odor of McLaren's office—the meat in the butcher's downstairs was less than fresh.

"Surprised?" Devin said.

"I... thought you'd be harder to find."

"Oh no. 'Speak of the devil, he's sure to appear' is quite true. What do you want?"

"Out of here," McLaren said immediately. He was good-looking, healthy, approaching his prime; he was self-centered, dishonest and desperate. "I want the good life, you know?"

"I know. You understand I expect your soul in return?"

"It's not doing me any good here."

"Just so. I can give you a one-year contract. Your soul goes into storage—limbo if you will—and—well, I'm sure you know the rest. Everyone does."

"You take my soul."

"Unless you can give me a substitute."

"Many people do that?"

"Those with initiative, yes. Your contract is now in effect. Enjoy your good fortune, Mr. McLaren."

And Devin vanished, leaving McLaren in his high-rise office with its view of the ocean. It was his best year. Wealth fell into his lap, women fell into his bed, and payment due seemed forever away.

Until tonight. McLaren, not knowing

Devin in human guise, held his breath. "We have twenty-five million. Do I hear twenty-six?" McLaren waited.

No one else wanted this ... thing.

"Sold."

McLaren wrote his check in Devin's office. He glanced at the statue of Caroline Terry.

"What's that?"

"It's called *Fulfillment*."

"For sale?"

"Eventually. It's not unusual for us to keep things on hand from one year to the next." Marissa passed him his soul as the wall clock chimed nine.

He held the jar in the crook of his arm and opened the door for her. They could hear the buzz of anticipation as another item came to the block.

"Mr. McLaren, tell me something."

He frowned at the humor in her voice. "Don't you wonder whose soul we sold you?"

"Whose?"

"Yours." She looked back as she entered the auction hall. "My husband will see you at midnight."

She joined Devin at the podium. A cool wind brushed her cheek as McLaren went out the back door.

They sold a harp that sounded like a woman weeping. They sold a nightingale that sang like a woman screaming. They offered a pair of glasses that allowed perfect sight into the mind of the wearer. No one bid.

Marissa brought up a pair of worn satin toe shoes, their ribbons gently frayed. She gave them to her husband, and watched Emily Chiana take a deep breath.

She thought Emily seemed more in pain than usual; she might have left an hour ago if walking weren't such an effort.

She'd seen Emily dance *Aurora* years

ago, before her body's cruel betrayal. Now the dancer who'd created firebirds and swans had gone from prima ballerina to hag. Her feet were deformed with arthritis, her fingers so twisted that spacing them was a joke.

Devin opened his mouth. Before he spoke Emily said, "Thirty million."

A young woman to her left called, "Thirty-one!"

Emily said, "Thirty-two." Marissa inwardly applauded her calm, and the voice that showed no trace of the fury behind it. That voice had spoken to a transition counselor about life after dance, and said firmly that for her, there was none.

The young woman called, "Thirty-three!"

"Thirty-four."

Emily had no talent for choreography or teaching. All that remained was her beauty, waiting for the pain to take it too. So while her green eyes were still bright, hair and skin still shadows and snow, she married enough money to buy a second chance.

And someone else was bidding on it. "Thirty-five."

Emily said, "Thirty-six" in a voice that dared a challenge. The other woman accepted it: thirty-seven.

Emily opened her mouth and rasped softly, tried to speak and couldn't. Marissa watched as she rode the sudden pain with an effort, and shook in her seat as Devin said, "Sold, for thirty-seven million."

The young woman stepped forward on two good legs. Dancer's legs, long-muscled and strong, with battered feet in expensive shoes. Marissa ushered her out the door, and paused to look back.

Emily's eyes flickered with random thoughts, and Marissa read them perfectly. There were places on the road down, where a sharp turn could send

you into space.

Later, one more leap.

One last firebird.

Marissa placed a glass cage on the podium and reached inside. A slither of jeweled colors coiled onto her hand. There was a collective gasp as she presented the snake to view. It reared on her palm until it was level with her face, looking into eyes as old as its own.

"This is the female," Devin said. It hissed softly at the sound of his voice. So did Marissa. The male appeared at the rim of the cage, sliding up her arm and flicking its tongue in the hollow of her throat. It glowed with all the colors of Solomon's mine.

