

# ON·SPEC

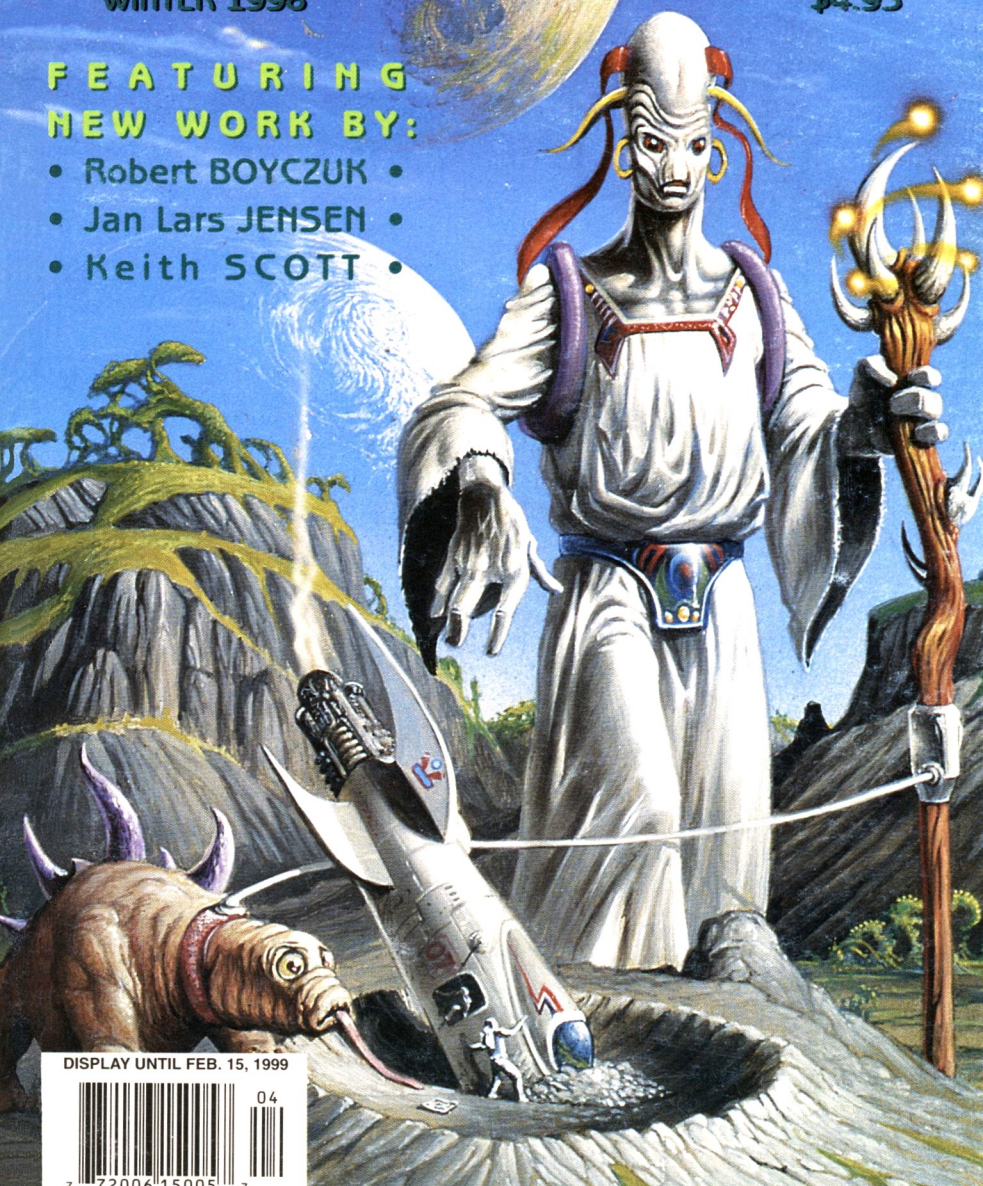
*more than just science fiction*

WINTER 1998

\$4.95

**FEATURING  
NEW WORK BY:**

- Robert BOYCZUK •
- Jan Lars JENSEN •
- Keith SCOTT •



DISPLAY UNTIL FEB. 15, 1999



# On·SPEC

*more than just science fiction*

Vol. 10, No. 4, #35

Winter 1998

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Please send all mail (letters, queries, submissions, and subscriptions) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph/fax: (403) 413-0215. All submissions must include self-addressed, stamped envelope. Manuscripts without SASE will not be returned. We do not consider previously published manuscripts or faxed or emailed submissions. Enclose cover letter including name, address, story/poem title, phone number, and word count (6,000 words max. for fiction; 100 lines max. for poetry). All nonfiction is commissioned. All art is commissioned; send b&w samples Attn: Art Director. We buy First North American Serial Rights only; copyright remains with the author or artist. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without the author's or artist's consent.

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## COVER

*"Do You Think They're ... Peaceful?"*  
painted in acrylic lacquer with hand/airbrush  
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LE CONSEIL DES ARTS  
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THE CANADA COUNCIL  
FOR THE ARTS  
SINCE 1957

On this issue...

## Run, white rabbit, run

Jena Snyder

*General Editor, On Spec*

I'VE SPENT THE PAST COUPLE OF DAYS RACING TO GET SOMEWHERE ONLY to find I have nothing but time on my hands. Running, running like Alice's white rabbit, pocket watch in hand, feeling as if I'm flying on magic mushrooms or, at the very least, too much airport coffee. It's got to be some kind of bad trip to celebrate a birthday and bury a brother-in-law all within a single week.

Please forgive me if I get celebrations and sorrows mixed up in this editorial—I don't seem to be tracking all that well yet. Still on Vancouver time maybe, instead of Edmonton. When we packed for Vancouver for my brother-in-law Don's memorial service, we had to find room for birthday presents for his daughter, turning seven just a week after he died.

I heard someone remark at the memorial service that years speed by while days drag. If you don't believe that, ask yourself how long it's been since you talked to a relative who lives a province or more away. It was just a few weeks ago ... wasn't it? Is it any wonder I feel like the White Rabbit, late for a very important date?

For writers, "White Rabbit Mode" is a familiar one: you hurry-scurry to get a submission in the mail before the deadline passes or finish a story before the weekend's over or even get a book published before you hit one of those dreaded "significant" birthdays. Then you wait for the editor to reply, for the magazine to come out, for the check to arrive...

WAYNE HARRISON ("Walking into Spring," page 60) would have been thrilled to see his name, his work, in print. Unfortunately, he was unable to enjoy a well-deserved reward after working hard at his craft: he was killed in a car accident shortly after he sent his story to us. So although we're very pleased to share his first professional sale with you, we're saddened at the same time to know that

he never got a chance to celebrate one of the sweetest milestones in a writer's career. The loss of his voice and talent is a loss for all of us.

## Changes and upcoming events at On Spec

We've made a few changes here at *On Spec*, some visible, some invisible. First, instead of an Editorial Collective and an Advisory Board, we've streamlined down to a General Editor (myself), five Fiction Editors (Barry Hammond, Susan MacGregor, Hazel Sangster, myself, and Diane L. Walton), and a Poetry Editor (Barry Hammond).

Another change is our recent decision to drop our requirement that all submissions be sent in competition format. Last but not least, we've adjusted our pay rates. We now pay \$50 for stories under 1000 words; \$100 for stories 1000-2999 words; \$150 for 3000-4999 words; and \$180 for 5000-6000 words.

Spring 1999 will be our "Earth, Air, Fire, Water" theme issue, and we're especially pleased to offer you new work by Bram Stoker co-winner DAVID NICKLE, Journey Prize winner MELISSA HARDY, Aurora winners PETER WATTS and MICHAEL SKEET, a fabulous cover by Aurora winner TIM HAMMELL, poetry by Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize winner SANDRA KASTURI, and much, much more!

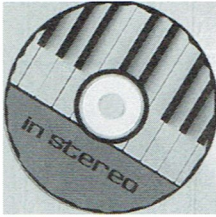
## Congratulations!

Many congratulations to STEVEN R. LAKER for "Bringing Back Sarah" (*On Spec*, Summer 1997), and DERRYL MURPHY for "Frail Orbits" (*On Spec*, Summer 1997) for their Honorable Mentions in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, and to KATE RIEDEL for "The Babysitter" (*On Spec*, Winter 1996), and DIANE L. WALTON for "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" (*On Spec*, Summer 1997) for their Honorable Mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*.

Congratulations too, to the Aurora Award winners this year (please see page 41) and the winners of the Prix Boréal (please see page 49).

## "When a good bird goes bad"

I was pleased and proud to participate in the joint launch of Ravenstone, the brand-new genre imprint from Winnipeg's Turnstone Press, and *Divine Realms*, SUSAN MACGREGOR's wonderful anthology. *Divine Realms*, like the two other Ravenstone titles launched in Winnipeg, is packed full of fabulous SF short stories with a spiritual theme. In it are stories by JASON KAPALKA, DIANE L. WALTON, LOUISE MARLEY, MARY WOODBURY, STEVE STANTON, DONNA FARLEY, URSULA PFLUG, CLAUDE-MICHEL PRÉVOST, JENA SNYDER, BRENT BUCKNER, KATE RIEDEL, KEITH SCOTT, SUSAN MACGREGOR, ALLAN LOWSON, VEN BEGAMUDRÉ, ERIK JON SPIGEL, and PETER WATTS. Also launched were a mystery, *Hoot to Kill* (by KAREN DUDLEY), and a collection of new Canadian Gothic short stories, *Fresh Blood* (edited by ERIC HENDERSON and MADELINE SONIK). Be on the lookout for *Divine Realms*, *Hoot to Kill*, and *Fresh Blood* at your favorite bookstores.



This issue is brought to you ...

## in stereo

(Well, okay, not exactly "stereo," but we do have something strange and special for you.)

One of my jobs at *On Spec* is to play DJ, choosing which stories will run in which issue of the magazine. And while I was reading over what we had on hand, I discovered two pairs of stories that created wonderful echoes that bounced back and forth for me, building on each other.

The first pair has a very subtle echo; but when you read Robert Boyczuk's "Shika" (p. 28) and Wes Smiderle's "Bottle of Skin" (p. 74), I'll bet you find yourself thinking about the characters of Shika and Mariko long after you set down your copy of the magazine. Besides sharing some physical traits, Shika and Mariko also make some eerily-similar career choices. In a different time and place, I found myself wondering, would one have made the same choices as the other?

Then I came upon Robert Ford's "Three Last Chances" (p. 86) and Gary George's "The Pandora Consequence" (p. 98). Both these stories involve time travel to change important events in the protagonist's past. They both involve a Volvo, a second wife, and a seemingly-minor decision. But that's where the two part company. One tweaks the nose of time travel, while the other spirals off in a darker direction. When I read one followed by the other, delicious shivers of *déjà vu* chased up and down my spine.

So sit back, put your headphones on, and enjoy the "stereo." 🍁

### ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

JAMES BEVERIDGE is a career commercial artist who's been eking out a living in Edmonton, Alberta. While most of his work is found on vehicles and walls, he has found that illustrating for *On Spec* (since 1991) is always engaging, stimulating and challenging. He is now branching out to computer games as well as returning to comics, and would like to try his hand at novel covers.

"Do You Think They're ... Peaceful?" was painted in acrylic lacquer with hand/airbrush. Jim also enjoys working with pencil/pen and Adobe Photoshop.

For more of his work, please see his website:

<http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>





# Reintroducing the Species

Jan Lars Jensen

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

**H**ECTOR SAW HIS FIRST ON A HIKE UP SUGAR MOUNTAIN. It flapped in from the heat-waffled distance, ungainly, immense for something with wings, and before he'd finished admiring its flight, the bird soared round the mountain, out of sight. He hiked past washed-out intimations of a bridge to the mountain's steeper face, and discovered an old concrete bunker weathered into the cliffs, a structure with a wire mesh ceiling and an open gate pointed at the horizon. Sitting on a wooden shelf inside was the condor. Hector figured the structure must have served long ago in some government program to reintroduce the birds to the valley, and subsequent generations continued to frequent the site, its location bred into their awareness. Hector started making pilgrimages to the bunker, too. And over the course of a hot and lonely year, he saw enough condors to notice a pattern.

"Their eyes are bigger," he said. "Huge, really. I've never seen a bird with eyes that big. And they keep getting bigger."

"Chihuahua eyes," Loretta said, sounding bored.

"Pardon me?"

"It sounds like you could be describing Chihuahua eyes. There was no such thing as Chihuahuas before Mexicans bred them into existence. They figured out what American housewives would think was the most beautiful pet, and they bred a dog to match that image: miniature deer, with eyes so big they almost pop out of their heads. That's what makes them the dumbest breed of dog alive."

"How so?"

She tapped her head. "Water on the brain."

Oh! Hector was glad he'd brought it up. Water on the brain. Before, Loretta had just been signaling the waiter to hurry up with their lunches so she could get going. Unfortunately the conversation was now interrupted, the waiter setting down plates, and Hector wondered if the waiter might assume he and Loretta were a couple; he found himself trying to encourage that idea with body language, leaning into her space, familiar.

"Let's stick to business," she said.

"Why not eat first?"

"You wanted to talk about a by-law."

He sighed. "1225 dash 17."

"Your people want to alter an historical building?"

"An historical townhouse."

"I don't know how you sleep at night."

"Historical townhouses, actually. Plural. They were declared historically significant as part of an ingenious marketing scheme by the last company to sell them. Our new scheme is just trying to nudge out the old. Happens every day; we're not being particularly devious."

"If the community now believes these townhouses are significant, it doesn't matter how they got that way."

"Marketing will take care of the locals."

"You think people are so easily fooled?"

"They elected Colonel Taylor as mayor, didn't they?"

Bad timing for such a comment. Later, he would admit that to himself. Loretta took on a glacial expression and put down her fork and emptied her drink into her meal (knowing otherwise he might clean up her plate when she was gone). "If I wanted to put up with your childishness, we'd still be married."

"Childishness? You think I'm being childish?"

But she was already leaving. Hector looked to see if she'd forgotten anything that might serve as an excuse to get in touch again. Nothing but damp linguine. Maybe the waiter could pour it into a doggy bag? He gestured for the waiter but only managed to attract the attention of the dessert cart, which rolled over with pieces of cake turning inside its plastic dome.

She was wrong, though. His behavior wasn't childish, it was self-destructive. In a very real sense his future with EASY Investments depended on what he could salvage of his relationship with Loretta. Her new husband, Colonel Taylor, had been elected mayor and had the ear of the Approving Office for New Subdivisions. Hector invented excuses to continue meeting Loretta and, through her, he tried to influence the Mayor Colonel in the company's favor. "In a very real sense, your future with EASY Investments depends on your relationship with your ex-wife," Johnny Mercator had explained. When Hector's briefcase started ringing, jumping up where it lay, he knew it would be him.

Hector opened the briefcase. "Yes?"

On the screen inside, Johnny Mercator looked like an elf with rectal cancer. Effeminate, pained, and bitterly unpleasant. Before becoming involved in speculative townhome purchases, Johnny had worked for Customs. It was never clear to Hector what precisely had been Mercator's position with Customs, but judging by the stories, it was something in the department of Making-Cross-Border-Shoppers-Burst-into-Tears. "I want you to go to Paradise-on-Earth," he said.

"What for?"

"One of the new owners has some bug up his ass. He's scaring away potential buyers."

"This is the sort of problem I'm qualified to handle?"

"I wouldn't dig for compliments, if I were you. The guy's name is Murray Flemming. His address is 444 P-O-E."

"444, okay." Paradise was only forty percent sold, Hector knew. No wonder Mercator looked miffed.

"I want you to shut this guy up, if it takes a fridge in his bedroom, free turf maintenance for a year, whatever. How did the meeting go with your ex, by the way?"

"I think we can expect good news from the Approving Office."

"That's what I like to hear."

Hector took a cab to the development, passing the rotating sign for Paradise-on-Earth Estates. Hector had been in the business long enough to have seen trends come and go in how strata developments were named. For a while, developers had competed to outclass each other with allusions to England. Cambridge Island Executive Mansions had risen alongside Merry

Old Cottages with a View of Big Ben. The reality was best demonstrated by Buckinghamshire Manor on the Lake, a converted apartment complex that had a view of a public swimming pool with one corroded shopping cart visible in the deep end. Now the developments seemed to refer, in their names, to a rewarding afterlife. EASY had bought up these townhomes and renovated them with an attractive theme; with simulated woods that would never rot or warp; with color schemes that were like rolling shoals of clouds sinking toward a perfect sunset; with Total Security, its protective circle drawn around the property in the largely symbolic form of a pearly white fence.

Hector had ceded custody of his Irish setter to Loretta to make this development possible. Now surveillance cameras tracked his approach, and voice mail told him to stop where he was, then interrogated him about his purpose and identity. The gates finally opened with only partial acceptance: he had to squeeze through sideways and get humiliating stains on his jacket.

For fruit, this year was without precedent: trees in the green space that had never produced before this year were suddenly bountiful, the cherry trees, an old apple tree—even the ornamental shrubbery revealed feathery green plums. A visibly dissatisfied owner let Hector into townhome 444.

"You people sold me a haunted house," Murray Flemming kept saying. He was dressed primly, his neck hanging partway over his shirt collar, his skin as tanned as a loaf of bread. He didn't look crazy.

"You said haunted?"

"A spirit wakes me up," he said. "Every few nights it enters the house and I hear it moving things downstairs. Rattling the drawers, rearranging furniture."

"Have you ever seen the, ah, spirit?"

"Looks like an old woman. She's always wringing her hands, mumbling about how cold it is, so cold."

He imitated the spirit's disconsolate movements, but his bulk somehow made the act unconvincing.

"Well, it doesn't sound like a prowler," Hector said.

Murray snorted at the idea of a prowler getting past Total Security.

"I'd like to help, but you must admit this is a very unusual—" Hector stopped mid-sentence, distracted by the view from the kitchenette window.

"What? Is she back?"

"I didn't realize you could see Sugar Mountain from here."

Murray frowned. "I need my rest. How can I get any rest if I have to share my home with a noisy entity? Probably it would be easier to sue you people for my money back."

"We'll do whatever's necessary to get you satisfaction, Murray. Even if I have to delve into the occult myself."

"Will you consult a spiritualist?"

Hector said he would do just that and report back within a week.

But he discovered there was no such thing as a spiritualist, at least not in the business directory, nor any promising listing under "OCCULT," so instead he called the cable company and had them feed his apartment a marathon of movies with the word

"Haunted" in the title. He couldn't turn on the TV without someone screaming at him. A lot of the movies were the interactive variety, in which characters would turn to the camera and say things like, "Where do you think we should bury the ancient scepter?" or "I see the vengeful spirit is reaching for your exposed neck." Hector spent a couple of days in underwear, fast-forwarding through supernatural premises and plot resolutions. It was hot. The telephones in the movies all glowed a throbbing pink, indicating that someone was trying to call the apartment. But Hector knew it would be Johnny Mercator with unfortunate news from the municipality, and didn't want to face his wrath until he could report success at Paradise-on-Earth.

"I've found the answer to your problem," he at last told Murray Flemming.

"You spoke to a spiritualist?"

"It wasn't easy, but I determined how to resolve your problem."

"How?"

"You must confront the spirit."

Murray rolled his eyes.

"When you hear those rattlings you have to go down and confront the ghost of that woman; tell her that her time in this world is up and she must move on to the spirit world."

Murray shook his head. "I'm not confronting anything. You people are the ones who sold me a haunted product; you should be the ones to confront the spirit."

Hector saw that his phone was fighting off another call, and losing. Johnny Mercator's face was growing like a determined wart from the center

of the image of Murray Flemming.

Hector said, "I'll help."

As he drove into Paradise the second time, three realtors on a bench sat up and noticed him; their heads moved in sync, eyeing him, keen as guard dogs, until he flashed them the hand signal which meant "Not-a-potential-buyer." They relaxed a little.

"Murray? Murray Flemming?"

The door was unlocked and Hector got no reply from within. He stepped inside and saw notes taped to the major appliances. "TV," "FRIDGE," "MICROWAVE." Apparently Murray had decided Hector would spend the night here alone: upstairs a guest bed had been made up. Hector shrugged and went to the "FRIDGE" for a glass of water. Then he pulled a stool over to the kitchenette window and scanned the sun-baked face of Sugar Mountain. He'd brought along binoculars, anticipating this view, and he could even see the forgotten condor habitat.

He spent most the evening posted at the window, hoping for a condor. The evening sun resisted setting, and the townhome regulated its temperature so evenly that Hector felt suspended in one extended moment, no more than three degrees covered on the clock or the thermometer. Outside, fruit descended from overladen branches. An apple, a peach, something brown and shiny from a maple tree. When he finally put down the binoculars, he saw one. A condor had perched in the green space of Paradise, resting its enormous eyes on Hector, but what really struck him was its excellent posture, eagle-like

and erect. It looked proud. Hector jogged to the front door for closer inspection, but by then the branch had been vacated and peaches thumped to the ground, while a dark hyphen pulsed against the face of Sugar Mountain, away.

Hector felt drained. He had stared so long at the sun-soaked mountain he felt as if his face must be tanned. When he dropped into the guest bed he glowed against the sheets.

Hours passed. Night had been thrown like a switch. He sat up in the unfamiliar bed, startled, awake, while downstairs he could hear the jangle of cutlery. It could only be the spirit of the townhouse, announcing its arrival. *You must confront the spirit*, Hector remembered, and he regretted getting his information from movies. But he got up and felt his way along the hall, listening to whispering steps over the kitchen floor.

From the base of the stairs, he could see the figure moving through the half-light. Spectral, spindly, a nimbus of bluish hair. In each fist she clutched stainless steel cutlery.

Hector flipped on a light. "What are you doing here?"

The old woman pulled out a drawer, spilling knives and forks.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

She turned and swung her dreamy gaze over him.

"I live here..." she said.

"The guy who lives here is named Murray Flemming and I'm pretty sure you're a complete stranger to him."

"Someone's been messing around with my dishes," she said. "Word to the wise, boy, don't ever let anyone

unload your dishwasher for you. Are you the twit who put away my dishes?"

"Everything seems out of place, huh?"

"Everything is out of place!"

Hector looked around. "How'd you get inside?" he wondered aloud. His heart was recovering. The front door was wide open and when he examined the card-lock he found somebody's ID jutting partway out of the slot. "Fiona Hastings," it read. "Fiona Hastings," he said, walking back to the kitchenette. "You?"

She drifted to the hall closet and started pulling out Murray's jackets. She frowned at each one before throwing it onto a pile.

"That name sounds familiar," he said. "Wait a second: Fiona Hastings. You're one of the people we bought out. Maybe you did live here, once. EASY Investments bought you out so they could tie this building into the development."

"This is my home," she said.

"You haven't lived here for years," he told her. "I'm sure you wisely invested your money elsewhere. That's your home, now."

"Here's my kitchen. Here's my living room. Here's my garbage disposal unit."

"If your card had worked anywhere else in this development, you'd have recognized their garbage disposal units, too. They all look alike, ma'am."

"You are a dim one, aren't you? Don't you get it? I've lived here twenty-two years."

"The point is you no longer live here. You don't. You sold this place,

and when you sell a home, that also means you've sold the right to come back at any hour of the night."

He went into the living room and palmed the phone.

"I'm sure someone, somewhere, is very worried about Fiona Hastings."

He argued with the telephone company's voice-mail manifestation, trying to squeeze Fiona's address out of it but only getting repeated demands for more detail. When he shouted to Fiona, "What's your phone number?" she didn't answer, and he saw the front door was open to the night.

"Fiona? Fiona?!"

The main boulevard was empty, and the other townhomes, bland as property markers from a Monopoly board, receded into darkness. Hector pulled on his clothes and walked down the middle of the street, residual heat coming off the asphalt. His work here was done: reprogramming the card-lock would be simple enough. He hoped he wouldn't bump into Fiona Hastings on the way home.

He walked for a few minutes before realizing he was going the wrong way, headed toward his old house rather than the apartment. Saddened, he adjusted course, and passed other gated communities, other developments he had helped make possible vis-à-vis his relationship with Loretta. He lingered outside Shakespeare is My Neighbor Castle-Homes, remembering the chilling ramifications of its septic output on the town's groundwater supply, which had all been overlooked during the approval process partly, he knew, because he'd surrendered his claim on

the swimming pool he and Loretta built together. "Keep moving," the fence's voice mail advised him.

There was no way to get the pool back, of course. A subdivision couldn't be refunded. In a sense, property now separated him from Loretta. Who knew about selling the right to come back better than he did?