"Bidding will begin at thirty million."

They sold the snakes to a blind woman who walked out carrying the cage flat on upturned palms. Light glinted off the reptiles and reflected in her eyes, like sunshine dancing on milk.

Marissa gave Devin a small stoppered bottle. Its scent filled the room in a single breath. It was the rain of new summer and an ocean of spice; it was the scent of baby scalp and all the backyards ever mown. Devin plugged the bottle. The fragrance vanished immediately.

"Bidding begins at twenty million."

The buyer had a week to live. He paid sixty million to make up for a lifetime spent dying.

"Next up: your worst fear."

Marissa recognized Benjamin Laskey. "Thirty-five million."

She set a snow globe on the podium. Something pale and indefinite wafted inside.

"We have thirty-five. Do I hear thirty-six? Thank you. Thirty-seven?"

Laskey bid, as she'd known he would. He was spoiled and beautiful, fear-junkie extraordinaire. Skydiving seemed

tame now, and bungee-jumping too dull. She thought he no longer felt his blood steaming through his body, felt every breath, *felt*.

He'd divorced two wives who said he took too many chances. But now chances were harder to find, and hope had brought him here.

Marissa smiled at the sheer greed on his face. Confronting his worst nightmare, yes, that would be the ultimate thrill. He bought it for fifty-one-five and followed her out.

"Tell me about nightmares," she said. "Are they nightmares if you look forward to them?"

He traded his check for the snow globe and shook it impatiently. The vagueness within drifted like fog.

"What happens now?" he snapped. "Why isn't anything happening?"

"It's your nightmare, Mr. Laskey. Why don't you *make* something happen?"

She stepped back as he smashed the globe on the floor. A cool mist blew out of the shards, wrapping him damply. His face contorted with terror. Marissa watched him curiously, knowing he wanted to scream but couldn't.

Benjamin Laskey died quietly. She watched his face smooth itself into a final expression of peace and understood: his last moment had been one of calm. His greatest fear was the absence of fear, and he'd never have to face it again.

They sold a leg bone. They sold a glass of water. They sold a one-use-only magic spell, suitable for either good or evil, to a man who'd never been able to make up his mind. He bought it as the clock chimed midnight.

Devin's gavel came down. "Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes our auction. If you'll keep your seats a moment longer, we'll draw for this evening's Bone prize—your fondest wish, granted free of charge."

There were restless whispers as Marissa collected their tickets in a champagne bucket. She swirled the pail quickly, mixing the stubs, then upended them on the floor. All landed facedown except one. She picked it up and gave it to Devin.

He said, "This evening's winner is Emily Chiana."

Emily looked up sharply, hope and horror mingling on her face—the expression of one finally facing the second chance.

Devin said, "Understand, you're under no obligation to accept."

"But I will!"

Marissa left the room as Emily struggled to her feet. She took Devin's hand and hobbled to the podium.

He said, "Now tell us your wish."

She said, "I want to dance again."

Behind her Marissa entered the room with a coil of rope, knotting it as she came. In a brief, graceful wave, she threw the end of it across an overhead beam. Devin caught it, and Marissa dropped the noose over Emily's head as he pulled it taut.

Emily Chiana danced beautifully.

Marissa went looking for Devin. She paused in the hallway, listening to rooms mortared with souls breathe around her. She glanced into the auction hall and watched Emily do one final, slow pirouette.

She went on outside. Devin was on the front step with the morning paper, reading the commodities update. Marissa smiled as she read over his shoulder. Birth and death announcements: the possibilities were endless. All things were for sale, and there were always those willing to buy.

She turned to close the door. It locked with the sound of small bones grinding. She closed her eyes and tasted the morning air. She said, "I can smell the want."

"I know. Shall we go?"

"After you."

They headed down the mountain. The wind blew hard from the city, rich with the perfume of longing. They both knew the scent of dashed hopes.