Without traffic he could hear chirping at multiple pedestrian crosswalks, signals to blind pedestrians that they might safely cross north-south, or east-west, or whatever. Nobody was around now. Hector crossed diagonally, taking the absolute shortest route back to the apartment. The crosswalks sounded as if they were attempting bird-call, and he wondered if it might mean anything to the condors.

Around the corner drove a Ford Domestic, slowly, its interior light on, illuminating three people sitting in the front. The way the car moved, Hector knew they must be realtors. They slowed alongside him and a window eased down.

"Don't you carry your phone with you?" one of them asked.

"Not always."

"You should get a head-phone. Everybody's got a head-phone."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Johnny Mercator has been trying to get in touch with you."

"I'm just on my way home now, boys. Long day. Long night."

"We'll give you a lift."

"Not necessary."

They insisted. They followed him slowly along, asking him again and again if he didn't feel like taking a load off, occasionally nudging him

with the body of the car. He gave in. But the route they took through the city was not direct by any means: it was a realtor's idea of a ride home, prowling the main streets and the side streets well beneath the speed limit, even now, the realtors glaring at the sidewalks, willing a potential buyer to materialize from the shadows. There was small talk happening in the front seat, one of them describing at length the hunting trip to China he had planned.

"They got giant pandas over there, pretty much one on every corner. It began as a tourist attraction. Everyone loves pandas, someone figured, so the government genetically altered them to better fit people's concepts of what pandas are like: soft and lazy and huggable, with almond-shaped eyes so everyone would know they're Chinese. But the population got out of control and now they're everywhere. Sitting on the sidewalks, mooching for scraps, getting into dumpsters, looking scabby. Not such a novelty. So for a limited time the government is issuing hunting permits along with special guns that shoot rubber plugs. You can only bag the really grubby ones, and even still, you've got to be respectful."

Eventually someone did appear in the realtors' headlights, and from a distance Hector recognized the pissed-off elf. He tried to cover the interior light with his hands so he wouldn't be visible in the car, but it was slowing anyway, coming to a halt right alongside the chief executive of EASY Investments.

"Beautiful evening," Hector said.

"It's night," said Johnny Mercator. "You've been ignoring your phone."

"I haven't been avoiding you. I was busy. I exorcised a townhouse."

"Like hell you haven't been avoiding me. I had somebody in that bistro listening in on your conversation with Loretta. You'd be a fool to pull a stunt like that and not avoid me afterward."

"Thanks for implying I'm not a fool."

"I'm deeply disappointed. Hector, this doesn't speak well of you. It reveals a reckless attitude toward your bread and butter. I'm forced to question your mental health. What kind of a man would risk his job like that?"

"Are you letting me go, Mr. Mercator?"

"I came out here with an opportunity for you to make it up to me. To the entire company. Even to these boys."

The realtors seemed unaware of what was being said, or, more likely, there were too many leaps of the imagination for them to relate Hector's job to their own personal well-being.

"Another development," said Johnny Mercator. "Big. Virgin land. With a connection in council, we could really make it fly."

Hector felt a weight in his stomach. "Sugar Mountain?"

"Sugar Mountain," Mercator said, nodding. "Great concept, isn't it? It is practically knocking on doors right now selling lots to an upscale clientele. Of course we'll have to get the name of the mountain changed. People don't like sugar."

Hector dropped back in his seat, weary.

"You should get to bed," Mercator suggested. "You're going to need your

energy to butter up the ex."

Without instruction the realtors pulled away from the curb and took the car up to ten miles an hour as they continued threading their way through the city. "Over the fireplace," one of them said. "In the den with your bowling trophies," said another. They were debating, Hector realized, the best place in a house to hang a panda's head.

The days following were sunny, sunny, sunny, one after another, as the company's strategic planners examined Sugar Mountain in the context of existing zoning laws. It became increasingly apparent that the profitability of the venture would depend on the municipality's degree of cooperation, and Hector felt himself receiving the attention of the company's special peer pressure unit, flattering and threatening him through everyday conversation, fostering in the office a general atmosphere of backslapping support interspersed with sudden, in-your-face shouts demanding that he get into action, and these eventually pushed him out the door and all the way to the driveway of his former abode, where the Mayor-Colonel and Loretta now bedded down nightly.

It was hot, and unfamiliar station wagons in the driveway reflected heat at him. Apparently there was some kind of meeting going on: Hector found the front door unlocked, and let himself in. Instinct, he thought with a shrug.

Then came the shock.

Was this really his old home? One living room wall had been cut away to create entirely new dimensions.



The furniture was different, the smell was different. And the Mayor-Colonel had marked his territory extensively, with framed commendations, with foreign mission flags, with a bronze M-16. Hector stepped over the new carpet—so plush—flummoxed by his surroundings, wide-eyed and lost as Fiona Hastings, disoriented by a place he was supposed to intimately know.

He walked toward the sound of voices—toward his old study—where the meeting was taking place. The people gathered around the table seemed to be discussing the machinations of a covert organization. “What’s to be done?” somebody worried. “Where will they strike next?” Hector was handed a glossy pamphlet and he gasped at the cover photo: a condor. It had huge, sad eyes and iridescent blue and green plumage—even covering its head. The bird resembled a traditional condor less than some marketing firm’s concept sketch for an updated eagle.

“What are you doing in here?” said Loretta, from behind. She wore a sun dress the same color as her skin. It was even freckled in surprising places.

“Officially, it’s more business. I’m here to win favors, same as ever.”

“You’ve used up any goodwill,” she told him flatly.

“EASY Investments wants to develop Sugar Mountain.”

This made her smile—really smile, like he hadn’t seen in years. It worried him. “Well then, you came on the right night,” she said. She stepped up to the table and her voice cut through the chatter. “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce a special guest speaker.”

“Oh,” said Hector. “Oh. No.”

“Hector represents a company hoping to develop Sugar Mountain.”

“I hadn’t planned on speaking to a group,” he said, but the crowd looked at him with anticipation and made a space in their noise for him to insert a speech.

“It is true that my company, EASY Investments, hopes to build new subdivisions on Sugar Mountain,” he said. “I gather you people are especially interested to hear this. Obviously you’re concerned about the condor population. I too consider myself a friend of this intriguing resident of our area.”

“We don’t exactly consider ourselves friends of those ... things.”

It was the Mayor-Colonel who’d spoken. Huge, he sat at the opposite end of the room, the magnet of the meeting. Medals from some vague military action overseas studded his chest, alongside civic awards.

“The people assembled here tonight belong to the local chapter of Ornithologists Unlimited,” he said. “They’ve been monitoring the condors in this area after reports of changes in the birds’ appearance.”

Hector nodded. “The bigger eyes, the feathered heads.”

“We believe the species is being tinkered with on the genetic level to make them more appealing to the eye. We suspect a secretive environmental group is to blame.”

“Why?”

“Animal lookism. Environmentalists know that a species is easier to protect if it’s physically attractive—it’s difficult to rally support for ugly animals, like the true condor is. Or was.

We are calling this hypothetical group of activists 'FOE,' for 'Friends of the Earth,' and we're assuming it's sponsored by some radical ethical mutual fund. The meeting tonight was called to determine how best to respond to the terrorism of FOE."

One of the ornithologists asked the Mayor-Colonel if he knew any old army buddies who might help lend a hand with these radicals. Someone else suggested deliberately committing an ecological crime, in order to draw them out of the woodwork.

"How much work would be involved in an oil spill?" an elderly man inquired. "Can someone do a costing for a landbound *Valdez*?"

Hector listened to them brainstorm, looked long and hard at the ornithologists and other concerned citizens who'd been summoned by the battle cry, and loathed them through and through. Especially because they were here, sitting around what he still considered his study. Only Loretta didn't look grossly out of place. Loretta and himself.

"I have a suggestion."

He described the old habitat he'd discovered on Sugar Mountain. Perhaps that was a good place to stake out if they wanted to spot these alleged environmentalists manipulating the condor population. His suggestion was met with a motion to investigate the site. Energized, the crowd drained from the room, leaving Loretta and her first and second husbands.

"I didn't know you liked birds," Hector said to the Mayor-Colonel.

"I'm president of over one hundred associations and action groups."

Hector nodded. "I'd like a moment to speak to my former wife."

The Mayor-Colonel eyed him and Loretta, then nodded. "We should have you over for dinner sometime." He marched outside, and Hector saw Rusty dive into the pool and commence doing laps. The dog was never allowed in the pool when he and Loretta lived here. Good Lord, he realized, Rusty had not known how to swim when he was Hector's dog.

"What?" said Loretta.

"I'd like you to convince him to allow our subdivision on Sugar Mountain," Hector told her.

"He'd probably do it just to spite these hypothetical environmentalists," she said. "Go ask him yourself, he'll probably agree to it right here and now. He likes you, for some reason."

"Loretta, I'd like you to do it on my behalf."

She looked at him. "Why?"

He gazed at his surroundings, the house, a sweater with epaulets, a hand grenade paperweight, a photo of the Mayor-Colonel and some federal agent in a suit running a three-legged race together. Outside, Hector could see the Mayor-Colonel keeping pace with the dog as it swam round and round.

"I'm a stranger in this house. I look around and don't know exactly where I am. But the city is different. All I wanted was more time with you, and instead I got subdivisions. At least I can wander through the city and not feel lost. I can look around and see evidence that you and I really were a couple, once upon a time."

"That's what development is all about," she said.

"What do you mean?"

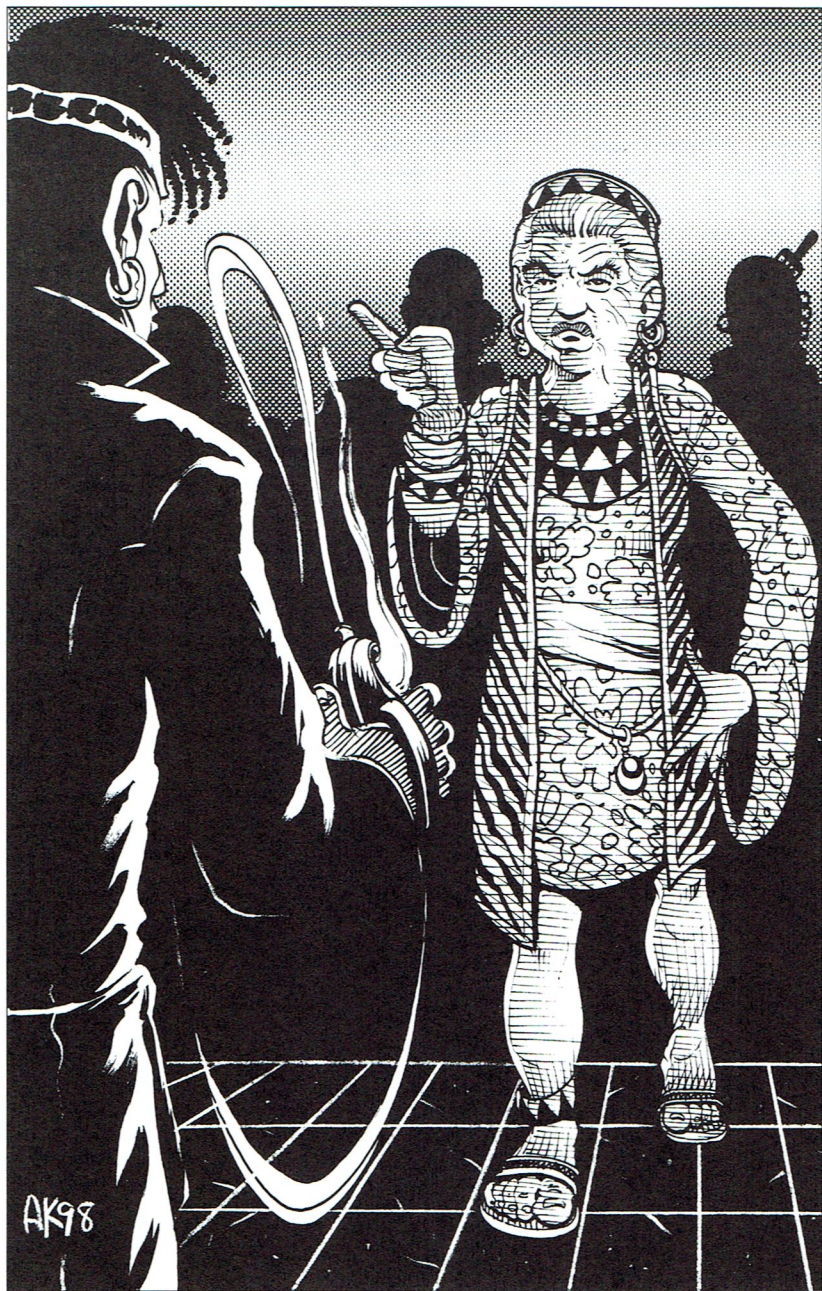
"Imperfect relationships. There aren't enough new people for all the new homes built each year; the housing market depends on new combinations of people to pick up the slack."

"I never thought of it that way," he admitted. "And we can't seem to stop building..."

She walked over then, kissed him briefly on the lips. Before he ruined the moment, he suspected. Outside, he saw Rusty pull out of the pool, sopping, leaping into the arms of the man who had helped him overcome his fear of water, and Hector knew he'd better get out of there before those two looked over and witnessed this moment of recognition, Hector not wanting to confuse or upset the dog. 🍁

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# Keffie and Scragman

Keith Scott

*illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

**K**EFFIE WOKE WITH SUN IN HIS EYES AND THE SMELL of warm urine catching at the back of his throat.

*Damnfuckshit*, he moaned. Why it always happen when Big Ants do shift change? Night shift, every two weeks. Big Ants, his half-brother, do night shift at Reclaim. Ants is big and kicking mean, Keffie reminded himself, and he don't much like ten-year-old half-brother. Specially Ants don't like pissed bed after night shift.

Keffie jumped from bed and swept back the blanket and sheet. He was a slight boy, taut and raw as a rubbed nerve, his black eyes mired in constant disbelief, youngest in a brood that came and went like the tide in the two bedroom Tract townhouse. Keffie was never quite sure where everybody fit. Particularly where he fit in this sea of change. Who amongst the towering ancillary males might be his father?

Everybody's got to have a father, ain't that right?

One time he used to think he had no father. Like the lil' old Lord Jesus who laid down his sweet head. Like Jesus, he was just there with Momma, and no pappa, someone special and fitted to everything. Me and Jesus, he used to think, both with no pappa and a 'maculate birth. He remembered telling this to the other kids when he was about seven or eight. That's when he stopped thinking he was like lil' old Lord Jesus, with no father and all.

Keffie looked down at the wet patch on the sheet. It was about ten inches

across, yellowing at its edges. He kicked off his wet pajama bottoms and scabbled in the bureau drawer for Ants' blow dryer, terror making his fingers fumbly and unsure. On day shift mornings, his half-brother would kick Keffie out of bed first light and Keffie would go to the bathroom so that there was no chance of a wet bed.

Night shift, Keffie was on his own.

He played the hot air from the dryer over the wet spot and watched it dry rapidly. Then he took the piece of chalk he'd scored from his third grade school room and scrubbed it over the yellowy edges, eliminating all signs of his fall from grace.

He heard the door open behind him and froze in dread, thinking it was Ants, *big mean sons-a-bitching Ants*. He waited for the shout and kick.

"Ah ... Keff honey," his mother's voice came from the doorway behind him. "Not again?"

"It's all right, Mom," he said. "I fixed it."

"You know how Antony's like—"

"I said I fixed it, Mom."

His mother came into the room, looked at the sheet closely, then leaned down and sniffed it. She straightened, smiled and gave him a hug. "I'll wash it later. Get dressed, then come have breakfast," she said.

Keffie clung to her, breathing in her essence. Zoe Jaquet was a tall woman with a prideful bearing. There were wispy grey touches at the sides of her carefully combed hair. This morning, as always, serenity rode in her unlined smiling face. Zoe Jaquet was the peg from which

Keffie hung his small life.

Breakfast took little time. Soy flakes and tea.

"What you be doing in school today—?" his mother began.

"Mom," Keffie stopped her. "Teachers still on strike. No school today. Like yesterday, and month before that."

"Oh...?" She seemed a little confused.

Keffie looked at her closely. "You been taking your medicine, Mom?"

"Well, of course I have, honey," Zoe laughed. "Can't do without my medicine, can I?" Keffie weighed her words. It had happened before—with unhappy, even terrifying, results for him. Last time he had to call Tante Cos, the healer, and the memory stayed with him clear and spooked because Tante Cos scared him all to hell when she became a healer and did her magical healing things.

"No, you can't miss your medicine," he said finally, worriedly. A few minutes later, Keffie looked back and waved to his mother as he scrambled down the concrete steps of their townhouse.

The Tract was laid out in quadrangles formed by two-story row houses. Each quad had a laid carpet of tiger turf and a corner of beat-proof playground pieces. Except every fourth quad. Every fourth quad was large enough to hold a basketball court or mini ball diamond instead of the playground pieces.

Social planning.

Keffie could hear the tap-tap-tap of a basketball from the next quad and he hurried around the corner,

then slowed as he carefully checked the identity of the eight or ten boys playing on the court. He knew all of them, particularly Bigass Lonnie who never missed a chance to beat on him, and a couple of others he didn't much give a shit for. Keffie made as if he was going to walk right on by, trying to walk cool and uncaring, like not being specially interested.

"Hey, Keffie. Wanta play?"

It was Carson who called to him, the white-trash kid who lived next door to him. Carson was a freckle-faced boy topped by a shock of red hair, part of a hillbilly family with bottomless Irish thirsts and mean fighting spirits. These two elements brought the TractSecs to their townhouse every weekend—regular as clockwork, every weekend.

"Maybe," Keffie said to Carson. "Who winning?"

"You play other side, with Carson," Bigass Lonnie said smiling, "So I get you good, momma-boy."

The play was more a test of survival than skill. Keffie used to spend nearly as much time sprawled on the court as in the swirl of the game, picking up his daily allotment of bruises and scrapes. Tract basketball was an outlet, fiercely cathartic.

Lately Keffie was beginning to show an eel-like ability to slip around the heavy hits, to not be there when Lonnie aimed his lardy ass at him; or to be under the basket at the right time.

"Way to go, Kef," Carson would call out, and doom Keffie to redoubled efforts by Lonnie and the other thugs to maim him. He was torn between showing gratitude to

Carson for his support or trying to ignore him. He paid dearly and immediately for Carson's praise. So it seemed wiser to ignore the scruffy redhead. Besides, he didn't much like getting too close to Carson anyway.

"Sakes. Soap company go broke with that crew," his mother had summed up their neighbors one day. Not unkindly, just a statement of visible and sniffable fact. In Zoe Jaquet's world, cleanliness outranked godliness, and Keffie faced each newborn day with a scrubbed body, clean clothes, and Zoe's ever-flowing love.

Even on her *funny* days.

Play on the basketball court stopped when Slogo, the beefy TractSec, heaved into view, glacial movement rippling his vast blue uniform, eyeing each player with oozing distrust. Slogo wasn't the Sec's real name, but Tract kids went by first impressions, and Slogo he had been from day one.

"Who put rock through window in J-Quad?" Slogo rumbled at them. The kids looked from one to the other with phony concern.

"J-Quad?" Lonnie spoke up, "Nobody here from J-Quad—"

"Din't ask where you from, smartass," Slogo growled. "Who put that rock?"

There was a chorus of denials. Slogo held up his hands. "No matter," he said. "I tole Scragman. He find out real quick—"

"Scragman?" Carson asked. "There's a Scragman here today?"

"Center quad," Slogo said. "He be real interested about rock in J-Quad. Wait and see."

The game was forgotten. Scragmen

were a source of endless fascination for Tract kids. Scragmen took care of things. They were the enforcers for the TonTons and the TonTons ran most everything.

"Think he's here about that rock?" Lonnie worried as they ran toward the central square.

"Naw," Carson scoffed. "Too small thing to bother TonTons."

Keffie agreed. TonTons, Big Ants always say, make things go real good. Ants get his job at Reclaim through speaking to TonTons and paying squeeze.

Center square held market stalls and booths set up by community members with the interest and product to operate them. Used clothes, furniture, appliances, toys, bruised and rotting fruit and vegetables—all were grist for the battered booth tables. But now a crowd was ringed around a whip-saw figure in black leather, scalp shaven to the skin, skull-like Afroasian features, menacing.

"It's Jeddo-san," Carson whispered with awe.

Keffie had never seen Jeddo-san. Heard about him, yeah. Who hadn't? But never seen him before. He was startled to see his half-brother, Big Ants, talking to the Scragman. That's why Ants be late getting home after night shift, Keffie thought. Talking to Jeddo-san. Making big with scragman.

Keffie wormed his way through the people and joined Carson and Lonnie. Together the three of them crouched down at the feet of the crowd and carefully examined the Scragman, particularly paying attention to the small flat disc he held lightly in his right hand, metallic

grey, palm-sized and palm-shaped.

It was his scragger.

Keffie could clearly see the tiny control buttons on the underside of the disc. Jeddo-san's fingers were lazily sweeping over them, caressing them, feeding in the commands that controlled the silken loop played out from the disc, making the loop sweep the ground around the TonTon. Keffie knew that the soft silk could change instantly to razor-edged wire, or switch to a rope-like braid forming itself into a noose, or a cutter coated with diamond dust, or it could become a conductor. He'd even seen one cut through a steel rail, spitting high energy particles for a meter on each side.

There was little a scragger couldn't do. Or *enforce*.

It all be a matter of rights, Keffie thought. *Rights laws had undercut most enforcement*, he remembered hearing the olders say. Not any sense depending on Secs or real law to do the job with rights around. So Tract management do same as everybody else. Get TonTons with their scraggers to keep order. No fuss, no muss. Take care of everything real quick. Scrag justice. All with no questions.

Slogo, the TractSec, pushed his way through the crowd to be greeted curtly by Jeddo-san. "Kid there," Slogo said nodding toward Lonnie, "know about rock in J-Quad."

Jeddo-san looked at the boys with bored interest. The silken cord, about as wide as wrapping string, lifted up from the ground and climbed Lonnie's left knee. Keffie could hear a faint hum coming from it and he shrank away from Lonnie.



"This one?" the Scragman asked, still bored.

"That him," Slogo agreed.

"I din't do that rock, Jeddo-san," Lonnie whined, now suddenly anxious. The loop opened abruptly and dropped around Lonnie's shoulders pulling the boy to his feet, drawing him toward the Scragman in the center of the circle.

"Who say?" Jeddo-san asked. Something began to stir in those flat eyes and Lonnie caught it. He squirmed, trying to wriggle out of the clasp of the scragger noose. There was a hissing sound and dozens of silken strands wrapped the boy tightly from neck to waist. "Just stay still, kid," Jeddo-san ordered and then he repeated. "Who say?"

Lonnie looked about him wildly. The crowd stared back at him with little sympathy, savoring the mounting tension, waiting for the mouthy kid to get his. Lonnie was not a favorite in the Tract, and by Tract rules, he deserved everything that was about to come to him.

Keffie watched as Lonnie's eyes fill with tears, filling so much that Lonnie nearly missed seeing Tante Cos join the circle. But the sight of the brightly decked-out healer finally came through his tears and Keffie saw the relief break out on Lonnie's face as he saw a possible way out.

"You looking for edgers, Jeddo-san?" he asked the scragman.

"Maybe."

"One just join us," Lonnie said pointing with a free foot. "Longtime edger. Sure as hell she be one."

Keffie squirmed. He liked Tante Cos even though he feared her. She

come to their house real quick when Momma got funny. Some times she give kids all-day jawbreakers to suck on. Tante Cos been in Tracts long time, a whole heap of time. Still ... she be no edger. No way.

You got to be fifty to be an edger. That's when you *win a country life*. Supposed to be a big windup to a life of living in the Tracts. Go out to uncrowded edges. People liked it so much they never came back, even for a visit, TonTons told them. How can people never have time for a visit? Or a vidcall? Or a letter? Tract people feared the edges, feared it with passion.

Tante be no edger, Keffie told himself.

To confirm his view, he looked at the healer. Everything about Tante Cos smiled. Her gaudy clothes, her full-blown figure, her rich throaty voice.

"Sheeze," Tante Cos rumbled at Lonnie, still trussed by the scragger string. "What's got into you, boy?" She turned from him to Jeddo-san. "This badass kid for sure—"

"You pushing time, Mother?"

"What you think, Scragman?" Tante shook her heavy uplift and rolled her eyes suggestively. "There be some round here would say that a bald-faced lie. Want to try, Scragman?"

The crowd laughed.

It was a mistake, Keffie thought. Scragmen don't shine to being laughed at, or losing face. The silken threads hissed off Lonnie and snaked along the concrete toward Tante.

"I ask you a question, old woman." Jeddo-san snapped.

"I'm thirty-eight. I got plastic to prove it." Tante placed her feet firmly apart and boldly faced the Scragman. The crowd grew silent with expectation.

"Boys be boys," Tante Cos went on, nodding at Lonnie, "but this boy work real hard at it. Rest of them are pretty good kids."

Keffie was surprised. Tante Cos had no reason to love the boys. Daily they would mock her, falling in behind her, aping her hip-swinging sashay, replaying her daily passage through the quads with telling accuracy.

"Forget the boy," Jeddo-san hissed. "What about you, old woman?"

"I tole you—"

"You tole me nothing." Jeddo-san flipped his left hand past his jacket pocket and palmed a second scragger. Their was a gasp of excitement from the crowd. Two-handed scragging! This was to be a real show. Automatically they enlarged the circle to give the TonTon more manoeuvring room.

Two singing loops now bracketed Tante Cos. She was startled at first then seemed to relax, but she kept her eyes on the face of the leather-clad enforcer.

"We don't have no fight, Jeddo-san," she began in a soft voice. "You and me, we have no trouble."

"That you say, old woman."

BOTH LOOPS BECAME AGITATED, BUZZING ominously, darting around her. Suddenly the right loop lifted and snatched the elaborate golden hairpiece from Tante Cos' head, revealing short gray hair.

The two scragger loops tossed the wig about in the air playfully. The crowd ooh-ed and ah-ed at Jeddo-san's mastery. Finally the left hand scragger held the wig aloft while the right hand snipped at it, giving it a haircut.

There was outright laughter and then clapping.

Abruptly the wig was dropped and the two scraggers descended on Tante Cos and began pulling, cutting, ripping at her clothes. The healer tried to fend them off at first, but finally stood still in her undergarments, defiantly glaring at her tormentor.

"Why you do this, Jeddo-san?"

"Because you lie, old woman."

"You never lie, Jeddo-san?" she said. "Even a small lie?"

The hissing loops became agitated. One settled on Tante Cos' size forty-four bra, ripping it from her and tossing it in the air. The crowd hooted their enjoyment with glinty-eyed anticipation.

"What we got here, edger?" Jeddo-san snapped. The right loop settled around one of her large breasts and ripped it away. The silicone cup with its stick-em edges fell to the pavement and spun for a moment. Tante's real breast sagged in a withered flap nearly to her navel. The companion scragger took away the other false breast.

The crowd screamed its enjoyment. This was a show that would be told and retold countless times. Keffie, still crouched at the feet of the laughing people, felt confused, nearly sick.

Jeddo-san had no right to do this to

Tante Cos. Even if she be an edger. Tante Cos do many good thing for these people. Tante Cos don't deserve what Jeddo-san was doing. Tante Cos be a good person...

The scragger loops descended suggestively to her lace panties, coyly pulling them down, then pulling them back up over Tante Cos' generous hips several times. Finally they ripped them away and the healer stood naked. Again the people hooted their enjoyment.

Jeddo-san held up his hand for silence. One loop dropped around Tante Cos' head and tightened around her throat. For the first time terror bloomed in the healer's eyes. She looked about the ring of onlookers, seeking help, getting none.

"Maybe we save time and money, old woman," Jeddo-san hissed.

Keffie got to his feet. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he knew he had to do something.

He shouted at Big Ants. "Stop it, Ants!" His half-brother looked at him without recognition, mouth slack, beyond thought.

Keffie launched himself at Jeddo-san.

"Leave her be, Jeddo-san," he yelled between tears, beating at the TonTon with weak fists.

Instantly the other loop fell around his neck, lifting him to his tiptoes, lining him up beside Tante Cos, whose face was now purpling. Keffie tried to scream, tried to breathe. The loop choked off everything...

"What's going on here?"

Zoe Jaquet stormed into the circle, eyes wild with disapproval.

Keffie recognized the wild look in her eyes. He watched as his mother pushed Jeddo-san so hard that he nearly fell. The flat eyes of the scragman flared with ferocity. Anyone else but Zoe Jaquet would have quailed.

"Stay outta this!" he hissed at her.

"Go to hell, Jeddo-san," she flared back at him. "Din't you ever have a mother?"

The flat eyes wavered.

"Well, din't you?" she persisted.

"I'm warning you—"

"Take your filthy strings off them both!" She pushed hard at him again.

It was a long moment before the loops left both Tante Cos and Keffie. The boy ran to his mother, standing protectively in front of her. Jeddo-san started to move around him for a clear shot at her. That's when Big Ants finally spoke up.

"Maybe you better leave it, Jeddo-san," he said.

There were mutters of agreement from the circle. Sanity was returning. Jeddo-san seemed to be weighing the mood, gauging the possibility of his regaining his edge of fear over them.

"No skin off'n my ass," he said at last.

He pocketed the left hand scragger and spat on the tiger turf in disgust. Then he elbowed his way viciously out of the circle and strode off.

Zoe Jaquet looked at her neighbors with profound disgust. Some of the women were stung into action by her fierce eyes. They helped Tante Cos gather up her clothes and the pitiful

remnants of her false youth. They held them out to the healer uncertainly.

Zoe turned on the rest.

"Go home," she slashed at them as they shuffled about, guilty eyes on the ground, eyes everywhere but on her face. "Go home and pray to the Almighty God to forgive your

miserable souls!"

The circle melted shamefacedly, in twos and threes, until there were no more. That's when Zoe reached for Keffie and hugged him tightly as Big Ants looked on bleakly.

"You did good, Keff," she whispered to him. ♣

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* KEITH SCOTT lives in Toromto with his soul mate. Billie, mother of their five children and defender of the truth. He was born in Manchuria, went to school in Korea, Japan, Canada, and the USA during the first half of the century, and now lives in retirement in Toronto. This is Keith's seventeenth story to see print.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN has been described as a self-styled Renaissance man. Besides drawing and painting, he has added sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, jewelry-making, and music composition to his repertoire of superhuman skills. He also does artwork on commission, draws and inks comics professionally, and is a cosmically cool guy. (Handsome, too.)

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AK98

# Shika

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*illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

**I** HATED HER.

More than I hated Pierre.

Pierre, now he was clear, easy to see. His beauty was his simplicity, his purity of thought and purpose: sure you hated the bastard, but you had to admire him, too, scrambling across the rugged, uneven hills of what the poor deluded asshole thought was his own country, using twenty-year-old weapons against our Steyr self-targeting assault rifles, wearing those ridiculous *Nationaliste* uniforms as if they were a shield that would protect him against anything, though they were no hell on stopping our flechettes. Yeah, he was stupid all right—but straight, as straight as you can get. You and he knew each other, better than you’ve ever known anybody else, because that’s the test, that’s the only real test, putting yourself there, with the few other assholes who dare, believing in something stupid like your own country, in a world that doesn’t believe in anything anymore. That’s the kind of stupidity that’s worth admiring, that’s worth having: daring those crosshairs to shake your belief, challenging that trigger finger to squeeze you out of your resolve, welcoming that round as if it was a special lover, not just a dumb lay like Shika...

Now don’t get me wrong.

Shika’s out there all alone on point.

And she’s lasted for over three months—not an easy thing to do. She’s as mean as they come, her pinched-up little face wagging back and forth as she hunts, her body small and low to the ground, swaying from side to side as she shuffles from cover to cover. I’ve seen her grease more than her share of Pierres and it’s weird, because she really hates them, not with my distant, admiring kind of hate, but personal, like they all did something awful to her last night in the woodshed, and now she’s going to make the bastards pay and pay and pay. You gotta

appreciate all that slow, seething hate walking up front for you, a giant scythe sweeping your path clear.

She was that way when I met her back in basic, eighteen months ago, a nasty piece of business, breathing dark anger, ready to explode. I was glad when our orders came and I thought I'd seen the last of her, she going off up north to Chibougamau where there was lots of heavy shit happening, while I pulled soft duty down south in the valley.

I never expected to see her again. But I did.

I remember when she transferred in, sitting across from me in the barracks, studying me when she thought I wasn't watching her, sharpening that long knife she always carried in her boot, running it up and down the whetstone, looking as if she was wondering how much of an edge she'd have to put on it to slice right through my neck with one stroke.

Seeing her again that day, I felt something inside me tighten up, and I knew I hated her still, even though she saved my life every day since just by being there, walking the point, rolling her hatred in front of her like a boulder.

WE'D DRAWN RECON PATROL AGAIN, another hot spot in the foothills of the Laurentians.

Why us? Why always send us into the worst possible shit? We drew this kind of stuff twice as much as any other squad. It was like somebody back at HQ had it in for us. But if it troubled anyone else in our squad, they didn't complain. Instead, they seemed to like it, to

savor the opportunity to raise our kill ratio.

We were strung out in a ragged line. I caught sight of Shika about ten meters ahead and a little too far to my left, so I picked up the pace, edging back in her direction. Occasionally I could see Angela between us, flitting in and out of cover, pale and wraith-like, difficult to spot, bending tree and shrub to her will, folding them around her like a cloak. Behind me there was Cash, then, in the middle of the pack, Sarge with his little dog, Tremblay. I could never quite figure out what Tremblay's story was, a clean-shaven regular army guy, betraying nothing, not really part of the unit, an *observer*, as Sarge called him, always scribbling in those little blue notebooks he carried around, attached to us in some way that was never made quite clear, observing God know what as he hunted his own people. It gave me the creeps whenever he was behind me, like he was *observing* me personally, even though there wasn't a god-damned thing I could think of that was worth observing.

We moved downhill, and the tree cover thinned a bit, then turned into a stand of birches, branches arching overhead to form a canopy. We broke into a copse. It was quiet and beautiful, flanked with thick undergrowth that looked like it had been cultivated, the duff soft and yielding under our boots, a shaft of sunlight slanting through the gap in the tree cover and into our eyes...

*Nice spot*, I thought. *For an ambush.* Then Pierre hit us.

I was knocked off my feet the instant they opened up, half a dozen



slugs slamming into my flak jacket, their AK-47s making an awful racket. I rolled on the ground, wheezing and gasping, trying to catch the breath that had been hammered from my lungs, fighting off the sharp pain of what I figured was a broken rib or two. Beside me, Cash lay on the ground, blood oozing from a hole in his throat, eyes open, dead as dead can get. I heard shouts over the gunfire, some I recognized, some I didn't. Heavy boots stamped on the ground, crashing through the underbrush, then the muffled thump of low-yield ordinance, mostly smoke, it seemed, to confuse and hide. But I wasn't scared; I didn't even care if I'd been hit. The only thing I felt was anger, anger at being on the ground, at the incompetence of Pierre not killing me when he had the chance. I wanted to make the bastard pay for his mistake. Gritting my teeth, I pushed myself to my feet, my Steyr cradled in my fists—and gasped as pain spiked my ribs again; my eyes teared up.

I blinked until my vision cleared. Gunfire had become sporadic, the confusion and smoke still making it difficult to know who to kill now, an occasional burst, sounds moving off to the left. Though I couldn't be sure, I guessed that Pierre had more or less hightailed it, Sarge and the rest of the squad chasing after him. I was alone.

Or thought I was.

Danby had been standing so still I hadn't noticed him. But there he was, off to my right, his piece gone, his eyes glassy, unfocused, seeing something I couldn't, seeing somewhere else, staring, maybe, at the place he'd rather be.

About to walk.

I'd seen it before, seen maybe a dozen or more in my last two squads.

It was always the same.

They'd pull their leads, drop their weapons, and disappear quietly into the bush, following Pierre mostly, sometimes just wandering off, going God knows where, thinking God knows what. Even the ones brought back were blanks, shells, their brains wiped clean of anything but this need to walk, as if they didn't know anything anymore except how to put one foot in front of another, step after goddamn step. Sometimes we'd find them—walkers, I mean—who'd walked until they couldn't walk any further because they'd fallen into a ravine and broken a leg or turned an ankle on a root or something, lying there in the dirt, covered with scratches and cuts where branches and twigs had whipped their faces, usually dead, but not always, sometimes legs still pushing against the ground, digging little channels in the earth, moving them forward, inch by terrible inch...

The army says walkers are Pierre's doing, some kind of bio-engineered stuff, a virus maybe, though they haven't isolated it yet, even though they've had two years and hundreds of walkers to experiment on. The masks and suits they used to give us didn't seem to be any damn good, and after a few weeks, we gave up on them. All they know is that once you've got it, you're gone, there's no return: *irreversible cortical damage*, meaning it eats away at your brain until you're nothing but a vegetable, an empty husk where someone used

to live.

And there was Danby, his piece gone, his eyes glassy with that look walkers get, me watching him, not offing him right then and there like I was supposed to, the way it said in our orders, because there was something ... wrong. A weird nagging feeling that told me this wasn't right. He wasn't going anywhere fast, so I just moved my rifle along, keeping it trained on him, thinking it odd, not Danby at all, that there was something really out of whack, because he was nothing like those other poor dreamy bastards I'd seen walk, nothing like them at all. Sure, he was crazy as a loon, but he just wasn't the type, you know, he just didn't have the smell. None of us did in this squad.

And I realized maybe that was it. He was the first walker since they'd cobbled together our squad six months ago. In that time I'd almost forgotten about walking. I tightened my finger on the trigger, about to waste him, thinking, *Oh well, there goes our perfect record—*

—and I was on the ground, the trees above me spinning out of control, my head pounding and my ears ringing so loud I couldn't hear a thing.

I squeezed my eyes shut but that only made it worse, so I opened them.

Shika was standing over me, rifle balanced in one hand, its muzzle almost touching my nose, her finger still inside the trigger guard. She wasn't looking at me—she was watching something else that I couldn't see.

I wondered what she could be watching, in a sort of detached, dreamy way, as if it really wasn't me

there, getting this weird feeling that it was important that I know what she was so intent on.

So I thought hard even though my head still pounded.

Then I remembered Danby.

She must have been watching him, I realized, the crazy little bitch, staring at him with this puzzled expression on her screwed-up face, an expression I'd never seen her wear before.

And that's all she did.

Even though she knew letting walkers go meant court-martial, still doing nothing, just watching, while I concentrated on a tendon in her forearm moving in and out, in and out, as she ran her finger up and down that hair trigger. But she didn't squeeze it, only stood there, as Danby wandered off into the bush.

She looked after him for a moment, long after he must have been gone, then turned suddenly to stare at me, her eyes burning with something I couldn't understand, something I couldn't quite place, staring along the barrel of her weapon right into my face.

A long dark stare that nailed me where I was.

Like she wanted something, not begging or pleading, but *insisting* on an answer from me.

Then she was gone.

Faster than you could imagine anyone moving, without sound or motion, just gone, leaving me there on the ground, head pounding, pain searing my side, scared that maybe I had just answered her question without meaning to.

WHEN WE GOT BACK, ALL OF DANBY'S stuff was gone, his locker cleared out, his pictures taken down.

Like he'd never been there at all.

The next day, a stiff was waiting for us, a Lieutenant-Colonel straight from HQ, to give us the drill, wanting to know who saw Danby, what happened, when he'd gone, what he said just before going, how he looked, the whole routine, asking his stupid questions over and over, making my brain ache so bad I had to close my eyes and put my head in my hands, my fingers feeling that big lump on the back of my neck.

It was all wrong.

And they knew it, somehow.

Danby bothered them more than he should have, more than it had ever bothered them before. With my other outfits, some pencil-pusher had shown up with the standard forms, ten minutes, talk into the mike, thank you very much, done. But this time it was different, more important, and Colonel Stiff was really annoyed.

It bothered me too, though I didn't say anything then, because that'd be inviting trouble. Something was really cracked about this whole thing, Shika giving me strange looks ever since, and that whore Angela too, whenever I saw them together as they were most of the time now, whispering to each other.

Before Danby, there had been some silent stream connecting them, an underground movement they shared for God knows what reason, maybe because they were the only two women in the squad. But now, since Danby, they'd become inseparable, day and night, together every

moment like—like lovers or something.

Why did it all of a sudden start to get under my skin?

I mean, I hated Shika more than all these other sorry bastards, a trained performer, doing her duty without feeling or remorse, killing efficiently and without respect for those she killed, in any way she could, cool and machine-like, Pierre an insect to be crushed beneath her heel. And Angela was just a big nothing, an empty space, in danger of being blown away by the next stiff breeze. It rattled you the way she appeared and disappeared without a sound, even around the barracks. Almost as if she wasn't really there. The one, hard and predatory, a slow careful, unforgiving stalker; the other a phantom, a waking dream, smoke.

Angela and Shika.

I ignored them, but it gave me the creeps anyway.

And for once I agreed: everyone was right to be all worked up, because there was definitely something wrong, something about this outfit that made it wrong to do what Danby did.

I OPENED MY EYES; IT WAS DARK AND THE ground was cold and hard beneath my thin sheets, and I knew I wasn't alone. I rolled over.

Shika hung over me, a gargoyle in the moonless dark, rain dripping down that long nose of hers to splash on my face.

"Did you tell them?"

I didn't say anything.

"Did you tell them?" she hissed at me again.

"Tell them what?"

"About Danby?"

I shook my head.

She squatted there next to me in the cold and wet, her face a crumpled map of shadows and broken edges, her hooded eyes no longer focused on mine, but staring now at an invisible place.

"Shika?"

She looked startled, as if she'd forgotten I was there. Then she got this weird look in her eyes. "I want to know," she said suddenly.

"Know what, Shika?"

"In basic. A pretty boy like you could've had anyone. Why me? Why'd you sleep with me?"

The question caught me off guard. I looked up at her, at that ugly, deformed little face with its hard lines and unforgiving angles. I started to say, "I heard you gave good head," or, "I didn't have enough energy for a struggle." But for some reason the words stuck in my throat, wouldn't come out with that little face poking right into mine. "Dunno," I said instead, shrugging, trying to sound unconcerned, uninterested.

She peered at me intently, and I could feel her reaching deep down into me, trying to find the real reason, trying to pull it out. I looked away. "Honest to God, I don't."

She blinked, once, twice, then began to push herself off her haunches.

"Shika?" She stopped and looked at me; my heart thumped beneath the weight of my rain-soaked fatigues. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

She bit her lower lip, then shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Why not?" I was surprised at the

sudden surge of anger I felt, at the rising volume of my words. "Is it because of that bitch Angela? *Is it?*"

She shrugged. "No," she said, simply, quietly, with the same finality with which I'd once seen her slice open the throat of an unlucky Pierre. She shifted her weight slightly, showing me what I hadn't seen before, the dull metallic gleam of the knife in her hand.

"You weren't so choosy back in basic," I said, watching the cold rain run off the tip of that blade.

"Neither were you."

"Fuck you," I said, trying not to let my voice shake, still watching the knife, hunkering back beneath my tarp and away from the rain. "Go back to your Angela."

Without a word she slipped the knife into her boot and stood up, poncholess and insensible to the rain. "Yeah," she said. "I will."

And as she strode off into the darkness, it felt as if she had somehow stolen part of me, taken it with her so that I would never be whole again.

ANOTHER WEEK PASSED AND WE managed to stay clear of each other. It wasn't until we were on recon, two days out, cold and tired and bored in the hills north of Lac Saint Jean, that we spoke again. We'd been humping through terrain worn down by ages of erosion, covered by enormous pine and fir.

There hadn't been much action in the last few weeks, just some hit and run stuff, nothing important. We hadn't even had a casualty, though we had to smoke some *Nationalistes* out of an abandoned shack a few days

ago. They were hungry and ragged, and the poor bastards almost looked grateful. But to Command, one Pierre meant a hundred more, so they sent us up into the hills to check it out, chasing after imaginary units because there was nothing better to do.

I was supposed to be doing a wide sweep on our eastern flank, but I dragged my ass west instead, over towards where Angela was patrolling, because my neck had been itching all morning, a light persistent tingling, telling me to go over there. It took me about half an hour to work my way round to where I guessed she was; it would have been much faster, but she had her gift, and though my neck itched wildly, urging me on, telling me I was headed the right way, I wasn't sure I could get close enough to the bitch without stepping on her first.

So I went slowly, carefully, passing as silently as I could from shadow to shadow—

—and almost stumbled when I caught sight of Angela.

She was standing beside a shallow creek, the sun beating down on her, no cover nearby, rifle and helmet at her feet, her thin hair not braided but out and hanging down between those narrow shoulders, strands moving slightly in the breeze. I was a good twenty meters away—and I knew she was about to walk then, because if she wasn't, she'd have known by now I watched her, and would have vanished before I could do anything.

Instead, she stood there, solid, more substantial than I'd ever seen her look before, staring north—I imagined her eyes, big and round and

unfocused, great big pie-in-the-sky eyes, a walker's eyes.

I raised my rifle and sighted, thinking, strangely, not about her, but about Shika, hard, unbreakable Shika, while I waited for those first few steps, for my chance to fire.

Shika.

Like the callus on my thumb, dead and tough and unfeeling.

*Maybe, just maybe*, I thought, *I won't wait for her to take that first step.*

I caressed the trigger as if it were a charm, pulling it back ever so slowly, savoring the moment, tasting its satisfaction—

Then froze. Became stone.

As dead-still as I could, because my itch was back and shouting DON'T MOVE, DON'T BREATHE, telling me BEHIND, BEHIND YOU, so I turned, slowly as I could, centimeter by centimeter, till I could see what I knew would be there, Shika, her piece pointed at me, its muzzle making small hypnotic arcs, a snake about to strike, needing only the smallest of pressures from her finger to stitch across my stomach. Beside her lay Tremblay, his throat cut cleanly, blood still trickling onto last autumn's leaves beneath him. She had this insane look in those hard, grey eyes, like she'd lost it or something, but I knew it wasn't that, couldn't be that, with her standing the way she was.

And then I thought, *I'm going to die*, and began shaking, though I'd never been scared before.

I wanted to talk to her, to tell her—what? I wasn't sure.

*"Shika..."* I had this crazy urge to say to her, to those mad eyes staring

through me, fixing me where I stood, a bug with a pin in it. But nothing came out.

Then she fired.

She didn't blink those eyes of hers, never took them off mine, just squeezed off the burst that brought Angela down in midstride as she stepped into the brook, tearing through her back and spraying out her front with her guts, shattering a small tree on the other side of the stream.

Shika closed her eyes then, at last, and turned and walked away, unhurriedly, not bothering to duck and weave as she'd always done out here in the bush, but straight up and stiff-legged, like it was something she hadn't done in a long time, something she wasn't used to doing.

I WAITED OUTSIDE.

She'd been hustled right in, still in her fatigues and recon gear, while I hung around outside the barracks across from the mess hall where they took her, stripping my piece, meticulously cleaning and laying each part on a small sheet of plywood I'd found nearby.

Cleaning and waiting to see if she'd come out, to see if they'd call me in.

People came and went.

Clerks and officers, even the CO, and the same stiff from HQ who'd been here when Danby walked.

What would she tell them, about Tremblay and Angela?

What could she tell them?

I waited until it got late and the lights went on in the mess, but they never called for me, and she never

came out.

"DID YOU LIKE ANGELA?"

It was dark in the barracks, and I could barely hear the whisper, but I knew right away who it was.

"Like her? Shit, I didn't even know her. How the hell could I like her?"

Sitting on Danby's bunk, I could make out Shika's squat form, and though I couldn't see her face, her shoulders looked tired and hunched.

"I liked her," she said.

I felt a sudden stab of anger. "Then why'd you waste her?"

I could feel her coil, as if she were about to come at me. But she didn't. Instead she answered, "Because she loved me," just like that.

I thought then that she had snapped, had lost it, that all this shit they'd piled on us had finally made her go over the edge, that maybe she really was insane.

"She asked me to," she said when I didn't say anything, and it sounded like she was asking for my forgiveness. "She made me promise, and I did—"

"Yeah," I said stupidly.

"—'cause she said she loved me."

We both sat there in the dark for a minute, before her voice came to me softly again. "We're special, you know."

"Special?"

"Yeah. Special." She shifted her weight and I could hear the bunk creak; it sounded loud, and I wondered if anyone else was awake listening to this. "You should know that. You've been here since the beginning. Can't you see we're special?"

"I don't see anything special about

us," I whispered to her. "We're just a bunch of shit-kickers, Shika, too much trouble on our own maybe, so they stick us together, you know, to minimize the problems."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Why do you think the brass is so pissed off? This squad isn't supposed to have walkers. That's why. I didn't know it before Danby walked, but when he did, I knew it wasn't ... *right* ... you know? It didn't *fit*. It wasn't supposed to happen."