It was going to be a very profitable season. 🍁

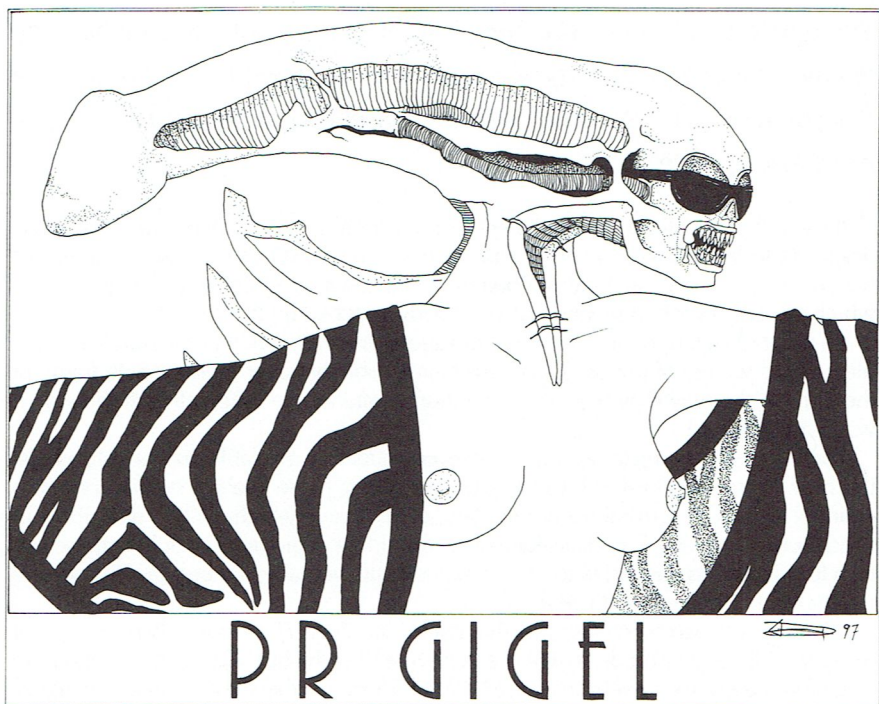
AUTHOR: CATHERINE MacLEOD has published short fiction in *On Spec*, *Transversions*, *Horizons SF*, and the anthologies *On Spec: The First Five Years*, and *Tesseract⁶*. One day she hopes to make the pilgrimage to Roswell.

ARTIST: PETER FRANCIS of Halifax, Nova Scotia has had illustrations published in many magazines. His favorite themes are horror & dark fantasy. Recently he contributed a piece to the *Fractures In Rhyme* anthology which had its debut at the Worldcon in San Antonio, Texas this past August. Currently he is working on promotional material, commissions, and limited edition prints.

ON the edge

Warren Layberry

THE ANSWER:



THE QUESTION:

What do you get if you cross H.R. Giger with Patrick Nagel? H.R. Giger is the Swiss illustrator responsible for, among other things, the set & creature design of the *Alien* movies. Patrick Nagel is the famous *Playboy* illustrator who made a virtual industry out of pert breasts and dark glasses. *

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ON Writing:

Description

Robert J. Sawyer

*There was a cartoon in **The New Yorker** many years ago in which the female host of a posh party accosts one of her guests: "I've just learned that you wrote a novel based on somebody else's screenplay. Please leave my house at once."*

It's true that novelizations are the antithesis of literature, but when I was a teenager, desperate to learn how to write, I read dozens of them. Why? Because in a piece of fiction, every nuance can be described in words. It was fascinating to see the ways in which writers described scenes that I'd already watched on the big screen.

(In point of fact, of course, most novelizations are written before the movie is completed. The writers of the book versions have probably never seen a single frame of the film, so the way they describe the action is often quite different from the way it was actually shot.)

For writers beginning today, there's an even better tool available than novelizations: the new interpreted-for-the-blind movies on video. These use the secondary audio channel to provide a running commentary, often of a very high caliber, describing in vivid words the scene that's simultaneously unfolding in pictures. Watching these can be a terrific way to learn how to bring a scene to life verbally; the best one I've seen is the for-the-blind version of *Casablanca*.

Although I'm part of the minority that thinks *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is one of the best SF films ever made, just about everyone likes the last bit of dialog in the film.