Somewhere down inside me I could feel muscles tightening. "Yeah, so what? We've all seen our share of walkers. What's the big deal?"

She shook her head. "Don't you see? Nothing happens by accident in the army. Nothing. It's that way 'cause they wanted it to be that way. Understand?"

"No, I—"

"Don't be an asshole," she hissed at me. "All you gotta do is watch. Why do you think they're making this stink? It's 'cause we're their prize guinea pigs—or were until *this*." I could hear pain in her voice, and it startled me, because it was something I'd never thought I'd hear from her. "Did you know," she said, me still hearing the strain in that voice of hers, "that we've had the best kill ratio for the last five months? And not a single walker the whole time."

"Now this, Danby and Angela, this is making them blow smoke outta their assholes. When I went in there, I thought they were going to crucify me, you know. But they asked hardly anything about Angela, and nothing about old Tremblay, they don't even

care about him, just about me. 'How are you? How did you feel about Angela? Does this upset you? Does this depress you?' and on and on and on, and I'm thinking, why are they asking me, you know, and not wondering about why I offed her in the first place.

"And I start to notice things, the way they keep looking into these little blue notebooks, Tremblay's notebooks, while they ask things, and flip through files, thick files, these medical corps guys there, not doctors, but psychiatrist types, one I remember from awhile ago who interviewed me just before they transferred me here. And get this. One guy even asks, 'Where was *Doctor* Tremblay while this was happening?' Can you believe that shit? Doctor Tremblay? He was a goddamn doctor!"

"Maybe the guy made a mistake, Shika."

"No. He didn't. 'Cause the others looked at him sharp, like he'd fucked up bad, not like he'd made a little mistake." The way she said it, I knew she believed. "No, he knew what he was saying, 'cause they're the ones that put Tremblay there in the first place, to watch us, to spy on us, to take his notes. They're the ones that put us together, you, me, Angela, Danby, Cash, all of us, even Sarge."

"Why? Why us?"

She shrugged. "Who knows?" She leaned forward until her head almost touched mine. "Maybe it's 'cause we're all sick twists," she said slowly, carefully watching how I'd react, but I didn't move a muscle. "Maybe we're like puzzles with a piece missing—the thing that makes walkers want to walk. Maybe something inside of us

is stunted, or not there, and so we can't walk. Or at least that's what the army thought."

It was my turn to shrug. "An awful lot of maybes," I said.

She studied my face for a moment, then asked, "Why do you hate yourself?"

A jagged flash of anger blinded me, and I began to rise; but before I could lift myself, Shika was on me, knocking my arms out from under me and pinning me to the bed, folding me in my sheets as if it were a cocoon. I struggled, letting out a wordless cry of frustration as I lay tangled in the sheets; but it was useless, and so I let myself go limp, forcing myself to be calm, letting the rage leech away.

She made a strange sound then, a dog bark, and it was a moment before I recognized it for what it was: a laugh. "We're part of the experiment," she said. "Their search for that missing piece that'll stop Pierre's fever. We hate ourselves so much, we can't think of anything else but dying. We're the exact sort they wanted, 'cause we conditioned ourselves better'n they ever coulda."

THEY LAID OUT A PATTERN OF SUPPRESSING fire around us that chewed up great big chunks of earth and showered them down on our heads. It sounded like an old Gustaff launcher with anti-tank rounds because of the way they detonated only after burrowing into the ground. Using it now seemed absurd, ludicrous, the same as killing an ant with a howitzer. An awful lot of trouble, an awful waste of energy, to use it on us, so unlike Pierre's normal sparing use of ordinance. What could

he be thinking?

Crawling a few meters, I peeked over the lip of the crater and tried to spot their placement, where they'd dug in on the hillside, but it was hard to see because it was buried deep in the trees and creeping shadows. I looked quickly to either side, curious more than for any other reason, wondering what had happened to the other squad that was with us, but couldn't see much of anything except for a few big holes where the shells had struck, an uprooted tree, and twisted and burnt pieces of debris.

I let myself slide back down into the crater next to Shika, Pettis and what was left of Sarge.

"Well," Pettis asked, calm as always. "See anything?"

"Nah."

Pettis nodded, idly moving a piece of Sarge back and forth with the toe of his boot. He didn't look scared at all, just kind of aware for a change, that sleepy look gone from his face, at peace I guess, as if he'd settled something with himself. He smiled at me, and I looked at him, his young face red and scrubbed, and realized I'd never looked closely at him before, never really looked at any of them.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'd better get going." He smiled again, a warm, knowing smile, and winked, crazy bastard, winked at us. He crawled to the edge of the crater, teetered on the brink for a moment, then was gone.

Shika stared at the sky, lying there on her back, but still wouldn't look at me.

I heard the distant sound of first one, then two, semis opening up, and the distinctive reply of Pettis' piece.



One of the semis suddenly fell silent, then the other, and all was quiet again.

A moment later the ground rocked with the impact of another strike not too far off, a dull thud and whistling of fragments, followed by a shower of dirt and small stones.

I brushed the crap from where it had fallen on Shika's face. She shivered, pulling her arms tighter around her bloodied stomach, as if she believed that might stop her insides from spilling out through those gaping holes. I didn't know why she wasn't already dead; she should have died half an hour ago when she first caught the fragment.

"Fuck it," she hissed through gritted teeth. "Fuck it all."

I heard the thump of another shell, close this time, and leaned over to shield her as dirt and small rocks pattered around us, something sharp striking my back and bouncing away. The shower ended, and the silence was broken once more only by Shika's ragged breathing.

"Why are you here?"

The question was hard to hear, coming as it did, whispered, throaty, through tightly clenched lips, through her pain.

I shrugged and rolled over onto my back next to her, the two of us staring up at the autumn sky, like a couple of goofy kids.

I knew it was a good question.

I could have gone Pettis' way, maybe broken through even; at the very least, greased a few Pierres for my trouble. Or I could have tried for the forest behind; it was only about two hundred meters and a few min-

utes until darkness, and if I made the cover, then they would never have been able to find me...

But I stayed.

"Maybe I've got that death wish you were talking about."

"No," her voice was weak, but the way she said it, I knew she meant it. She started to say something else, to explain herself maybe, but her lips twisted in a rictus of pain, and her words were choked off when she began coughing up blood.

Silence fell then, a breathless calm, and I could hear her struggling to inhale, fighting for each breath, not surrendering a single one, focused entirely on drawing in air, making shattered muscles obey her will, raggedly forcing the oxygen into her torn lungs—

It stopped.

No. Not stopped.

Changed. Became quiet, steady, rhythmic—peaceful.

Her eyes had a distant, faraway look in them. A walker's look. Her face was no longer hard and angry, just tired, full of sadness, as if for things she couldn't change. She relaxed her grip on her chest, and her arms slipped, bit by bit, down her sides, to where they lay, palms up, in the dark earth.

I knew then that she would have walked if she could—it seemed to me that her little legs were restless, wanting nothing more than to push herself to her feet, to get up and walk towards Pierre.

But it was too late; she hadn't the strength.

So I picked her up—lighter than I'd ever have imagined—as if all that

were substantial about her, all that kept her nailed down to the earth had fled, only that little wisp of air, a tiny rising and settling of her chest, connecting her still to this world, still to me. I climbed the side of the crater, moving towards Pierre, through the gloom, through the shattered trees and smoke and debris.

I walked without thinking, a distant part of me waiting for the sound of those final rounds, the last I knew I would hear, but it didn't seem important, the only important thing now the small misshapen figure cradled in my arms.

And when her breathing finally stopped, I realized I was crying, my tears falling down onto her face, leaving little pink trails on her cheeks where they washed away the dust, hearing somewhere in the back of my mind, coming from a different place, a world I no longer belonged to, the faraway sound of choppers.

SIX MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE THEN.

I'm back in the valley now, attached to a unit west of Montreal,

training new meat, teaching them what they didn't learn in basic, meaning just about everything. When I look around, their faces seem normal, young and scared and excited all at the same time; but mostly scared, though they wouldn't admit it. They strut around, pretending they're not frightened of anything or anyone, proudly flashing their new hardware as if they were marching in a parade.

Every once in a while I catch a glimpse of a face in the crowd with that same hardened look Shika wore; and my heart seems to stop then. In those moments I can almost convince myself I hate her once again, hate her for abandoning me, hate her for leaving before I had my chance.

I try not to think about it too much, but I know that soon I'll have no other choice, because that day when she went, she took my hatred with her, leaving me with a big empty space inside that I'm going have to fill somehow.

And it's hard to know where to begin. 🍁

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* BOB BOYCZUK has previously published stories in *On Spec* ("Falling," Spring 1993, "Distant Seas," Fall 1993, "Jazz Fantasia," Winter 1993, "The Reality War," Winter 1997), *TransVersions*, *Prairie Fire*, *Erotica Vampirica* and *Northern Frights 4*, and has pieces forthcoming in the *Tesseract*<sup>7</sup> and *Northern Suns* anthologies. He recently completed his first novel, an excerpt of which may be found at his web site:

<http://pandora.senecac.on.ca/~boyczuk/writing>

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN. Please see page 26.

## Congratulations to the Winners of the 1998 PRIX AURORA AWARDS!

The 1998 Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards were presented at Convention 18, held in conjunction with **Con\*cept**, on October 2 to October 4 in Montréal, Quebec. For more info, see the Aurora Awards website: <http://www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora>

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*Black Wine*  
Candas Jane Dorsey  
(Tor, Jan/97)

**MEILLEUR OUVRAGE  
EN FRANÇAIS (AUTRE)  
(1997)**

*Solaris*  
Hugues Morin, réd.  
(Les Compagnons  
à temps perdu)

**MEILLEUR LIVRE EN FRANÇAIS  
(1996-97)**

*L'Odysée du Pénélope*  
Jean-Pierre Guillet  
(Héritage, 97)

**ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT**  
Jean-Pierre Normand

**BEST SHORT-FORM WORK  
IN ENGLISH  
(1997)**

"Three Hearings on the  
Existence of Snakes in the  
Human Blood Stream"  
James Alan Gardner  
(*Asimov's*, Feb/97)

**FAN ACHIEVEMENT  
(FANZINE)**

*Warp Factor*  
Chris Chartier, ed.  
(Warp 9)

**MEILLEURE NOUVELLE EN FRANÇAIS  
(1997)**

«Une lettre de ma mère»  
Yves Meynard  
(*Solaris* 121)

**FAN ACHIEVEMENT  
(ORGANIZATION)**

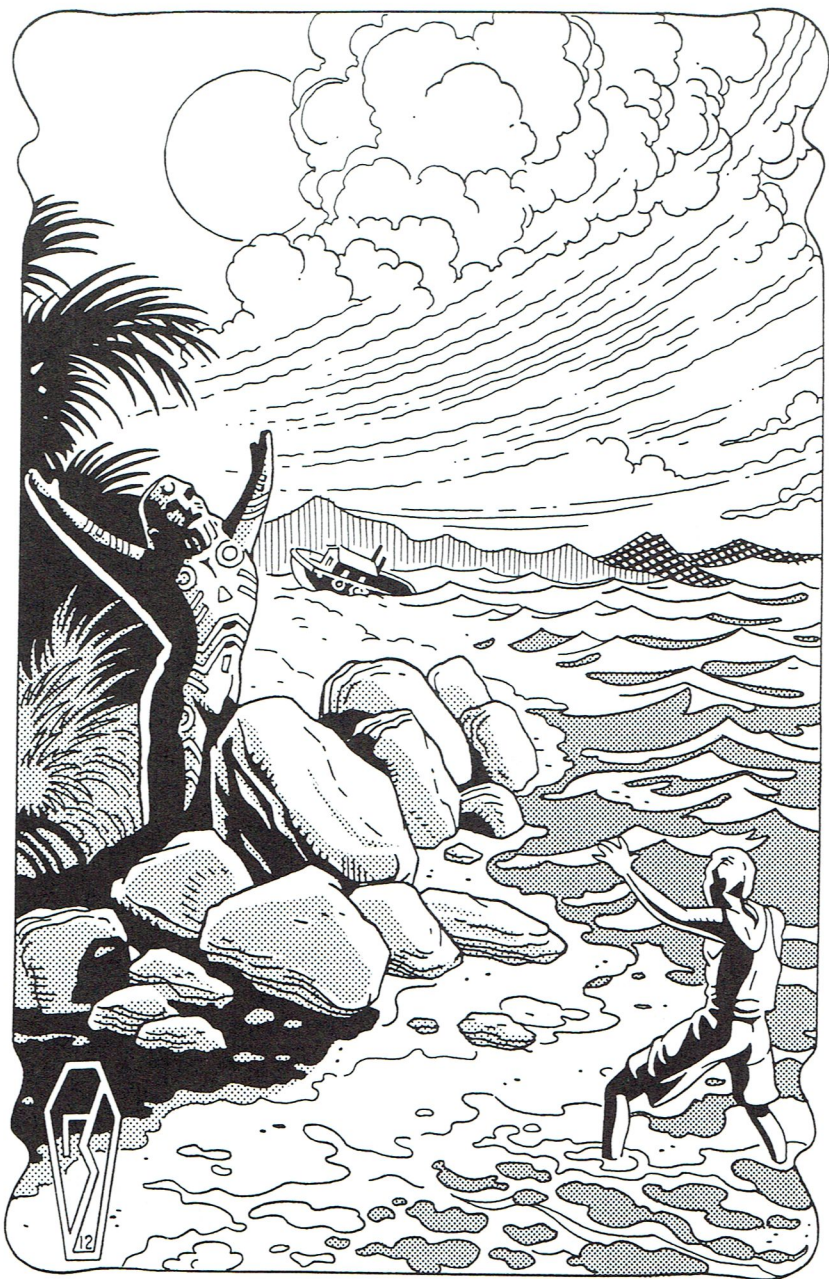
Peter Halasz  
(The National Science Fiction  
& Fantasy Society)

**BEST OTHER WORK IN ENGLISH  
(1997)**

*Northern Frights 4*  
Don Hutchison, ed.  
(Mosaic Press) (anthology)

**FAN ACHIEVEMENT  
(OTHER)**

Larry Stewart  
(entertainer/personnalité  
amuseur)



# Face of God

Barbara Galler-Smith

*illustrated by Ronn Sutton*

**S**TRIDENT PROTESTS OF NESTING SEA BIRDS ROSE ABOVE the boom of surf against rocks. They called to each other as easily as long-mated lovers might, their cries a symphony of sharp and fluid crescendos. The waves kept a beat as they pounded the rough shore like drums summoning the ghosts of the dead.

Baj awoke face down in the sand, stiff and exhausted. Sun-dried salty foam left his unbound hair unruly, and the sand clung to his sweaty skin. Water lapped at his knees and held a hint of the cooler off-shore current that had swept his prawn boat off course a month before the monsoons. He rolled to his back and coughed. He should have drowned.

Something in the water nudged his foot and he jerked away from the incoming ripple with a cry that silenced the gulls overhead. With the little strength left him, he scurried away from the water to the boulder-strewn beach. He scanned the water's surface, then settled back in relief. He'd been bumped by nothing more dangerous than flotsam from his shrimp boat. He looked up the beach and grimaced at his boat perched like a mynah on a

sandbar five meters above the high tide mark. It didn't even wobble in the stiff west wind off the Arabian Sea. How it got so far up the beach undamaged puzzled him. He shivered in spite of the heat. It would take a dozen men to muscle the craft back into the waves.

He staggered to his feet and trudged across the sand to the boat. He turned the ignition key, expecting the batteries to kick in, but nothing happened and the red operating light on the radio stayed off.

"Gods' balls!" He rummaged through the cupboard beneath the wheel for the emergency transponder, but it, too, failed.

"They won't find you," someone said from behind him.

Startled, he whirled and tripped, landing heavily amidst the rocks.

"Gods, Baj," he said, "you're hearing things."

"Aye," came a reply on the wind.

Convinced someone hid among the boulders, he scrutinized them carefully, waiting for the inevitable flash of color that didn't belong or the tell-tale movement of a prankster. Yet nothing moved and the black rock and pale sand showed no trails.

"Who's there?" he called, his mouth dry.

"I'm here," said the voice from behind a mound of stones. In the center stood a crude statue. Arms outstretched as if measuring the width of sky, it faced the open sea.

A clever trick. He must be closer to a settlement than he thought; perhaps even Karachi lay around the next turn of the shoreline. He

gawked at the statue so unlike any shrine he'd ever seen. A tourist thing, he surmised.

He smiled. "I'm glad to see you, wherever you are. During the night's storm, my boat ran aground."

"I know," said the voice from the stones.

Baj edged closer to get a better view around the back of the figure. Even then no one moved and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled a silent warning.

"Where are you?" he whispered, suddenly not wanting to know.

"Here—in the rock—I'm the god of this place."

Baj let the corner of his mouth twitch in the semblance of a smile. A crazy old hermit must live here. "Of course."

"You should be more respectful of me. I saved your life." The statue didn't move.

Baj circled it. Nearly six feet tall and in the semblance of a man, it had but one interesting feature—the single red crystal in its forehead.

"Hard to believe," Baj said, eyeing the ruby. Such a gem would buy six prawn boats and the men to sail them.

The stone god said nothing, and Baj went back to his boat. The batteries still did not work and the small refrigerator had already started to warm. He took a long swig of water and munched on a handful of figs.

Birds wheeled overhead and nothing else moved but the sea.

"You're welcome," the statue said as if Baj still listened. "Don't you wish to know why?"

Baj grinned. Here came the payoff.

Now he was certain the voice would toy with him for a while, then direct him to the nearest tourist hotel.

"Why?" Baj asked as he drained the water pouch.

"I need you."

Baj sat on the warm sand and laughed. Since when did a god need a man?

"Belief is everything, my friend," it said. "Being a god in this place is slow. There is nothing to do. No one asks for boons and I've lived decades without a single offering."

"Then go elsewhere," Baj said. He looked at his boat. So high above the tide mark meant he would need help getting the boat on the water again, or he had a long wait before his rescue.

"Alas, I can't. No one carries me in his heart, so I must remain here where the last man who believed in me died." It sounded as if the voice came from deep within the stone. No hermit after all. Baj wiped at the sweat dripping into his eyes. Perhaps the sun played tricks on him.

"I have my own gods. I don't need you." Baj marched back to his boat and grabbed a flare pistol mounted on the bulkhead. He nestled in the shade beneath the boat's bow, confident he'd be on his way home again by morning. The prawn fishing flourished this time of the year and soon boats would be bobbing across the sea by the dozen. He'd alert the first passing vessel.

NOT A SINGLE BOAT PLIED THE SHOALS all that day, nor the next. By mid-morning of the third day, Baj's

stomach growled with hunger. He'd eaten all the figs and had only three chapatis left. He ate one and washed it down with tepid water. Two chapatis and three gallons of water remained.

He tried to nap but the rumbling of his stomach made him restless.

"I can help you," the stone god said.

Baj ignored him and spent the morning looking for something to lever his boat back into the water. The desert around him offered no aids. At noon he lay down in the shade of the boat and daydreamed about food.

"I know where there are fresh bird eggs," the stone god said.

Baj ignored it as he crouched in the shade. He vowed not to consort with any gods until his own had answered him. He spent an hour in lamentation and prayer, exhorting his gods to come to his rescue. Late in the afternoon, he spied the mast of a small sailing vessel. Trembling with excitement, he raised the flare pistol, pointed it high, and pulled the trigger. The flare rocketed upward, spun a few tight spirals, then plopped into the calm sea without exploding. A dud.

He tried the second flare with the same result. He watched the mast disappear over the horizon. Enraged, he turned to the stone figure. Its red eye gleamed in the low afternoon light.

"You made the flares fail!" Baj cried.

When the god remained silent, Baj licked his dry lips. He'd have to gather brush for a signal fire. Smoke by day, fire by night. He labored

slowly, careful not to work up a sweat and use his precious low supply of water.

"I know where there is fresh water," the god said.

"When I need your help, I'll ask for it, statue. I beseech no strange god when my own will do."

"You need not even speak to me, if that is your wish. Just give me an offering, a small one—a berry eased from a nearby bush or a drop of water from your barrel is all I ask—some show of trust in me."

"I'll not make any offerings to any false gods."

Baj thought if the stone could move, it might have shrugged. He sensed the stone turned away from him, though the face, as always, remained turned to the sea.

The next day, a line of black storm clouds marred the horizon. Baj rejoiced. A squall meant water and he prepared to catch as much of it as he could. Every pot, pan and plastic sheet lay spread on the dry sand.

"Bring the rain to me," he prayed to his gods.

The stone god rumbled as if in joy. "I shall!"

"Not you!" Baj shouted. "My real gods."

The stone god spoke no more.

Baj watched the clouds move northward, missing his little stretch of beach by less than a mile. Anger, like waves on an unsettled ocean, washed over his head and threatened to engulf him. He trembled with unvented rage and stared at the stone god. The god's unblinking third eye, a blood-red crystal wrenched from the earth by the sweat of some

anonymous slave, shone with illumination from deep within. He ran to the statue and slapped at the red eye.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"A little belief. Some respect. A small sacrifice."

The ground trembled and forced Baj to one knee.

"I'll not sacrifice to you," he said.

The earth trembled again and he fell forward in compelled obeisance to the nameless god.

Baj pulled himself away. He felt it staring at his sun-blackened, salt-encrusted back. No mere stone god could do that.

With a grimace of anger, he twisted around to face his tormentor. "Do what you like, but I'll not respect you. You have no power over me or my own gods."

The red eye gleamed. "You should serve as others have served."

Baj hauled himself further from the stone. The rock he climbed over was cracked in spots, giving him ample fingerholds. He struggled, scraping his knees and hands on the sharp edges. "I'll not be yours, no matter what you do to me."

"I could kill you easily," the statue said.

The amiable quality to its voice surprised Baj. "You might, but then you'd have to find someone else all over again." He spat and the jellied gob clung precariously to the god's upper lip before dropping unceremoniously to the ground. "There. That's the only sacrifice you'll get from me. Now put my boat in the water."

"Is there nothing I can say to convince you to honor me?"



Baj shook his head. "No. I'm loyal to my own ways to the death."

"And after?" it said.

Baj paused. After death, he could not say. The ground trembled beneath him and again he dropped to his belly. "Though the earth swallow me whole, I serve none but my own."

The earth beneath him opened and Baj tumbled into the widening maw. Jagged stones, like sharks' teeth, ripped at him. His once-smooth brown skin was now reddened from a hundred raw gashes. His body disappeared bit by bit into the dark abyss. Blinded and scourged, his anger bubbled from the wounds to seek the earth's surface.

Whole again, he stepped from a blue sea and looked at the god. Cold rock, unchanged, stared back at him, but its single ruby eye was gone.

"Look," the god said.

Baj turned to the sea and stared at a wave racing toward the beach. As the swell hit the shallows, it grew, the roll of water beneath it rising like a whale from the depths. It hit the beach with a crash and the water rushed up past the crusty dry sand at the limit of the last tide. It didn't slow even as it rocked the boat off the sand. As it hit the wall of boulders, it surged backwards, taking the boat with it. When the wave disappeared into the sea, the boat sat in the shallows, listing on its short keel and only needing someone to push it back into the deep to sail away.

"Aha!" Baj cried in exultation. "At last, my gods have saved me." He turned to the stone statue. "You can do nothing."

"I am the god of this place," it said. "I would have saved you had you only asked me."

Baj's rage found action. He pummeled the massive figure with balled fists, the sharp rock cutting and gouging him at every blow. His anger, bitter-tasting, masked all other feeling. At last exhausted, he collapsed at the foot of the stone, panting for air.

When the ground opened and swallowed him once more, his strength ebbed. Surprised he still lived, he opened his eyes to see the world through the clear red window of a ruby. He struggled to move but each shove bound him deeper and tighter into a prison of stone. His anger rose like a full moon tide and he screamed, yet no sound disturbed the spotted plovers flitting along the water's edge.

A stone-faced man gazed without malice at Baj. "Fool. To spit on one god is to spit on all. You offered disdain. I accept."

Baj wanted to speak, yet could do nothing but stare at the man standing in front of him.

"In time your power will grow, as befits a god of this place. Perhaps when you've served as long as I did, you'll understand the true value of worship," the god said, his voice no louder than a distant roll of thunder, until it diminished to a peaceful susurration and then silence. He bowed once before striding toward the shoreline and Baj's boat. With little effort, he shouldered the vessel into the surf, now low and calm with all trace of the huge wave gone. He turned the prow into the swells and

pushed hard. Once beyond the waves, he raised the small sail.

When at last the stone-faced man

looked back, Baj thought he caught the flash of ruby-red in one of his eyes. ♣

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* BARBARA GALLER-SMITH lives in Edmonton with her husband and two white dogs. She's collaborating with Josh Langston on a series of Romano-Celtic fantasy novels and credits Compuserve's SF Literature IMPs for keeping her sane. In September, she won first prize in the Edmonton *Journal's* Second Annual Literary Contest.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* RONN SUTTON continues drawing Claypool Comics' *ELVIRA, Mistress of the Dark*, and is currently on his thirteenth assignment for that comic book. He does pencilling only, which takes him two full working days per page after having done extensive roughs and layouts. He lives in Ottawa with writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington and also draws for *DRACULINA* magazine, and other comics and animation.

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### ON SPEC Spring 2000 Theme Issue

In our parents' day, no one would have believed that a killer could be identified by matching a swab of saliva to a single hair, saliva on a cigarette butt, or a fleck of skin found at a crime scene. In the future, what technology will be available to solve crimes? To commit them? Will certain types of crime increase, while others disappear altogether? What will be the next wave in crime--media manipulation by corporate or government bodies, environmental terrorism, genetic tampering? You guessed it: the theme for our next special issue is "FUTURE CRIME."

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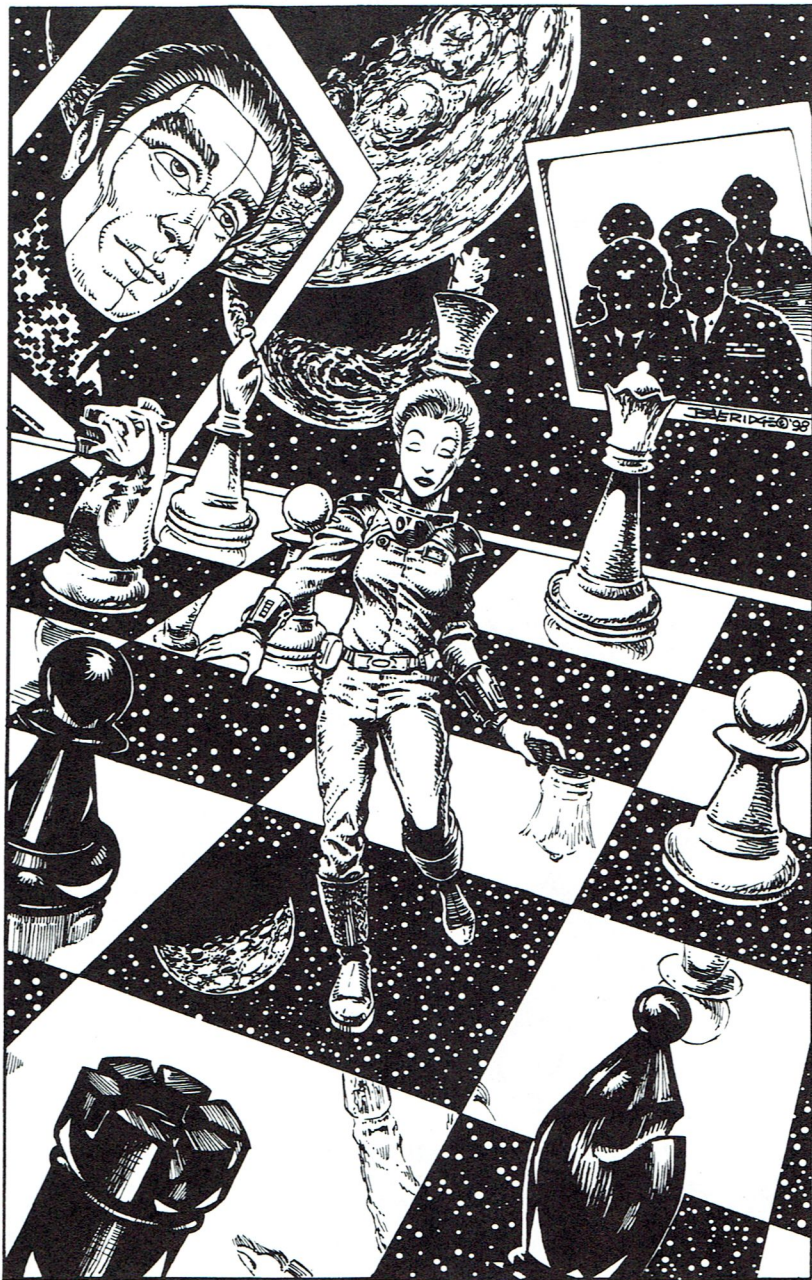
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# Queen's Move

Leslie Lupien

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

PASCAL HELD UP THE LARGE BLACK KING'S PAWN UNTIL its polished ebony surface gleamed in the light of the monitor linking the Terran jumpship with the Tang craft. His soft, sibilant voice accompanied the gesture. "A curious design, Mai. What can you tell me about it?"

Ensign Mai Nguyen stiffened against the cushioned back of the contour chair.

*First test.* "Answer any of the alien's questions, but watch our image," Commander Sverdlov had told her. The peace-loving Terran image must be protected.

Mai hesitated, awed for an instant by the responsibility she had been given. Did she really want to be here at all? She thought of Roger and Baby Mark, eleven light years away, with a spasm of longing, then scolded herself for the silly misgivings. She had worked her head off to score number one among the officers in training for this expedition. And she had volunteered to confront Pascal, then proved her fitness for the job by trouncing every other chess player aboard the jumpship.

"Mai?"

She needed an innocuous answer. If she said the pawn represented a warrior, the crafty alien might ask dangerous questions about Terran history. But Sverdlov must have thought of that when he included the ivory and ebony chess set among the "cultural exchanges" sent to the Tang. He would expect her to use good judgment in handling Pascal.

"The evolution of the piece eludes me at the moment." Mai forced a smile. "It is your turn to make a first move, sir."

Pascal moved the pawn two spaces to confront the white king's pawn, but held it just above the board. His bushy eyebrows lifted, giving his face a sardonic cast. "But surely, Mai, it represents *something*. Please think."

Mai stared at her alien adversary. *Remember, it is only a simulacrum*, she reminded herself. She didn't know what lay behind that handsome human face—what the creature really looked like or what it thought. Was it capable of irony?

Mai plumbed her memory, came up with a fragment of reading on chess history. Medieval monks had tried, without success, to identify the pawn with medieval craftsmen. "I seem to remember the pawn originally symbolized some occupation, perhaps engineers or architects," she lied. If Sverdlov were present, would he appreciate her quick thinking? Probably not. He had a smile or a few words of praise for other crew members. But for her, he reserved chilly courtesy.

Pascal smiled, his full lips opening wide to reveal immaculate white teeth. Was he taunting her? Did he sense already what she was trying to do?

Mai looked down to avoid Pascal's eyes and to see the operations monitor hidden from his view. The real game, the life-and-death game, would start to register on the monitor very soon. A white ellipse on the dark screen represented the Terran

jumpship and a green ellipse represented the enigmatic Tang craft. Nothing in the background represented the force field that pinned the jump ship like a fish in a net deep inside the gravity well of Epsilon's second planet.

"I believe it is your ... tur-turn." The Tang language transposer faltered for an instant, a rare occurrence while turning whatever sounds Pascal made into Solar Commonwealth Standard.

Mai moved her king's knight to attack Pascal's advanced pawn, and the move was replicated on Pascal's chessboard. Pascal responded by holding his queen's knight high off the board by its equine ears. "I have seen this animal pictured in the samples of Terran art Commander Sverdlov so kindly sent us. It must be a very intelligent animal."

"Why, no," Mai said. She considered the horse to be a very stupid animal.

Pascal planted his queen's knight to protect his pawn and flashed the toothy smile again. "Yet you include it in a game which you consider intellectually challenging. Most curious."

*Another test*, Mai thought. How should she respond? Probably with silence. Pascal was so intelligent. He had even learned to pick up nuances of human speech and behavior. That was why, half in jest, Sverdlov or one of his deputies had given him the name Pascal, because the seventeenth-century savant's social skills seemed to have matched his scientific genius.

Mai advanced her king's bishop to threaten Pascal's queen's knight.

"Oh. How delightful. The Ruy

Lopez opening." Pascal smiled more broadly than ever. "Don't look surprised. We learned the openings from the manual Commander Sverdlov sent us. He said we would need it because you are the most expert player in his crew. And this piece you just moved, what does it represent?"

Mai did not answer because movement on the operations monitor caught her eye. Sverdlov had started *his* game. A swarm of pink midges billowed out from the white ellipse. They were nanobots that would pick at the mysterious force field, hopefully without alerting the aliens.

The real game had begun.

"Sorry, sir. It represents a spiritual adviser."

"Oh? And what do your spiritual advisers teach?"

The question alarmed Mai. Not metaphysics! The Commonwealth had danced gingerly around that thicket for a century since the first radio contact with the Tang in 2041. "I am not trained in theology, sir."

Pascal pushed forward a rook's pawn to attack Mai's king's bishop. "I am asking for a personal reaction. What have you learned from your spiritual advisers?"

A tougher question. She dreaded to go where Pascal seemed determined to draw her. Yet she could not refuse to answer. Sverdlov had been emphatic on that point. "Pascal is the eyes and ears of the Tang," he had told her. "Keep him occupied, and don't antagonize him while we make our move to get out of here. Our lives may all depend upon you." Delightful words at the time. How ironic. By playing chess, she had finally forced

the man to recognize her worth.

"You have trouble answering, Mai. I will be more specific. We understand that your spiritual advisers teach that humans should love one another. Does your love include us?"

Mai did not know how a representative of a human religion would answer that question. A guess would have to do. "Yes," she said and lowered her head to watch the operations monitor and avoid Pascal's bright eyes.

"Why must you lie to me, Mai?"

She forced herself to look at him, expecting to see anger. Instead, she saw a doleful face. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why do you Terrans always try to misrepresent yourselves?" The tone remained soft, unthreatening. "You always describe your nature as peace-loving. Commander Sverdlov sent us artifacts that are supposed to show your devotion to harmony, beauty, and belief in a benevolent Creator. Why then do you come here, without warning, in a ship heavy with weapons?"

*Touché!* Pascal could not know about the debate that had raged in the Commonwealth about arming the jumpship. Mai understood that Sverdlov himself had argued against it and had spoken privately of "high-level paranoia." But dedication to his crew had prevented him from resigning command of the expedition. She dared not try to explain that.

"We are here on a peaceful mission, sir."

Pascal looked down at his chessboard and moved his king's knight to threaten Mai's advanced center

pawn. "We judge Commander Sverdlov to be a human of high integrity and good intentions. But he evaded the same question."

"We could not provide you with advance notice, sir; it takes over eleven of our years to reach you with a radio message. We only found the collapsar jumps to the Epsilon Indi system three years ago."

A specious answer, Mai knew. The Commonwealth could have sent a robotic probe first to give the Tang notice. She braced for a hostile or derisive response. But Pascal only said, "It is your move, Mai."

Mai decided on a verbal counter-thrust to keep Pascal engaged. "Sir, you accuse us of duplicity. What about you? You will not meet with us face to face. You will not even let us see what you really look like."

"You must move, Mai."

Mai castled automatically, setting up the standard trap. If Pascal took her advanced pawn with his king's knight, his game would be in deep trouble.

Pascal appeared to study his chessboard. "We believed it best that I assume a human persona for your comfort, Mai. Personal contact could be dangerous for both of us until we complete reviews of each other's viral history."

Mai glanced at the operations monitor. The pink midges appeared frozen in a tight formation to match the elliptical shape of the jumpship. They blinked as if in frustration. Had the Tang paralyzed them, made a move in the real game?

"You treat us like prisoners. It is your move, sir."

Pascal advanced his king's bishop to the square in front of his king, avoiding the trap. *How fast the Tang learn, Mai thought. Of course. They are older than us. Smarter. Damn them.*

"I explained our position to Commander Sverdlov. We prefer to treat you as guests. But we do not know you yet."

Pascal straightened and stretched in his high-backed, uncushioned chair. The muscles in his arms rippled in a fascinating way under the tight Terran-style tunic. *Silly, Mai told herself, those muscles are not real.*

"Let us talk a bit, Mai." Pascal's smile seemed so innocent.

*Do not let that avuncular manner deceive you, Mai warned herself. He is trying to pump you for information.* But she managed a small smile. "Very well, sir. What shall we talk about?"

"How you think. This game, chess, tells us a good deal. It is a game of conflict."

Mai shrugged. "And so? You must have such games."

"No, we do not." Pascal's expression turned somber for the first time. "We long ago eradicated the concepts of strife and competition from our—your word—*weltanschauung*. Terrans have not. True?"

More movement on the operations monitor caught Mai's eye. The pink midges were still blinking feebly. Red warning lights flashed at several points along the edges of the white ellipse. Mai recognized that Sverdlov was preparing to launch drones piloted by human-size robots armed with cutting lasers and explosives.

"Yes, true," she admitted.



"So your Commonwealth sent an armed ship here to threaten us." Pascal held up a hand as if to forestall an objection. "From fear of the unknown. To spy upon us and impress us with your power. Perhaps to strike us first."

Mai pretended to concentrate upon the chessboard. She did not know what secret instructions Sverdlov had received from the Commonwealth Directorate. But she suspected Pascal's accusation to be close to the truth. And she believed Sverdlov would carry out his instructions whatever reservations he might have.

"Mai!" Loud. Like a challenge.

Stung, she met Pascal's eyes. "I am not aware of any such intentions, sir. And it is unfair of you to make such an accusation to me, a mere ensign."

Pascal seemed nonplused for the first time. His mouth worked without sound. Finally, he said, "You are right. I did not consider your concept of hierarchy."

Flashes on the operations monitor registered on Mai's peripheral vision. Sverdlov had launched his drones. She had to keep the Tang's attention, but divert it from herself. "Do you want to continue the game, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

Mai pushed her queen bishop's pawn forward one square. "That move was to support an attack in the center, sir."

Pascal hesitated only a few seconds. "I know," he said and advanced his queen's pawn one square.

"The best defensive move on record, sir," she said. "Now—"

"Mai, please. I spoke too bluntly and upset you. Forgive me." His dark,

luminous eyes softened as if to show concern. *Is the creature sincere, or has he already mastered the human art of dissimulation?*

"We seem to be evenly matched in chess, Mai. Cannot we take a little rest and relate as friend to friend?"

"Of course, sir, but—" A vibration started in Mai's toes and ran swiftly up her body. The screen of the operations monitor flared with coruscating light, blinding her for an instant.

"What, Mai?"

She couldn't take her eyes off the operations monitor as it cleared. Several blue lozenge-shaped images—drones—circled the jumpship. Words in large white letters superimposed on the images: LEAD DRONE IMPLoded. OTHER DRONES RECALLED. STAND BY.

"Are you ill, Mai?"

"No, sir," she lied as the weight of despair settled in her belly. The Tang were winning the real game. She had failed in her assignment to divert them. Still, she had better keep open a line of communication with the enemy. "I will speak for myself, sir, but not for the Commonwealth."

"Agreed. Tell me about yourself. Did you choose to confront me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, Mai?"

Mai drew a deep breath. The answer was too painful to admit. She yearned for the smile and the words of praise that Sverdlov had withheld for months. Damn the man! She was his most junior officer. But what about her number one training score, her advanced degree in astrophysics, her proven competence as a crew member? "I wanted recognition, sir."

"I see." A gentle smile. "And why

did you join Commander Sverdlov's crew?"

"Me?" Mai wondered if Pascal would understand her answer. "I was selected from among thousands of applicants. I was commissioned an officer in our new Interstellar Fleet. A great honor."

"You were thrilled to compete so successfully, to be honored over so many other Terrans."

"Yes, sir."

"But *why*, Mai?"

"Because..." A tougher question. "Because that is the way we are—some of us. That is the way *I* am."

"But surely that was not the only reason."

"No." Mai pushed back in her seat to face Pascal and still keep the operations monitor in view. No change in Sverdlov's game. He must be baffled, huddling with his ballistics officers. "My parents were astrophysicists, like me. They dreamed of taking part in interstellar travel, but could not qualify. So..."

"I understand. What else?"

"I was idealistic."

"Oh?" Pascal leaned forward. "Tell me about that."

"A great adventure." Her head ached and she yearned to escape from the alien. Was he just taunting her now? She recalled fragments from the Interstellar Fleet creed. "To expand the frontier of knowledge. To explore and conquer..." The last word, a mistake. She glanced uneasily at Pascal. "Also, material rewards that would make life easier for my child."

Pascal looked thoughtful. "So you are a female, a mother?"

*What does that mean to the creature?* she wondered, knowing the Tang were androgynous. "Yes."

"I understand." Pascal steepled his hands, a gesture he must have picked up from Sverdlov. "But I sense something else. You have regrets about being here. True?"

GENERAL QUARTERS

The red letters flashed across the operations monitor screen. They terrified Mai. A nuclear-tipped missile strike against the Tang ship with its unknown armament? Sverdlov must be following instructions she could not know about.

"It is very important you tell me, Mai, so I can understand you."

"Very well," Mai said. Probably nothing she could say or do now could affect the outcome of Sverdlov's game. Still, she had to try. And, sensing death very close, she felt an urge to talk. "Because I left a male Terran whom I love, the father of my child, and my child. And I may never see them again—" She checked herself from adding, *Because of you*.

Tears appeared in Pascal's eyes, and his lips trembled. Mai stared at the alien in amazement. Was he mocking her?

The transposer voice made unintelligible hissing sounds, then, "There is no more, Mai. Tell me."

The thoughts so long suppressed gushed out in words. "Guilt. I abandoned my loving mate and my child out of pride and greed and lust for glory. I caused them great pain, and will cause them more if I do not return."

Pascal stood abruptly, turned and disappeared from the screen.

"Game's over," Mai said aloud. She had failed. The Tang would probably apply a lethal checkmate in the real game. She would return to the control room and inform Sverdlov of her failure. The most she could hope for was a nod and a cold, "Very well, Ensign." But she did not want to die alone.

Pascal reappeared as suddenly as he had vanished, looming grim-faced and very erect in his hard, high-backed chair. "Please make a move, Mai."

What did the creature want now? To enjoy her humiliation? She wiped her damp eyes with a tunic sleeve and glanced at the chessboard. The position was familiar, requiring no thought. She moved her rook to the king's square.

Pascal picked up his queen and held it between two fingers. "Your most powerful piece is a female. Curious." Then he slammed it down on a square in the center of the board.

"Sir, you can't!" Mai leaped to her feet. "That is not a legal move."

"I know." Pascal's eyes locked on hers.

Mai leaned toward the screen to read the alien's expression.

"What is the matter?"

"I think you know, Mai. We could play to an interesting end game. But it appears that Commander Sverdlov will not permit that." When she did not answer, he thrust the queen forward, knocking over several white pieces and pawns. "So we must end the game to save ourselves. Do you understand, Mai?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

"Unless you convince your com-

mander not to do what he plans to do. You must, Mai."

"But I—"

"He is very intelligent. He will listen. And we will help you."

The contour chair shook violently, pitching Mai to her knees. Trembling with fear and shock, she slid along a heaving deck. Alarm bells clanged throughout the jumpship.

"Listen to me, Mai!" Loud, peremptory.

The deck settled and she struggled upright on uncertain legs. Pascal's head and shoulders filled the monitor screen. The intensity of his gaze riveted her attention. "We do not wish harm to you humans. Convince him, Mai. If you do, you will see your mate and child again. I promise."

MAI FOUND SVERDLOV AND THREE officers standing by the weapons console as she entered the control room. As she tried to approach Sverdlov, Sims restrained her. "Sir!" she called.

The commander stared at her blankly. "Ensign, not now."

"Commander, abort the strike! We're all dead if you don't! You felt the Tang's power!"

"Ensign..." Lieutenant Sims fastened a hand on Mai's arm, but she wrenched herself free.

"Damn you, hear me, Sverdlov—sir! The Tang do not want to kill us, but they will if they have to!"

Lt. Sims and several other junior officers moved toward Mai. They never reached her. The deck vibrated, pitched and heaved, throwing them off balance. They either went down or teetered toward the wall, seeking safety handholds.

Sverdlov stepped backward and found a handhold. The control room resounded with shouts, obscenities, and the jangle of alarm bells.

Mai steadied herself, waiting for the motion to stop. Then she ran to Sverdlov. "Please don't be paranoid like the Commonwealth Directors. Pascal promised to let us go if you abort."

White-faced, Sverdlov whispered, "Do you believe him?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. Sir."

He nodded back. "All right, Ensign."

SVERDLOV DID NOT LOOK AT MAI AS he waved her to a seat in front of the desk in his tiny, unadorned commander's cubicle.

"Ensign, I have been too busy to meet with you since..." Sverdlov appeared to study the screen of the ship systems monitor on the edge of his desk. "...the contretemps in the control room."

"I understand, sir." Mai sat stiffly erect on the hard, armless utility chair.

"Preparations are complete for the collapsar jump. Epsilon Indi will sling us halfway home within the hour."

"Thank you for telling me, sir."

Sverdlov looked at her with a stern expression she had never seen. "Ensign, the manner in which you accosted me in front of fellow officers was unacceptable. Do you realize you cursed your commanding officer?"

"I apologize, sir."

"You must always show respect

for your superiors, even when you consider their judgment to be faulty or..." He sighed. "...inane. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." It came at last, the smile. "But considering the stress you were under, I will forget your discourtesy."

"Thank you, sir." Taking his words as a dismissal, she stood. Then guilt overwhelmed her, and the words tumbled out. "But I failed you, sir. I did not distract Pascal sufficiently. We had to rely on the Tang's mercy. Your doubts about me were correct."

"Doubts?" He raised both eyebrows. "Sit down, Ensign. I never doubted your fitness for that assignment. Or for any assignment. And, I believe, you distracted Pascal as long as anyone could have."

Mai sat numbly. "But, sir, your manner toward me..."

"My manner? Ensign, it is my policy to treat the most junior Fleet officer with reserve—for the officer's own good. It is not my policy to wound any young officer's self-esteem. But I never thought you had a problem with self-esteem." His smile struck her as puckish. "Quite the contrary."

She felt her cheeks burn. "I understand, sir."

"Good." His manner turned serious. "Now, Ensign, I am preparing a report for the Board of Inquiry. We were all puzzled by the Tang's sudden decision to free us. Did you get any inkling from Pascal as to why?"

Mai believed she had received

more than an inkling. She had misinterpreted Pascal's show of distress as mockery. His empathy had been real. Perhaps he had found in her the revelation of a gentler, redeeming side of human nature that the Tang sought.

"I can only speculate, sir. And for

an official report..."

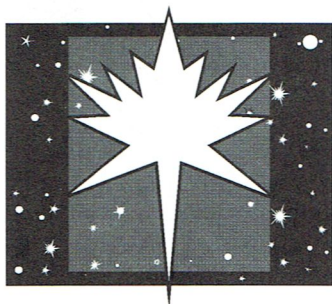
"I want it, Ensign. Put it in writing for me." Sverdlov smiled. "Well, did you teach the Tang anything about chess?"

"I must have taught them something, sir," she answered, thinking, *But not about chess.* ♣

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* LESLIE LUPIEN, an American expatriate who has been living in the Montreal area since 1992, has had stories published in the Fall 1996 issue of *Absolute Magnitude*, the Canadian science fiction anthology, *North of Infinity*, published in June, 1998, and in a few small press publications.