Unfortunately, the novelization of *ST: TMP* is by none other than Gene Roddenberry (and it's so clunky, unlike the *Star Wars* novelization—which is putatively by George Lucas but was actually written by Alan Dean Foster—that I'm inclined to believe Roddenberry really did perpetrate it). How does Roddenberry portray this climactic moment in the book version? Just by reprinting the dialog, without any real description:

Kirk turned to the helm. "Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu."

"Heading, sir?" DiFalco asked.

Kirk indicated generally ahead. "Out there. Thataway."

Now, let's see how that might have been handled better. Remember, a scene in any book has to carry all the emotional freight on its own; it's not supposed to be a mere

transcript of something people have already seen:

Jim returned to the center seat. It wasn't his old chair, but he *would* have to get used to it. He heard the whirring of the little motors in the chair's ergonomic back as it nestled into his spine.

He knew everyone on the bridge was waiting for what he would do next; it was his ship, at last and again, and he was back where he belonged. Ahead of him, he could see the backs of Sulu and DiFalco's heads, and between them—

—between them, the stars, steady, untwinkling, beckoning.

Jim's heart was pounding. He allowed himself a moment to gain composure, then gave the familiar order. "Mr. Sulu, ahead warp one."

Sulu's voice was filled with excitement, with anticipation. "Warp one, sir," he acknowledged, while sliding the master velocity control on his helm console forward. The deckplates immediately began to vibrate, and a growing hum filled the air.

Chief DiFalco half-turned in her seat to look back at Kirk. "Heading, sir?"

Jim was still caught up in the beauty of the cosmos. He leaned forward, and his voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Out there," he said.

He glanced to his right; Scotty was standing beside him, eyebrows raised.

Jim couldn't quite suppress the grin that was growing across his face. He was back, and the adventure was just beginning. He flipped his hand nonchalantly ahead.

"Thataway..."

The trick is to appeal both to the emotions and to the senses: tell us what people are feeling, what they're thinking, and, when appropriate, what they're seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.

You have much more control over the reader's experience than a movie director does. A director can't be sure what part of the frame any given viewer might be looking at, but when you write "there was permanent dirt under his fingernails, the legacy of decades of archeological fieldwork," you know exactly what the reader is contemplating.

Of course, you shouldn't weigh down every bit of business with lots of detail; it may be sufficient to say "she rode the bus to work." But when something major is happening, increase the amount of description; think of your words as swelling background music, denoting the importance of the scene.

Description does more than just make vivid the reader's image of the story; it also lets you control the timing of experiences. Don't just blurt out, "The butler did it!" Rather, play out the moment, stretch things, build the suspense, make the reader wait:

"Of course you all know by now who the killer is," said the detective. He paused, looking from face to face, taking in the sea of expressions—fear and agitation and anger, one man biting his lower lip, another nervously smoothing out his hair, a woman with eyes darting left and right. The clock on the mantelpiece clicked loudly to a new minute. Rain continued to beat a staccato rhythm against the window. The detective, milking the moment for all its drama, extended his index finger and swung it slowly from chest to chest until at last it came to rest pointing at

that hideous chartreuse cummerbund. "The butler did it!"

Pauses don't have to be large to convey volumes. Here's an entire scene from Terence M. Green's 1992 novel *Children of the Rainbow*:

It was almost midnight when McTaggart made the decision.

"I think," he said, "that we should go closer."

The others stared at him.

"Maybe fifteen miles away."

Nobody said a word.

"Force their hand."

Even though the other characters do nothing, their inaction communicates

their nervousness, their failing resolve, their fear that their leader has gone over the edge. Try it without the description:

"I think that we should go closer. Maybe fifteen miles away. Force their hand."

Nothing. No tension. No suspense. Description isn't padding—it's the heart and soul of good writing.

One last note: after three years, I'm retiring from writing this column. It's been lots of fun, and I hope it's been helpful. My final piece of advice is this: don't give up. More than anything, perseverance is the key to becoming a published writer. Good luck—and goodbye! 🌟

ROBERT J. SAWYER's ninth novel, *Illegal Alien*, is just out in hardcover from Ace. His tenth, *Factoring Humanity*, will be a July 1998 hardcover from Tor. Rob is the only writer in history to have won the top SF awards in Canada (the Aurora), the United States (the Nebula), France (*Le Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire*), and Japan (the Seiun). Visit his World Wide Web home page at:

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