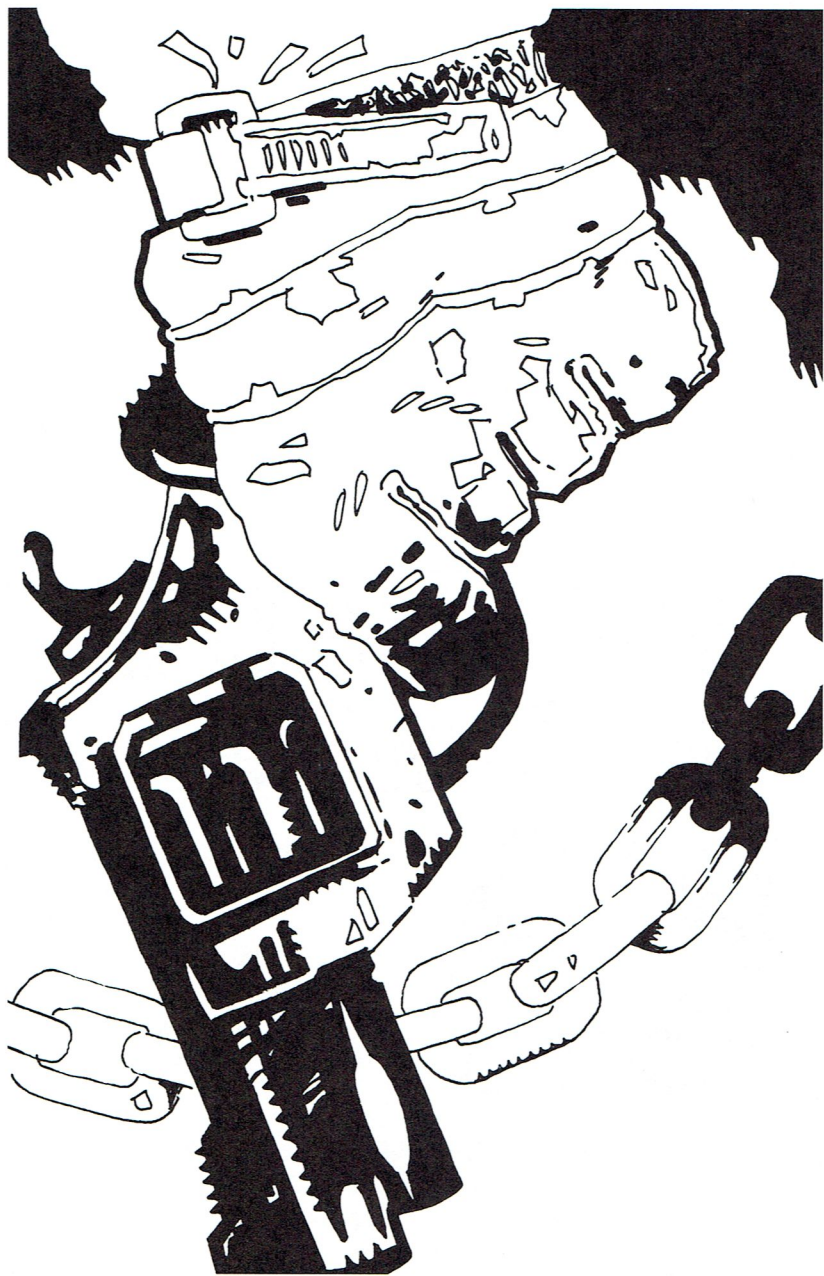
*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* JAMES BEVERIDGE, our cover artist this issue, is profiled on page 5.

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# Walking Into Spring

Wayne Harrison

*illustrated by Marc Holmes*

EVERYTHING WAS WHITE SAVE FOR THE SHAGGY WALL OF evergreens—the logged-out open space, the dawn sky, the air itself, and all as silent and still as a photograph.

A sharp-peaked hummock of new-fallen snow stood at the northwest corner of the clearing. The hummock was one more feature of the white landscape until a gloved hand juggled the tent from the inside, shaking a foot-deep cover of snow from the canvas. A billow of steam escaped as a thin, nervous man wincingly peered out the tent flap. He remained peering until a boot on his rump propelled him fully outside. He wore good boots, long underwear, two pairs of pants, two sweaters, a hooded parka, a balaclava, a scarf, a toque, half-worn-through gloves, and a chain padlocked around his ankle. With his eyes squinting hard against the milky bright dawn, he started stamping out a square of packed snow in front of the tent. His first circuit knocked down the snow to knee height; his second circuit packed it down hard enough to stand on, though even that left the surface several yards above the forest floor. He ducked back into the tent for a blackened pot, which he set on the packed snow. Then, stretching his chain tether to its maximum length, he snapped off dead limbs from the nearest pines, being careful not to set off a thunderous collapse of snow from the higher, weighted-down limbs.

When the pot was half-filled with kindling, a second man emerged from the tent. He wore good boots, one good pair of long underwear and pants, a light undershirt, one sweater, a parka, a balaclava, soft well-oiled gloves, and no chain. He took a leak to one side of the packed snow, then turned his attention to the black pot. With a disgusted sigh, he pushed away the first man and scooped out half the sticks, then used a knife to fray the end of one stick. A minute

later he had smoke rising from the pot; a minute after that, the fire was well established.

"Bigger sticks now, Polly," Maldon called, hand held out, expecting to be given the sticks immediately. Polbeck, the chained man, didn't have any larger sticks to give him. He hobbled over to the trees to break off more limbs. When his chain snagged on some under-snow obstacle, Maldon grabbed the limbs from Polbeck's hands and left him to untangle himself.

In a quarter hour, a small pot of soup was boiling over the fire pot. Polbeck crouched near the fire, trying to warm his hands at the flame. Maldon patiently poured the soup into the battered tin mugs, precisely dividing it into equal portions. Polbeck snatched up his mug and retreated at once into the tent. Maldon took his cup with him as he waded waist-deep to the edge of the clearing. As he surveyed the pensive stillness, he sipped slowly, savoring each swallow.

Soon Maldon called out, "Strike, Polly!" and tossed his mug in through the tent flap.

Polbeck continued licking the soup pot until a harsher shout from Maldon stirred him to his feet. With practiced haste, he packed the backpacks even as Maldon pulled down the tent around him. Together they rolled up the canvas and dismantled the old metal frame. Last of all, Maldon made a dramatic show of checking his pistol. Then he changed Polbeck's chain from his ankle to his neck. Polbeck would need both feet.

Backpacks shouldered, they made ready to head out, Polbeck in the

lead, breaking trail, Maldon behind, chain clasped in his hand. They had been following a half-decent trail the previous afternoon. The night's blizzard had buried it. Maldon, while sipping his soup, had scuffed about until he had rediscovered the trail.

"Well," he said when Polbeck stood dazedly at the edge of the clearing, "There's your start. Get moving."

"Go where?" Polbeck snapped.

"There! Can't you see?" Maldon jabbed his hand at the featureless surface. "It's the same trail we were following yesterday. Follow it as you were doing."

"I can't see it."

"I see it. Just step where the snow feels packed. Step off it and you'll know it."

Polbeck set out, as nervous as a novice tightrope walker. After a few awkward strides, though, he began to think he would be able to follow the buried, invisible trail. He needed only the occasional grunt from Maldon to keep him going straight. Beyond the old timber cut, where the trail threaded its way throughout the forest, Polbeck had a greater challenge. Several times he floundered off the trail and would have fallen, maybe even smothered in the deep snow, if Maldon hadn't used the chain to yank him back onto the safety of the packed trail. Each time, Maldon barked, "Are you blind?" and Polbeck protested, "There's nothing to see!"

After an hour, Polbeck's exertions had warmed him up. This was his favorite part of the day, when he was physically warm but not yet tired or overly hungry. Better yet, they were moving along a straight cut through



the forest; the trail was easy to follow. Possibly they were atop a logging trail, possibly even a true road. Whatever, it meant the wilderness wasn't quite the wilderness it had been for the last few days.

"Maybe this leads to a town," Polbeck said with whiny hopefulness.

Maldon grunted.

Polbeck thought that was just like Maldon, to be so negative, so doubting, but a hundred yards on, he saw that Maldon was right to doubt: the straight cut suddenly ended and the trail once more wound its way through the forest. Worse yet, the landscape was becoming rumped; deep as the snow was and leveling as the blasting winds had been, the hummocks and dips in the snow surface still reflected, in a muffled way, the actual terrain buried beneath. Hill-ocks and ravines could mean deep plunging troughs of snow, and would definitely mean an unpredictable, zig-zagging trail.

The same moment Polbeck thought about that, he misstepped. He didn't just drop a foot or two; he slid down a steep slope. He screamed in fright as, with one hand, he scratched at the slope face for a handhold and, with the other, grabbed at the chain around his neck to keep from being strangled.

"I have you!" Maldon shouted.

Polbeck's descent stopped half-way down the sinkhole. His feet had broken through to a harder, grittier layer of snow. He screamed again, in pure terror this time, as he found himself thrashing through a layer of the ashy grey snow that had fallen early in the winter. He felt, with reason, as

if he were wallowing in a crematorium. Feet kicking and arms flailing, he was so frantic to get away from the ashy snow he would have slipped to the bottom of the sinkhole if Maldon hadn't patiently, if distastefully, hauled him out.

"It's just dust," Maldon said as Polbeck fretfully brushed the grey snow from his boots and pants.

"You know what it's dust of," Polbeck answered, unapologetic for his finickiness.

Maldon indulged Polbeck for one minute, then jerked the chain to get him moving again. An hour later, Maldon decided to rest his trail-breaker. While they shared a chocolate bar, Maldon scanned the forest for blaze marks, new or old, hints of trails, ribbons of smoke rising into the grey sky, even buried buildings. He checked the pale disk of the sun in the overcast, seeking his direction.

It was always quiet during the day. Not so at night. When the frost-cracked trees went off like gunshots. When the wolves howled. Distantly, so far; they hadn't been attacked yet. There were enough easy kills to be had that the wolves didn't need to take chances with these relatively fit humans. This day was calm. That wasn't always the case. Sometimes the wind blew so hard and the snow swirled so maddeningly, Maldon had to rely on the feel of the chain to know if Polbeck was still attached to it. All was clear today. They could see for miles when they crested the little hills.

At midday they encountered even hillier land. When Polbeck fell off the trail the second time in two minutes, Maldon snapped, "Will you watch

where you are going, you imbecile!"

Polbeck struggled back to the trail. He had to climb up onto it as if it were a chest-high beam. As he wiped the snow from the round holes in his balaclava, he snapped back, "You lead, then! I'm going snow-blind. Let me rest my eyes on your back for a while."

"Rest your hands on my neck, you mean. Move on. To the left, to the left!"

Too late, Polbeck grabbed at the chain to soften the force of the yank on his neck. He howled in pain.

"Dramatics!" Maldon scoffed. "Keep this up and no supper, Polly."

"Stop! Stop! You're killing me with this chain! You're brutal!"

"Brutal like a doctor doing surgery. So ungrateful, Polly. Move!"

Polbeck set off again, truculently, not caring all that much if he was on the trail or not. "Killing me!" he cried.

"Killing you! How often have I saved your life?"

Polbeck ranted under his breath for a few minutes until he felt a light tug on his chain, which he obeyed immediately. He had learned that the light tug was a cautioning, not a correction. He turned to follow Maldon's gaze through the trees to the west.

"What?" Polbeck asked, his voice low.

"Sharp turn in the trail ahead."

Now that he'd pointed it out to him, even Polbeck could see the faint line of subtle scallops in the snow, heading west, parallel to a ridge they had been ascending the last quarter mile. When he looked back a Maldon, he smiled. He liked to see Maldon perplexed, suffering from a

little of the confusion that was so much a part of Polbeck's own life.

"Why would they change directions here?" He asked to wring further enjoyment from Maldon's confusion.

"Not a mind reader. All right, we leave the trail, Go up to the ridge top, then we'll circle west."

"I'm too tired," Polbeck sighed at the prospect of having to plunge through untracked snow.

"You don't know what tired is. Get going."

Polbeck floundered up the ridge. From its top they looked over a terrain riven with ravines and frozen streams. Maldon had Polbeck head west, just beneath the ridge line.

"Please, Maldon, take this chain off. I can walk more easily without it."

"Now, now. Without the chain, you'd run away and freeze to death or you'd make a move on me and I'd have to put you down."

"You can trust me. We can be partners."

"You are not trustworthy because you are not grateful. You are not grateful because you are not thinking. If you could think, you'd be grateful for all I've done for you."

"Selflessly, of course."

"If not for me, you'd still be up in Camlo with the rest of those idiots waiting for a spring that is not coming this year, and probably not next year. When it does finally come, there'll be nobody alive here to listen to the birds go twitter-twitter. If there are any birds. Round about now, your Camlo pals will have used up the food stores and will be eyeing one another. If you were still there, they'd go for you first because you look athletic.

You weren't raised on candies and doughnuts. I saved you from that."

"You don't know that's how it would be."

"I know."

"A convoy could have got through, or an airlift."

Maldon laughed pleasantly. "You leave a lot to be desired as a trail-breaker, but you're a pretty good court jester, Polly! Convoys and airlifts are done with. The only way out of this is south, and you and I—this endearing, enduring duo—are going to make it. If you stick with me. That's why I can't let you loose; you'd harm yourself. How could I live with myself if that happened?"

"I won't try anything! I just don't want to be... This is degrading!"

"I told you, we get to Quamlis, I let you go."

"What if there's no food there?"

"Then I won't let you go. But I do promise, once we find spring, you'll be free. Though if I were you, I'd follow me. I'm a good catch."

"Follow you? Where? I thought Quamlis was your destination?"

"The first destination, idiot! Six months from now, Quamlis will be as bad as Camlo. Now shhh."

Maldon pulled out his pistol, waggled a finger at Polbeck, then plowed his way westward along the ridge top. He stood motionless for a minute, then beckoned Polbeck to join him. In all the miles they'd traveled together, this was the first time Maldon had broken trail for Polbeck. He enjoyed every inch of it.

He soon saw what it was that held Maldon's interest. Less than fifty yards away, in the shelter of a clump of

trees, stood a lurid orange pup tent, three-quarters covered with snow. There were no tracks around it.

"They've gone to earth," Maldon said. "Go check it out."

Polbeck, eyes wide open, shook his head. "Anyone in there will be dead."

Maldon gave Polbeck an uncomprehending stare, then quietly laughed. He said, "Polly, you don't even know what nightmares are to be preferred. I was guessing that the tent people are alive and you'd be drawing their fire. If they are dead, you're getting off easy." Maldon dropped his end of the chain, then aimed his pistol at the tent, though he made it clear that he would aim it at Polbeck if he had to.

He didn't have to. Though doubly fearful now about what he might find at the campsite, Polbeck plunged down the slope, shouting out that he was unarmed. At the tent flap, he paused, alternately silent and listening, then shouting at the top of his lungs. Finally he nerved himself to enter.

"They're dead as I said!" Polbeck called out, gloating.

Maldon hurried down the slope before Polbeck thought to ransack the tent for weapons. There were two bodies in sleeping bags, a backpack, a heap of empty tin cans, and a pile of half-burnt firewood. At the end, the people had brought the fire into the tent in a final effort to keep warm.

"Look for food," Maldon said as he started unzipping the sleeping bags.

Polbeck said, "They would have eaten any food they had."

"Not necessarily. Maybe they

didn't starve—maybe they froze to death or died of radiation poisoning. Ah! A matched set. Man and woman." He found a pistol and a knife on the man. The woman had been unarmed. He guessed they had died a few days earlier.

"A can! A can of corn!" Polbeck excitedly waved his find in the air until he looked over at the emaciated corpses Maldon had uncovered.

Maldon wasn't put off by the corpses. He was squatting, carefully examining the bodies. He said, "Good. Froze to death, I bet. Not radiation in any case. So—will you carve or shall I?"

Polbeck thought that was a sick joke, at first. "No—you can't. You can't be—"

"I guess that means I carve. You get the fire going."

"Maldon!"

"Fire! Now!"

Appalled and disgusted, Polbeck floundered as far from the tent as his chain would allow. As he snapped off dead limbs from the trees, he tried to shut his ears to the sounds coming from the tent. At length, Maldon emerged with two hunks of meat in the cooking pot. He soon had them sizzling over the fire. Despite his disgust, Polbeck crouched near the flames to warm himself.

"I did the woman," Maldon told him. "They say women have more body fat than men. We can use the fat."

"I thought ... I thought this was beyond even you."

"They're beyond caring, Polly. You'd rather the wolves get them?"

"Yes, I would."

"And that wolf we ate last week? What do you think it had been feeding on recently—pork chops? Tofu? This looks done." Maldon speared a piece with his knife and held it to his nose appraisingly. He couldn't say what the aroma reminded him of, so he shrugged his shoulders and took a bite.

Polbeck gagged and turned away. Maldon yanked his chain. "You eat! If you don't eat, you can't work. If you can't work, you're no good to me."

"You eat it! I'll eat the corn."

"We—need—meat!" He flicked a piece at Polbeck, who automatically caught it. Maldon saw there'd be no forcing this point, so he retreated into the tent. Left alone, Polbeck took a tiny bite. He started crying, but he kept eating and forced himself to keep it down.

In another hour, fed and warmed and rested, they started out again. They chanced upon what they thought was a logging trail and made good time. After a mile, Polbeck, silent since the noon stopover, whimpered, "When did you eat ... human flesh before?"

"Never."

"Then how could you so easily—?"

"It's called survival instinct, Polly. It's why I'm on this end of the chain and you're on the other."

An hour later they broached a hill-top and found below them a broad, forested valley split by a black ribbon of fast-moving water. Maldon cursed it. All the rivers they'd come across so far had been frozen. There'd be no walking across this one. That might mean a long detour.

Polbeck was pleased. Maldon con-

sternated twice in one day. "Where now, then?" Polbeck asked snidely.

"South, of course. We'll find a way across."

"Why didn't you keep to the high-ways? Because you knew the people we met would make you let me go."

"Because the people we met would have shot us for our boots and barbecued us."

Up north, maybe, Polbeck conceded to himself. But they'd come a long way south. People here would—

As if Maldon could read Polbeck's mind, he said, "And don't be getting your hopes up about anyone around here letting you go. Anyone who sees us will call me a humanitarian. They'll say, 'There you are, generously saving the life of a simpleton. Does human kindness know no limits?'"

"You really are mad."

"Then thank me for my madness. Some spring day you'll wake to find the chain gone, and me gone, too. Then in your heart you will say, 'I owe everything to that life-saver.' You'll miss me, Polly. Some day we might even meet again in a tropical town and you will shout for all the world to hear, 'There is my life-saver, my gentle Maldon.'"

Polbeck shook his head. Yes, mad.

They headed west, atop the river-girding hills. Before Polbeck was too exhausted from his trail breaking to speak, he sniped, "Why can't we use snowshoes or skis?"

"Good idea. You will the snowshoes out of nothing. I'll conjure the skis."

"At least unchain me! We'll be partners. I'll do as you say, but I'll be free and you won't be a slaver."

"You spend more energy on that tired rant than you do breaking trail. If I let you go you'll be all right for the first day, then you'll get ideas about making me take a turn breaking trail or fetching firewood."

"And why can't you?" Polbeck screamed, stopping dead in his tracks and spinning around. "If you are such an expert at wilderness survival, why can't you do anything for yourself?"

"I could, but that would leave me too tired to stay alert."

"For what?"

"Say I free you. Where do you go? Which direction? Which trail do you follow? But of course that wouldn't be a concern for you because you can't even see the trails under the snow. Keeping alive out here isn't all brute labor. It's thinking, too."

Maldon flicked the chain. Polbeck dispiritedly turned and resumed plodding forward. As they dropped into the river valley, the forest grew thicker. In the midst of one tangle of brush, Polbeck was furiously slapping at the snagging limbs when he felt a soft tug on his chain. He followed Maldon's gaze. Polbeck started—he thought they had encountered a bear. After a moment, he realized that the big shaggy creature a hundred paces away with its arms raised was a man. That realization was no more comforting: these days, men could be far more dangerous than rogue bears. This stranger, though, kept his hands held high.

Maldon tethered Polbeck, then stepped forward to parlay with the stranger. Polbeck intently watched the two men talking and gesturing. Once they looked right at him. Fi-

nally, Maldon told Polbeck to hand over the can of corn and the caribou meat.

"The what?"

"The caribou meat left over from noon. Wake up!"

Polbeck shrugged off his backpack and squeamishly dug out the package of human flesh. Maldon handed it and the can of corn to the stranger who tucked it all into his coat and, without a word, headed off on the trail they had been making.

"Who is he?" Polbeck asked, watching the man disappear. "Where is he going?"

"He's a traveler like us. I put him on to that tent we found."

"Why did you give him our ... that meat?"

"There you are, ungrateful again. What he told me has saved you hours of trail-breaking. If we follow his trail, we'll come to a town and a bridge that's still standing."

"A town? A town with people?" Polbeck's elation quickly faded. "Then why is he leaving it and going north? What sense does that make?"

"I told you I'm not a mind reader. I said 'Thank you for the information,' and I left him to his business."

Polbeck forgot his suspicion once they were under way. The big stranger's trail was very good; they made great time. After a half mile, though, he started to worry again.

"Maldon? We are going into this town?"

Maldon grunted an affirmative.

"Then let me go now. Please, Maldon. I won't lay charges against you. You can find someone else who'll be happy to travel with you the

rest of the way."

"Too much trouble breaking in someone new."

Polbeck was about to say that the townspeople wouldn't stand for slavery, then he bit off his words. If Maldon hadn't thought of that, too bad for him.

A half-hour later, Maldon tethered Polbeck again and jogged up the next hillside. He studied the terrain for a minute, then returned and ordered Polbeck to make camp. This was an earlier end of day than they usually had; Polbeck had hoped they'd get to this town by nightfall, but he never complained when it came to making camp for the night. He stamped out a square of packed snow and set up the tent. Maldon divided a chocolate bar, then, as he did every night, snapped handcuffs on Polbeck's wrists. As he was slipping the key into his pocket, he swung around to face the tent flap. The key fell to the packed snow floor.

"What was that?" Maldon asked. He drew out his pistol and peered through the tent flap. Polbeck, eyes glued to Maldon's back, snatched up the fallen key with his fingers. Maldon closed the flap again. "Frost cracking a tree, I guess," he said.

Maldon zipped Polbeck into his sleeping bag, then crawled into his own. He turned his back on Polbeck—and silently removed the bullets from his pistol.

MALDON WOKE WITH A SCREAM TEARING from his throat, his lower back one great flare of pain.

Polbeck was standing over him, face maniacal, hands tremblingly clutching the pistol he'd taken from

the sleeping man. "Up, up!" he cried. He gave Maldon another kick in the kidneys. "You get up! I've got the gun now!"

Maldon, almost blacking out from the agony, slowly rose to a sitting position. He raised a feeble hand to protect his face. "Now listen, Polly, don't get—"

Polbeck smashed the pistol butt against Maldon's temple. Maldon was only distantly aware of the next minutes as Polbeck kicked and pummeled him. Finally, he felt a hand grab hold of his hair and throw him out of the tent into the frigid grey dawn. Dressed only in his underwear, he was fully conscious now, though he was shivering his way towards hypothermia. Polbeck filled the sky with the steam of his triumphant laughter.

"Get the firewood. Build a fire. Now."

"I'm freezing. I never treated you like—"

"Not freezing enough if you can still talk." Polbeck shoved him into the sharp, gouging limbs of a pine.

At the last moment of consciousness, Maldon managed to start the fire, then he stumbled into the tent and rolled himself into a sleeping bag. Polbeck gave him five minutes, then dragged him out into the snow again. "Bigger sticks now!" he cried. "Hey, Maldy—bigger sticks now!"

Only when there was a steady fire did Polbeck allow Maldon to dress and warm himself. He gave him another five minutes, then ordered him to strike camp. When that was done, Polbeck tossed him one end of the chain. His face a mask of hate, he

said, "Put it on, Maldon."

"You've got the pistol. You don't need—"

"Put it on! We're going into town. Me the slaver, you the slave. We'll see how you like being the monkey on the leash."

Maldon, still shivering, hung his head. "All right, all right. I won't chain you anymore. We'll go as partners, like you suggested."

"Put the chain on. If you won't work, you're no good to me and I might as well drop you right now. I heard that somewhere."

Maldon stared at the chain, then fitted it around his neck and clicked shut the padlock.

MALDON IN THE LEAD NOW, POLBECK behind lashing him on, they set out. A wind was blowing snow, obliterating the stranger's trail from the day before. Maldon had to struggle through the shifting drifts, but he was still able to keep to the old trail. That wasn't exertion enough—Polbeck had him strike off through the untracked forest.

Maldon gave Polbeck a black glare. "Let's not get carried away, Mr. Polbeck. Fortune is fickle, remember."

"We're finding that out, aren't we? Now—head east."

"The town is west."

"The town will wait. East."

Maldon broke trail again through deep snow for two hours before Polbeck had had enough and redirected him west. Around noon they crested a final hill. The river was on their left, still black and unfrozen, but spanned one mile west by a wind-blasted bridge. The town lay at the north end of the bridge, a hundred

buildings hunched against the cold. Threads of smoke rose from perhaps a quarter of the buildings. There were people outside, dark ballooned figures gathering firewood.

Polbeck drove Maldon, making him go faster and faster towards the work detail.

"Hello, hello!" Polbeck shouted triumphantly when they reached the town limits. "Five weeks from Camlo! Five weeks in this cold, and we made it!"

The work party paused to stare at the newcomers. The man closest to Polbeck gave him an uncomprehending look; then, with surreal easiness, walked over and laid him out with the flat of his ax. Leaving Polbeck face-down in the snow, the townspeople unchained Maldon and escorted him to what used to be an inn but now served as the town hall because it had two large fireplaces and was easy to heat. They gave Maldon a hot drink and saw to his cuts and bruises and possible broken ribs.

After he had a chance to warm up and had a second cup pressed into his hands, Maldon said, "Thank God. Thank God. I've been a slave since we left Camlo five weeks ago."

A stocky thirty-year-old with a thick black beard seemed to be the town's mayor or strongman. He gave Maldon a suspicious look-over. He said, "You're twice the size of that slaver. How'd he keep you under control all that time?"

"A pistol makes a small man a lot bigger."

"The pistol we took from him had no bullets in it."

Maldon made to speak, then just let his mouth hang open.

The innkeeper and official host stalked over. "What got me," she said, "was the way he comes leaping into town as if he expected we'd hug him. Our town has a reputation—no slavers."

"Thank heaven for that," Maldon said.

"Until the river freezes over, anyone going south has to cross here," the woman said. "We stop all slavers. Just yesterday we stopped this big ox who had two slaves. We turned him back. That's our punishment for a slaver—the wilderness, on his own."

Maldon nodded. He was thawed out enough to lean back in his chair and look around. "Nice setup. Food, fuel, obviously a good security system."

His audience stiffened at this line of talk. The bearded man said, "We turn the slavers back. We free the slaves and feed them for a week, then we send them out, too. This town is for townspeople only. But we aren't cruel. We don't mind you settling in the general area. There's old hunting lodges in the woods you could try."

"I rather thought of moving on. South."

"That's your lookout. We're all sticking here. Once the weather turns, there's sure to be relief convoys and food-drops."

The innkeeper saw how unimpressed Maldon was. With a broken smile she said, "I think the slaver has brainwashed you. Most of these slavers have the idea that if we don't walk south into spring, we'll all die."

"I think there is merit to the idea. I might try it."

The welcoming committee shrugged. Your funeral.



"What...? What about the slaver?"

"Don't worry about him," the bearded man said. "You won't see him again. I don't think anyone ever sees them again. Once we turn them back, I think slavers feed on themselves. Literally."

Maldon was silent for a moment, then shook his head. "You know, that Polbeck—cruel, cruel bastard, of course—but he wasn't all that bad—he may have saved my life by bringing me this far south. I think if you let him go, we'd be able to proceed from here as equal partners."

"I know what you're thinking. Get him alone and kill him with your bare hands. I sympathize, but we can't allow that."

"I wouldn't kill him. I've already forgiven him."

"No."

"Look, I know this guy. After five weeks on the trail, believe me, I know him. I know he doesn't look like much, but he's a wilderness survival genius. If you let him go, he won't just disappear into the forest. He'll stay around here making raids on your town until he catches one of your people, then off he goes with his new slave. He'll do it. He's as cunning as he is cruel. The best thing you can do is just let him head south across the bridge, get him out of your hair as fast as you can. Give me a day's start, then let him go."

The innkeeper said, "He'd be following your trail. He could catch up with you."

"Doubtful. But in case he does, give me his pistol: if he does catch up with me, I'll tell him you also gave me some bullets. I'd be safe then. In fact, I'd be willing to leave right now. You

were going to feed me for a week? Give me two days' rations and you'll be five days ahead. What d'you say?"

To themselves they said, You must be mad. Walking south, a former slave with a slaver on his tail. Mad. But aloud, the mayor said, "It's your lookout," and handed over the pistol.

"Great. I'll just warm my toes a few minutes more and be off. Now, this Polbeck is a piece of work. The most amazing egomaniac and liar I ever met. When he wakes, he'll give you some cock and bull story, no doubt. Pay him no mind. This time tomorrow, you just poke him in the back and send him across that bridge. After that, as you say, it's my lookout."

POLBECK'S STEPS SLOWED THEN STUTTERED to a stop at the end of the bridge. The trail ahead of him staggered past a few snow-buried buildings, then curved south, disappearing into the shrouded forest. Behind him, the town exodus committee waited at the far end of the bridge, rifles in hand.

Polbeck bellowed, "It's him! He's the slaver, I tell you! He planned this!"

One man made as if to aim his rifle. With a hopeless whimper, Polbeck dashed away from the bridge, past the buildings, into the clasp of the forest. For the first mile or so, the spotty trail followed an old highway. For at least that stretch, he saw no one ahead of him, no one waiting, no trails branching off. The trail was good, too. Maybe Maldon had realized he didn't need anyone to break trail for him anymore.

Polbeck didn't know what to do—hurry, dawdle, try to live in one of the buildings he came across, if he could find one whose roof hadn't collapsed

from the weight of the snow. Whatever he did, he couldn't stay near the town; the townspeople had made that clear. So, haltingly, head swiveling to look in all directions, he continued down the trail. After a couple of miles, the trail inexplicably left the highway and plunged into the forest. He followed as best he could, but after a while, he wasn't sure he was on the correct trail anymore. Was he following a moose? By midafternoon, his neck was aching from all the nervous scanning he'd done. He hadn't seen anyone yet. Several times when he'd paused to rest, though, a tree had popped in the cold and his heart had half-leapt out of his chest. Sometimes he thought the wind in the trees whispered his name.

When he still had two hours of grey daylight to travel by, he decided to make camp for the night. He'd been moving too fast, he was sweating, over-tired, cold. Numbly he stamped out a square of packed snow, got out his fire-pot and gathered firewood as he always had.

He took out the box of matches the town had given him out of charity, but even with them he couldn't make the kindling ignite. With each match that failed, he swore more, panicked more, and tore another from the book. Finally, he saw a tiny blue flame catch—at the same time that he heard the clink of chain behind him. He refused to look, but when his attention returned to his kindling, he saw that the little flame had gone out.

"Well, it's a sheltered spot, anyway," Maldon said. "Nice packed snow. See, you are learning, Polly." He flicked the chain again.

Polbeck remained absolutely still for half a minute, then reached behind, grabbed the end of the chain, and fitted it around his neck.

"Very good, Polly. Now, get some bigger limbs while I get the fire going. Good trail, isn't it? I'd say Quamlis isn't more than a month away. We'll make it. And someday you'll wake with the spring sun shining in your face and I'll be gone and you'll say, 'Thank God for Maldon.'" ❁

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* WAYNE HARRISON received an Honors B.A. in English and History, and his Masters degree in Library Science from the University of Western Ontario in 1986. While living on the family farm in Ilderton, Ontario, his life was unfortunately cut short in a car accident on July 31, 1997. His mother, Catherine Harrison, accepted our offer to buy his story about a month later. Wayne's favorite authors included Dickens, Arthur C. Clarke, and Tolkien. The loss of his life, voice, and talent, is our loss. "Walking Into Spring" was Wayne's first professional sale.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* Today's artist is brought to you by the number 7 and the letter X. MARC HOLMES works as a game developer and freelance illustrator. His hobbies are working late and coming to the office on the weekend. You can visit his website at <[www.mholmes.com](http://www.mholmes.com)> or make contact at <[marc@mholmes.com](mailto:marc@mholmes.com)>.

# ASK MR. SCIENCE!

**Ms. DM of Coquitlam asks:**

**Q:** Why does my cat have extra toes?

**A:** Cats have four toes and a dew-claw on each foot. The creature you describe is, in actuality, the larval form of the Sasquatch, or Bigfoot. In the spring of its fourteenth year, your “pet” will seek out a very secure hiding place, where it will spin a dense cocoon around itself. It will emerge six weeks later, a fully formed Yeti, only 40 cm tall.

**Ms. FH of Vancouver asks:**

**Q:** Why do cats make that strange coughing sound when observing birds?

**A:** Cats, unfortunately, are the victims of a major genetic defect. While stalking, they attempt to decoy their prey by imitating the birds’ chirping vocalization. But because of a severe error in all cats’ sense of hearing caused by this genetic mutation, their imitation of chirps comes out as a growling cough. They do not respond to being called by their names for the same reason.

**Mr. DB of Toronto asks:**

**Q:** If bread always falls buttered side down, and cats always land on their feet, what would happen if I tied a piece of buttered bread on a cat’s back, and then dropped it?

**A:** WARNING! Do not proceed with this experiment! Whenever immutable laws of nature are pitted against one another, the results are always catastrophic. The extinction of the dinosaurs was the result of such an event. The “Big Bang” was another.

**Mr. ST of Vancouver asks:**

**Q:** Why is there no Channel 1 on my TV set?

**A:** Mr. Science’s television set receives Channel 1. Yours is clearly defective.

**Ms. SB of Coquitlam asks:**

**Q:** Why did the Titanic sink?

**A:** Although it was kept secret from the passengers, crew, and public, the *Titanic* was engaged in a metallurgical testing program aimed at finding a new alloy for rivets. One large hull plate was fastened in place with rivets made of a sodium/steel alloy that had been formulated incorrectly by a dyslexic chemist who reversed the intended proportions of 3% sodium and 97% iron. The sodium remained reactive, and slowly dissolved in the cold seawater. When the plate fell away, the “unsinkable” *Titanic* sank. ❁



# Bottle of Skin

Wes Smiderle

*illustrated by Andrea Baeza*

A GAGGLE OF CLUB-CRAWLERS FLOWED PAST, THEIR FLESH dyed a gentle shade of mauve. The group paused long enough to squint in the window, moving purple fingertips through damp curls. All moved away quickly when they saw Mariko's face peering back at them. A rooftop holo-board launched a row of rippled body parts in the air, selling perfume and cologne to anyone glancing up at the sky. She stared at it from behind bar-covered windows, waves of muddy rain oozing across the glass. She glanced down at her watch—22:28. Mr. Jiggs was late. Not a good sign.

Mariko had sat near a window to avoid the diner's many mirrors. She disliked reflective surfaces; they made her jumpy. The entire diner made her uneasy—a decaying, turn-of-the-century burger trough buried in a slummy nowhere corner of Metro. The name, Nicky's, buzzing electric in sloppy blue neon tubing. The seats were pea-green vinyl, each table topped in yellowed Formica and fifty-year-old coffee stains. A few customers sat scattered in separate corners, dark and sullen. They stared down at plates filled with grey lumps of nutrient covered in a sprinkle of flavor. She had skipped food and taken a chance on the coffee—thick, greasy, left sandy bits stuck between her teeth. Nicky's didn't feel like the kind of place to be planning a professional assassination.

She enjoyed the sound of that: *assassination*. Though she never really thought of her assignments that way. It made them sound too fussy and elaborate. Mariko was more casual about her work; she killed easily. But no guns—too loud, belched flame, and left behind an ugly stench. She preferred the quiet, inevitable movement of a knife, or rivulet of poison trickling into an open wound.

Devices that allowed her to walk out of a situation as calmly as she had entered. That's what the hits were to her—situations.

Earlier that night, Cleo—an old acquaintance—had asked if she wanted to cruise the clubs. "Can't," she replied. "I've got a situation."

Cleo had squealed with delight. "Go girl!" Thought she meant a man. But there were no men in her life and she never cruised any clubs. She went out alone, usually at night, and preferably in the rain so she could tug a hood down low to hide her face.

Mariko was ugly. It was a fact she had tried most of her life to accept gracefully, without success. She would often find herself, late at night, staring into the bathroom mirror—the only mirror in her apartment. She leaned close, nose against the glass, hypnotised by her own offensive appearance, studying each extravagant flaw. Wondering why.

One eye sat nearly an inch below the other. They were like random parts swiped from other faces and thrown together on hers, left staring practically in the opposite direction. The bone structure of her entire face was painfully twisted, as though a hammer had struck the bridge of her nose and sent one section spinning away from the other. But it hadn't been a hammer, just a few too many dense non-aqueous phase liquids floating in the neighborhood groundwater. Most of the rest of her body had been badly scarred by her stepmother, whose own skin was smooth as ice and bleached of all color. Her father had been easily bewitched by the shiny blonde lap-goddess with

little patience for children—especially ugly ones. The scars brought on by the woman were easy enough to hide compared to her face. She stood tall and strong, which helped slightly. Long legs and a nice ass, but the face of a Frankenstein monster.

Her friends, and her father, had tried consoling her with platitudes. *Beauty is skin deep*, they told her. But she knew better. Didn't matter how a person felt inside, or even what they looked like. What mattered was everyone else, the world around her. What came through their eyes travelled straight to the heart then moved back up, murmured from ear to ear later. Girl, they think you're ugly—you are ugly. That was it. All the inner warmth in the universe wouldn't change that.

"Mind some company?"

She whirled around a bit too quickly. The man stood right next to her, one hand resting on the table as he leaned close. He did a good job of pretending not to be shocked by her appearance. Too good, really. He must have seen pictures. Most people—most men—never bothered hiding their surprise. This one had none of the typical disgust or disappointment. This one must be the new Mister Jiggs.

"Sit down," she said.

He sat across from her, clearly pleased with himself. A young man, completely out of place with his face shiny and scrubbed, his body wrapped neatly in an expensive new suit. He looked handsome and confident, each quality emphasizing, and feeding off, the other. She couldn't tell if he was corporate or government. Her targets were too diverse to

provide any clue. Usually all Mariko knew about them was that they had to die. It was all she needed to know.

The waitress arrived, targeting Jiggs with an appraising leer. "Getcha anything?"

"Coffee, black."

When the waitress left, Jiggs brought a piece of glass the size and shape of a beer coaster out from his jacket. He cupped the disc gently in one huge, smooth hand and sent it across the table. "Edgar Vandergill."

She tucked the unit next to her plate and tapped the button at its base. A crisp digital image of Vandergill appeared. He looked like old money, well-bred and carefully sculpted, with skin gently tanned to good leather—the best that surgery and skin dyes could produce. Mariko had killed a dozen men just like him.

"He'll be one of several hundred guests at the opening of an exhibit at the old National Gallery tomorrow night. He'll arrive at 22:15, but before going in, he'll stop in the alley on the building's west side to consume illegal substances, probably drop pills. He'll be there for three minutes, no longer. That's when you'll do it."

She said nothing, mentally leafing through the various ways this plan could stumble into disaster. There were a lot. "I don't like it," she said. "During a party, I mean. How do you know he'll be alone?"

"He won't be. I expect he'll be accompanied by at least one guest. Nail them all in the alley. Your bonus increases according to the number of people with him."

Mariko liked that even less. "Two people, possibly more, outdoors, next

to a party swarming with security."

"Not swarming."

"Why now, at a party?"

"Because that's how it will be. There are no why's allowed within the Agency, Mariko. I thought you'd realized that by now."

She looked away, to the window, and cleared her throat. "It's a high-class gathering. How do I ... how will I get past security? I mean, how will I..."

Jiggs sat there, waiting. Making her say it.

"You know what I mean. My appearance. I won't fit in."

"We arranged an invite easily enough." He smiled. "As for your appearance, I can fix that as well. Temporarily, at least. I have an associate. She handles this sort of thing."

He pulled a glossy brochure from his pocket. She read the title quickly before sliding it into her purse. *Nu Looko*.

"I don't like this."

"Cheer up, dear," Jiggs said, very smug now as he sat back in his chair, enjoying the moment. "For a few hours, you'll be one of the beautiful people."

THE PARLOR WAS IN A ROUGH PART OF Metro. She had expected the Agency to use a high-class specialist in some swanky uptown office. What could a second-rate cutter do for her? Make things worse, probably. The next morning, she called the parlor via the T3 and discovered there was already an appointment set up for her at six-thirty.

She packed evening clothes, though she suspected proper attire

would be provided at Nu Looke. She wanted to be prepared. She also brought her gold, crescent-moon earrings—a good luck charm.

When she arrived, Mariko found Nu Looke was tucked away in the basement of a decaying tenement only a few blocks from Nicky's. Today, the holo-boards advertised aftershave using a different row of equally perfect male and female forms.

The lobby was deserted and she could barely make out the fading sign: Nu Looke, Room 101. She walked down the staircase, kicking past the rats and the filth. Room 101 was at the end of a narrow corridor, the only door not boarded up. She knocked on the glass panels made opaque by successive layers of grime.

The door opened, but only a crack. "Yes?"

"I have an appointment," Mariko said.

There was a pause before it opened wide, revealing a boy, no more than twelve, standing in a dusty waiting room. "Come in."

There was a desk, some chairs and, at the opposite end of the room, a steel door. The boy told her to wait, then opened the other door and entered a dark corridor, much cleaner than the waiting room. The door was several inches thick; she could hear the click of the locking mechanism activating itself after it shut behind him.

Mariko sat down, among the dust and the magazines. Childhood memories fluttered about inside her stomach. *Please, make me beautiful. Not beautiful, just normal. Doesn't*

*even have to be everywhere. Leave the scars, but fix the face. Maybe just a little, a nudge here and there, so the eyes aren't quite so far apart...* And here she was again, waiting for another chance to plea-bargain with the Fates.

The worst thing was most people had similar flaws, some spidery crack spoiling their delicate symmetry. She saw it constantly. Uneven limbs, lopsided faces, one breast bigger than the other. The flaw always worsened with age; time was the enemy. A continental drift of the body, turning smooth plains into jagged mountain ranges and defacing even the most delicate symmetry. Completely, utterly common. Especially among those considered beautiful; the ones people made fools of themselves for, just to gain a little of their attention. The ones she wished she could be. Her flaws were a bit more extreme, that was all.

"Miss?"

"Yes?" Mariko said, her voice meek and distant. She coughed. "Yes."

It was the boy, peering from behind the steel door. "It is time, miss."

She followed him in.

THE ROOM RESEMBLED AN OPERATING theatre, though not as sterile. The air felt warm, the lighting dim and surprisingly forgiving; she found herself resenting how much she appreciated that. The theatre was almost pleasant—even with that steel table and its leather straps.

A woman appeared from behind heavy curtains, wrapped in shadows and moving quietly across the room like a ghost. She wore loose robes,



virtually transparent, giving her the appearance of a high priestess in some strange, sylvan cult.

When she passed through a hazy cone of light, Mariko gasped.

What had at first appeared to be makeup was actually skin, pale as white powder with fluid puddles of color washing across its surface. Uniform dye jobs were common enough, but this was quite different. It was color in motion, vibrant and dynamic. The soft orange of a peach travelled down her chest and shoulders, merging with the burning yellows and reds of a sunset that came creeping up her arms and legs. The woman seemed to have the skin of a cuttlefish, wild pigment pumping out a shining stream of color in thick waves. All of it moved over the surface of her body like the shadows of passing clouds along a smooth field.

"I have other tricks, much more impressive," the woman said, noting Mariko's astonishment. "My name is Piel."

But Mariko didn't respond. She could only stare in amazement and admiration. Piel, in turn, studied her—but neither disgust nor shock crossed her face. It was the first time Mariko was struck dumb by another's appearance while they seemed unconcerned with hers.

"What ... your skin ... how do you do that?"

"Flesh is my palette," Piel smiled.

The strange woman offered no further explanation and told her to undress and lie on the table. When Mariko did so, she was subjected to a series of painful injections, all along her spine. Metal pinches followed by

a cold burn.

After the injections, Piel brought out a long glass cylinder filled with a milky liquid. She cracked open the glass and let the strange semi-solid mixture spill slowly all over Mariko's body. The viscous goo was ice-cold and had the consistency of mercury, although it felt vaguely flesh-like. Piel spread the substance all over Mariko, paying special attention to her face, until her entire body was gripped with a chill that gradually dissipated into a million microscopic drills burrowing into her flesh. Soon, that passed as well and her whole body grew numb.

During this strange massage, she noticed Piel's massive hands. Despite their size, they appeared feminine, with long, smooth fingers and gentle movements. The deep blue fingernails gliding smoothly at first, mesmerizing. Mariko lay quietly, only dimly aware of the paralysis spreading over her body like a layer of ice.

Then, with no warning, it happened. The calm fingernails grew sharp with purpose, plunging in and digging deep. Bending bone and grabbing flesh by the fistful, pulling and pounding as though Mariko's body was just a mound of clay. She felt nothing. The whole experience may as well have been happening to someone else on a T3 screen.

"The total surface area of your skin is roughly five and a half meters," Piel said. She spoke softly, as though murmuring a nursery rhyme to a sleepy child. "Its weight is twelve kilograms, give or take. Skin, being twice as heavy as the brain, is the largest of the human body's organs."

Her hands moved up from

Mariko's chest to her neck and then her face. She could hear the rips and tears. She tried to tense up, but her muscles wouldn't respond. She wondered about the goo. A cross between nano-tech and some kind of chemical bath? She knew asking would be pointless. This woman was with the Agency. Lying was part of her survival instinct.

Gradually, Mariko ceased to care about what was happening. Her body became old clothing left in a crumpled heap. The true Mariko lay floating somewhere above—comfortable and without worries.

"Skin is made up of two main layers," Piel continued. "The epidermis and, beneath that, the thicker dermis layer. The outer layer of the epidermis is covered in dead skin that forms a rough, tough outer fabric."

A wet sensation spread across Mariko's cheeks, or what was left of them. She could feel bone and cartilage grow damp and soft, as though decaying before being bent and rearranged. What if this was a joke? What if she came out of it looking worse than before—again? Yet, somehow, she couldn't bring herself to worry.

"The dead cells protect the nondividing living cells, which lie much deeper within the epidermis. Meanwhile, the dermis is galvanized by a series of interwoven protein fibres. It is even further strengthened by a series of fat cells separating the dermis from the inner muscle."

Piel stopped moving, peering with clinical interest into her patient's eyes.

"Put simply, skin is not thin."

Then Piel sighed and stepped out of Mariko's field of vision. She felt a

tight, steel-sharp pinch somewhere near her thigh and then a deep fatigue washed over her in a slow tide. "You will sleep now."

The dreams were groggy and terrible. They seemed to go on forever.

"HOW LONG WAS I OUT?"

Piel was sorting through various sharp-edged tools, her flesh alternating between soothing shades of ocean blue and eggplant purple. "Half an hour," she said, not turning around. "No more than that."

Mariko felt peculiar, as if someone had dressed her up in clothes that didn't quite fit—tight and pinching in all the wrong places. Yet she felt no pain and she was completely alert.

Piel presented her with a parcel: a sleek dress, some jewelry, and a shiny pair of black leather heels. She had little experience with heels, but she put them on anyway, along with the dress.

"How does it feel to be beautiful?"

"Beauty doesn't exist," she replied mildly. "It's a lie. People seek out what society tells them is beautiful. They seek out prizes and trophies. Not true beauty."

"That's of little concern to me," Piel shrugged. "I can provide the lie or the truth. Now, would you like a mirror?"

Mariko almost said no, then decided remaining ignorant of her own appearance would be a bad idea. This was an undercover job; she had to know what she looked like. "All right."

Piel wheeled in a body-length mirror, ridiculously old-fashioned with its wooden frame covered in flowery etchings. "My work is only temporary,"

Piel said. "A few hours at best before the flesh and bone fall back into their natural shape. Two A.M. at most, I would say. The aches and pains will last for many weeks afterwards. I have painkillers for you."

When Piel finished speaking, Mariko looked into that cold sheet of glass. And gasped.

The network of spiky scars along her arms and legs was gone. Her body had been smoothed out, like a rumpled bedsheet. She only barely noticed this, however, in comparison to her face. And it was her face. The eyes were solid and facing the glass evenly, exactly where they should be. Soft emerald green touched off by sharp, angular eyebrows. The nose, although not perfect by pop-beauty standards, looked somehow right. It suited her face, bringing it above and beyond the sum of its parts. She had expected to see a mask, as foreign as the shining faces flashed across the holo-boards uptown. But it was her own face, her own eyes, as they could have been—as she should have been—beautiful.

IT WAS EASY TO HATE THEM.

The beautiful people, gliding up and down the boulevard with perfect bodies packaged in sharp suits, shiny baubles, plunging necklines. Some had dye jobs, but only very conservative colors—brushed gold, a dull, demure silver or antique brass. Pools of light poured down from the streetlamps, clinging to their bodies and reflecting the inner glow of their wealth. Four entire city-blocks had been closed off for the party. At their request.

They spent, consumed, cavorted, travelled—experiencing everything in great, wild gulps. Heedless of context or consequence. The type who complained when it took them more than an hour to get from New York to San Francisco. Mariko had long ago learned there were only two kinds of people in the world: those who could get to anywhere on the planet in a few hours, and those who couldn't get out of their neighborhood with all the time in the world.

She believed herself capable of killing all of them without a second thought. She also believed the feeling was mutual.

Exiting the limousine, she took a few steps—shaky in her heels—towards the sidewalk where a thin group of security guards stood, lined up like toy soldiers. No doubt paid careless wages to watch the beautiful people make fools of themselves. Most, though, had their eyes on her. She wondered if they suspected. Was there a flaw in the disguise?

One guard's eyes clung steadily to her body and she considered killing him when his hands suddenly reached out and she flinched ... but he was touching her arm to steady her balance. He guided her gently over the curb and smiled, as though thanking her. "Have a nice time, miss."

It was such a bizarre event, Mariko had to pause in wonder. This strange man, smiling and drinking her in. Helping simply for the pleasure of being close to her.

She was still marvelling over the curb when she spotted Vandergill stepping out of his car. Even in this crowd, he gleamed like some polished

jewel. A woman at his side—no, two women. Blonde holo-models, they could have been squeezed from the same tube. They murmured in each other's ears, giggling. Quite loose, probably a bit high already. Security stayed tight around them as they walked down the sidewalk and ... right past the alleyway. Vandergill didn't even glance at it. He proceeded up the gallery steps, a blonde bauble dangling from each arm. He merged quickly with the rest of the crowd as they all poured inside.

Mariko stopped moving, her throat dry as a strip of sandpaper. He had ignored the alley. Jiggs had been wrong. No, they were never wrong. Jiggs had lied. This was a setup. She wasn't meant to kill Vandergill, then. She was meant to fail, perhaps. So they could cut her loose. That explained the change in Jiggs. But why stage this elaborate ruse? Why go through the effort of fixing her looks?

She shrugged her worries aside; to panic now would mean disaster. She moved smoothly up the steps, slipping among the crowd as though they were all standing still, and then into the dizzy warmth of the gallery. Surely, the Agency was watching her. An Insurance Agent—at least one—peering out from somewhere, maintaining a discreet distance. There was always someone watching. She wondered if killing Vandergill would even make a difference. Probably not, but there was little else for her to try. She had to corner him and finish the situation—quickly.

After passing through the murky entrance chamber, the main gallery opened high above her like a

cathedral, filled with old paintings and sculptures for all the guests to peruse and admire—or to simply rest their drinks on. The core of the party gathered under the high, vaulted ceilings of the main hall, but many of them spilled over into dozens of smaller chambers. Long narrow panels of reflective glass were everywhere, more than enough to allow guests to surreptitiously survey others, or themselves, no matter where they were standing.

It took Mariko several minutes to spot Vandergill. The toy women were nowhere to be seen; he was alone in the crowd. Scanning the floor for some more easy prey, no doubt. She decided to oblige him.

She caught his eye quickly. For a moment, he seemed to recognize her. She lured him away from the hall—all it took was that glance. Easy enough, but also something she had never done before; but she had watched it being done. The thrill the act brought her now was indescribable. She moved slowly, enthralled with her new power, the invisible hooks floating from her perfect body, seeming to snag smouldering stares from everyone in her path. Trying to maintain her cool, she lured her prey through the tight labyrinth of smaller chambers, past landscapes and portraits, getting further from the center until the lights were dark and the noise dim. Finally, when they were safely isolated, she turned to face him.

Vandergill did not smile. Instead, he pulled a knife from inside his jacket and began running towards her.

She reacted quicker than thought,

slipping free from her high heels and crouching low. She took hold of Vandergill as he approached, redirecting him up and over—towards the wall behind her. But instead of crashing into it, Vandergill dropped the knife and landed solidly, almost delicately, on his feet. He regained his balance with casual ease.

She was surprised, but not impressed. She reached for one of her crescent earrings, then changed her mind as Vandergill made his next pass, just as clumsy as the first. He was sweating heavily, and seemed distracted. The veins along his forehead were visibly throbbing.

She wasted no time. She caught his upper body in a lock, then brought him straight down against the marble floor—his face bouncing once. He lay there for a moment, stunned. She straightened up and dropped again, stopping short so that his throat was pinned between her shin and the cold tiles.

“Bitch,” he snarled, his bloody teeth clenched. “Money-hungry bitch.”

“Who sent you? ... Who do you think I am?”

But he made no other sound, or even an attempt to struggle. Mariko saw something in his eyes, a ferocity she hadn't expected. She saw something of herself in Vandergill and it disturbed her. With one quick burst of strength, she brought her leg down, ploughing through soft resistance until she could feel her knee touching the floor beneath. Vandergill made a spattered gurgling noise and was silent.

She sat down beside the corpse,

pondering her next move. Barely ten minutes had passed when she suddenly noticed Vandergill's features shifting, melting slowly like wax, undergoing a strange but familiar transformation...

WHEN SHE REACHED THE NU LOOKE building, she didn't even bother trying the door.

She entered through a window on the ground floor. When she heard someone shuffling in the darkness, Mariko tossed Vandergill's knife, and the movement ceased. The rest of the ground floor was deserted—except for one room, right above Nu Looke. Two men with guns stood there, idle and bored. Mariko killed them, retrieving a pair of throwing knives from one of the corpses. She found a staircase descending from an antechamber. As she stepped down, she could see the boy from the waiting room crouched in the gloom below. She killed him too.

She continued down a narrow corridor, expecting more resistance. Instead, harsh halogen bulbs opened wide, shining hard spots of light across the floor as though to guide her way. The area around her eyes began to ache, but she followed the circles. Soon, there was a door. Mariko stopped several meters before reaching it.

And waited.

Nearly an hour passed, but she barely moved, standing silent with a thin throwing knife held delicately in each hand. The ache in her face soon spread to her temples; her thoughts grew slippery.

Finally the door opened to reveal

a woman, her ghostly skin swathed in soft colors. Her voice was low, but as harsh as the burning halogens.

"I thought you would enter."

"I'm not entirely stupid."

"No," Piel said. "Not entirely."

"Who are you working for?"

"Myself."

"No one works for themselves."

"I do."

"Who was Vandergill?" Mariko demanded, the edge of each knife beginning to tremble. Sweat trickled down the sides of her face. Her new face, rippling and sore.

"He was an assassin, like you. An angry outsider, eager to kill and easy to manipulate."

"Ugly too?"

A coy smile crossed Piel's features. "Lacking symmetry, yes."

Mariko threw the first knife, missing Piel completely. The thin blade landed in the corner by the door. Piel didn't even acknowledge she had thrown it.

"You murder easily because you feel the world has done you a disservice," she said. "It hurts you to be different, to be mistreated because of it. However, you don't realize how much there is of that in everyone. Even beautiful people. You're not as much of an outsider as you think."

"What's the point of all this? What did you get from Vandergill? ... From me?"

"You were experiments. I had many, but needed only one finished product," Piel said with a slight bow to Mariko. "And now, after a successful field test, you are that product."

"Who are you? What power do you have?"

"I control beauty, and beauty is like wealth—the power it grants comes from those who lack it," Piel said. "Imagine what would happen if beauty were a dispensable product, packaged in an attractive bottle and available to all? Imagine if each person could choose their face, their entire physical form, with the click of a mouse button."

Mariko didn't speak. Her headache intensified, muffling surrounding noise as it burrowed thick roots deeper inside her skull. A sickening dizziness rolled around her brain, moving in sludgy waves.

"Will everyone choose to look the same? Safety in numbers, jumping eagerly on the assembly line of gods and goddesses. Who can say for certain? ...But we will both find out someday. Someday soon."

Mariko threw her second knife, barely aware of the wet metal leaving her trembling fingertips. She missed the mark, for a final time. She watched it clatter in the opposite corner. When she looked back, the room was a sickening kaleidoscope of blur and color. Piel had vanished. No, there she was. Still there. Except now ... now, it was a man standing there. A man in Piel's robes. It didn't make sense, his handsome, leering face with that familiar smirk. How could ... it was *his* face—Mister Jiggs. Mariko stifled a scream and stumbled backward several steps.

"Society has become one giant Narcissus," the figure said. The voice was still Piel's, smooth and amused. "While the dreaming robots concern themselves with one another's reflections, I grow richer. More powerful."

The pain was too much now, spiralling further into her mind from every direction. Her body felt slow and brittle, a crumbling stone sculpture about to be shattered with a careful blow of a hammer. All strength left her, and she collapsed to the ground, writhing with agony.

The colors swirled like clouds. Piel leaned close suddenly, her face female once more, but this time it was Mariko's face—the beautiful new and improved version of Mariko—staring back at her.

“And you, Mariko, will be what I want you to be.”

When Piel leaned in, just close enough, Mariko tugged off one of her good luck crescent earrings and slashed blindly, striking Piel diagonally across the face—across her own features—ruining their delicate symmetry with a thin blood line from the top of the eye, across the bridge of her nose and down along the jaw. Not a deep cut. It didn't have to be deep. Mariko had moved so quickly, and with such a lack of concern, it left Piel bewildered. As though she wasn't quite sure what had just happened. She put a finger to her nose, then examined the drops of blood. “You...”

“You're dead,” Mariko said. “I've assassinated you.”

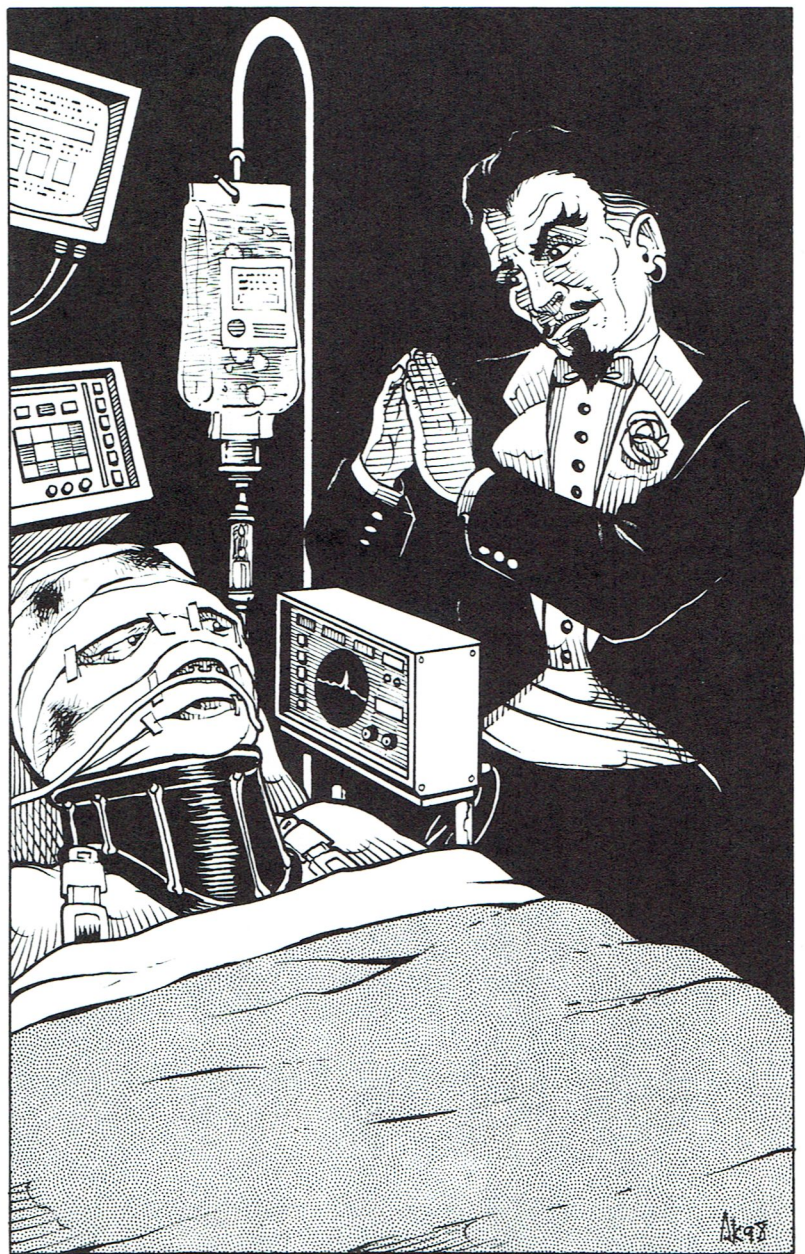
The poison worked quickly, moving through the nervous system like flame following a thick trail of gunpowder. Piel had no time to speak further. The wound foamed violently and her body was seized in a powerful fit, ending only when she collapsed, lifeless, on the floor. The colors on her skin continued swirling awhile longer before settling into a shade of grey, the color of dirty snow melting in a gutter.

Some time passed before the pain began to subside and Mariko managed to stand up. She staggered over Piel's murky body, back down the corridor, up the steps, and out of the building. No one tried to stop her.

She moved down the street in slow, careful steps. It began to rain, so she found shelter at a booth in Nicky's. As she chewed grey nutrient and drank sandy coffee, a dreary compulsion drove her to stare into a nearby mirror. There, in grease-covered glass, Mariko watched the last remnants of her new beauty slowly melt away. She wondered about the glass bottles still hidden somewhere in Nu Looke. Outside, meticulous body parts hovered above the city. 🍁

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* When leggy super-model WES SMIDERLE isn't strutting down a Parisian cat-walk, he bides his time in Ottawa as a freelance writer. He has written many pieces for the *Ottawa Citizen* and has had several short stories published in *Storyteller* magazine. “Bottle of Skin” is his first story to appear in *On Spec*.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* ANDREA BAEZA concentrates mostly on her tattoos, but other mediums are a pleasant diversion. You can usually find her at Ritualistics on Kingsway, but a website is currently under construction.





# Three Last Chances

Robert Ford

*Illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

**J**AW SET, KNUCKLES EDGING INTO THE WHITE, AND NOSTRILS flared, it was clear, even to Gerry, that he was driving in the wrong mood.

The MR2, a fast red sports car, hurtled up the wet surface of Granville Street. The dashboard clock told him it was 8:35 P.M. It was December 23rd.

Nothing but trouble. Bugs in the software. Contracts being cancelled. And Christmas. For Gerry, it always brought painful memories.

The middle lane was sluggish. He pulled into the right lane behind a cab, keeping a half-second distance. He mused that rushing, only to change clothes for a Christmas party he really didn't want to attend, was probably a bad idea. His clients might be disappointed if he didn't show. His ex-wife's friends wouldn't.

The cab abruptly switched to the middle lane, leaving Gerry cheek by jowl with a bus. He hit the brakes, fish-tailed slightly on the slick pavement—it hadn't been raining enough to wash away the road grease—and regained control. He was so close to the bus, he could see little of the road in front of him. An Ocean Construction cement mixer passed on the left and he snapped the MR2 into the lane right behind the truck.

"Come on, come on."

His cell phone rang.

"Shit."

He let it ring a second time. Gerry grabbed the phone with his right hand and flipped it open. When, he thought, am I going to get a hands-free set?

"Yeah? Hi ... they did what? They can't change the resourcing for the New

Year *now*. What? They cut the effort for the install in half?"

At 35th, he pulled back into the right lane, a few car lengths ahead of the bus. He started to overtake the cement mixer. He was considering who to hit at the project office when he approached 33rd. A person at the bus stop stepped, or stumbled, off the sidewalk into his lane.

Gerry dropped the phone.

He couldn't determine why someone was suddenly in the road or if they were likely to move themselves out of the way. Two seconds to decide. Gerry couldn't live with hitting a person and swerved into the middle lane, knowing full well that the cement mixer was going to be there. He consciously decided not to check his blind spot.

HE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS IN A SEA of agony. It was obviously a hospital.

There was a man in a tuxedo standing beside Gerry's bed. He held a strange-looking device—what a kid would do to a cell phone to make it look like a Star Trek tricorder—and was passing it over Gerry's body.

Gerry let this strange person sit in his mind unanalyzed while trying to take stock of himself. He could move his head only slightly to the right and thus he could tell nothing about his body. All the tubes leading to his body and the amount of equipment in the room disconcerted him. His tuxedo-clad visitor abruptly peered into his face. He had a goatee, a slim moustache and dark, dark eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Gerry.

"Excellent." He waved the scanner

in front of Gerry's face. Twinkling lights shot down his eyes and into his brain. The pain stopped.

"I'm less of a who and more of a what."

"Thank you, whatever you are, for what you just did. I take it you aren't a nurse."

"No, I'm an angel of death."

"An angel of death?"

"Well, *your* angel of death."

"Really."

"Yes. You are a statistical anomaly. The chances of you being anything but *purée* after you embedded your MR2 into that cement mixer are astronomically small."

"You're saying I should be dead."

"You will be dead, soon."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"Let me put it this way ... if the doctors could have stopped your pain the way I have, don't you think they would have?"

Gerry's angel of death waved his device and the pain resumed. He waved it again and the pain stopped.

"Please don't do that again." Gerry took in a hard-earned breath. "If you are Death, why did you stop my pain?"

"I didn't stop it; I just taught you how to ignore it. Since no one can predict one's time of death exactly, I have to arrive a little early and people are so much nicer to talk to when they don't notice the pain."

"I see. ... Is it Christmas?"

"December 24th."

"What's the longest you've ever waited for someone to die?"

"Forty-six minutes."

"What's the average?"

"Eleven point five."

"Do I get any last wishes?"

"You're not being executed; you smashed up your car. A direct result of being in a rush, I might add."

Gerry remembered the crash. "Don't I get points for choosing not to hit the pedestrian?"

"Spirituality is not a points system. There is no hierarchy of sin or karma."

Gerry wondered if Death just kept him out of pain simply to harass him.

"You're a gambling man, obviously."

Death cocked his head to one side. "Yesssss. So?"

"I bet that I'll last a total of eleven and a half minutes since you showed up. If I win, you have to grant me a wish."

Death looked at Gerry. "Eleven point five minutes from now."

Gerry frowned. "Okay, but you have to put me back into pain."

"Why?"

"I want to monitor my situation."

"Okay."

Agony.

"WELL, GERRY, I'M IMPRESSED."

Gerry was exhausted. Clinging to his consciousness had been like bailing out a horribly leaky lifeboat with a teaspoon.

"There are limits to what I can do in the last wish department, but here's what I can offer. You can spend six minutes at three different times in your past."

"In my current condition?"

"No, no. Something useful. Age thirty-six."

"Why thirty-six?"

"Six times six is thirty-six."

"Oh. What different times? What

can I do there? Won't this screw up the space-time continuum?"

"The date will be picked from your memories more or less randomly. I can't control that part. You can do anything you want in six minutes and, frankly, I think the space-time continuum, as you put it, is old enough to look after itself.

"When does this start?"

"Now, actually."

EVEN IF HE HADN'T RECALLED THE DINGY yellow gloom of the corridor, the smell was a give-away: high school. He looked at himself. Not smashed up, wearing jeans and a corduroy shirt. All blue. His watch was different. It had a simple digital display with a chronometer—counting down. It read 05:40. But when was this?

The corridor had that eerie during-class quietness. He heard the muttering of teachers talking about algebra, physics, botany, and social studies. Did he hear the typing class clattering away in the distance? He pivoted slowly in the middle of the corridor. He saw the plaque on the door: PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE.

05:10. Minutes and seconds remaining.

He opened the door and entered the office. The huge counter, which acted as a kind of safety buffer between the dry, grizzled secretaries and any student misbegotten enough to visit, seemed to warn him to go back.

He walked past it and the secretaries (to whom he wished a pleasant day).

"Mr. Helm is with someone."

"I know, thanks."

Gerry walked into the office and, sitting in the usual I-am-the-powerful-principal and you-are-the-worthless-student chairs were, respectively, Mr. Helm and himself at age seventeen.

04:50.

Man, was I a geek, Gerry thought. More surprising was Helm; his appearance did not match Gerry's memory of an arrogant bastard. The principal's facial stress lines and purple bags under the eyes made Gerry recall coworkers who had been way out of their depth professionally, but struggled on regardless.

"Hello..." said the principal.

"Hi, I'm Gerry's Uncle Gerald and I hear there's a bit of a problem."

"Uncle Gerald" winked at his younger self and—with his face away from Mr. Helm—mouthed the phrase "work with me."

"Well," said Mr. Helm as Gerry Sr. took a seat, "we were just discussing what's appropriate for slide shows at school assemblies." Gerry saw Helm's face revert to the holier-than-thou aspect he had originally remembered.

04:30.

During high school, Gerry had photographed everything that moved—particularly female things that moved. As president of the photography club, he organized the various slide shows sponsored by sports teams, the student council, and so forth. His meeting today with Mr. Helm was the result of a swim team photograph.

"Sorry to jump in like this," said Gerry Sr., "but I'm really pressed for time. As I understand it, you are concerned about a photo of a girl on the

swim team. As I've been told, the photo garnered some wolf whistles from the audience."

"Yes it did and—"

"And you don't think this is appropriate behavior. I understand that—"

"It was not my intent," said Gerry Jr., "to ... embarrass anyone."

"I'm certain that's true, Gerry, but—"

03:59.

"Mr. Helm," jumped in Gerry Sr., "I have a hypothetical question for you. We all agree that the swim team member in question was, shall we say, a buxom lass."

Mr. Helm scowled.

"I'll take that to mean you noticed her breasts; everyone else seemed to. What if she had been flat?"

Mr. Helm twitched.

"Gerry, you'd have still put the picture into the show, right?"

"Of course. The lighting poolside is atrocious. The flash units barely compensate. I took two rolls of film and got four usable shots—"

03:02

"Thanks. Mr. Helm do you agree that if she had had nominal bazoombas, there'd have been no wolf whistles and I ... and Gerry ... would not be having this conversation with you?"

"It's possible, but there were wolf whistles and this can't be tolerated."

"But the problem, if there is one, isn't the photo, the tits, or the whistles. It's the attitude. How do you expect to teach these kids anything about moral behavior when you are sexist?"

"Sexist?"

"Yes, if it had been a guy—shirtless—or a trim girl, we wouldn't

be having this chat. You wouldn't have noticed a problem. Furthermore, you are not teaching or nurturing these kids; you're trying to control their behavior so that they don't embarrass you. I urge you to examine your motives and review your breast fixation. The teenage boys around here are *supposed* to be upset by breasts; you're not."

02:28.

"I've got to go. Gerry, let's move. Nice talking with you, Mr. Helm."

Gerry Jr. followed semi-blindly, leaving Mr. Helm to wonder what had just hit him.

Once in the hall, Gerry Jr. said, "Who the hell are you?"

Gerry Sr. stared at him.

"He's you," said Death.

They whirled in sync to see the tuxedo-clad figure leaning against a locker, smoking a cigarette.

"Why are you smoking?" asked Gerry Sr.

"I've always wanted to smoke in a school corridor."

"What do you mean, he's me?" All of Gerry Jr.'s muscles were tense; he appeared like a cornered cat looking for a way out.

"He's a solid projection from the future fulfilling—"

01:30.

"Shut up. He doesn't need to know that."

"Gosh, now who's embarrassed?"

"Look, Gerry, I'm going to be gone in a minute—"

"Almost literally."

"Be quiet. And the important thing I want to tell you is to firmly and politely stand up for yourself. You were going to let that idiot Helm make you

think you had to kiss his ass. It's not required."

"Okay," said Gerry Jr. "I agree, but if you're really me, you'll be able to tell me what I really wanted to say in there."

"Sure: 'Mr. Helm, if that girl had been flat-chested, I wouldn't be in here. Your puritanical attitudes are not my fucking problem.'"

"I guess you are me."

"Bye-bye," said Death.

IT FELT AS IF THEY WERE ON A HIGH-speed moving sidewalk, blasting through an airport full of people, buildings, and animals.

"What is this?"

"A transition to the next stop. It takes a couple of minutes to settle down."

This Death creature—or whatever he was—gave Gerry the creeps. There was something disturbing about the smug and glib attitude—and the power. Gerry couldn't understand why Death would bother making good on a gambling debt. It wasn't as if Gerry could have, while in a hospital bed, forced the entity to pay up. Even if some code of honor was in force, why time travel as a way to compensate him? Surely a painless death or some nice dahlias would have been easier to conjure up instead of toddling through time.

Death looked at his hand-held scanner and snickered.

"What?"

"This should be fun."

GERRY WAS LYING ON HIS BACK, KNEES bent, on the rear seat of a car. He kept very still and glanced at his watch.

05:58.

The car was big, a station wagon, and from the front seat he heard voices and noises.

Gerry didn't realize that the sounds of kissing and caressing were so distinctive. He heard the occasional murmur, but could discern nothing that made sense.

05:30.

It seemed a waste of his six minutes to be sitting in the back of a car, motionless. The shock he would give the romantic couple would be fairly intense.

"Please, I don't want to do it again," said the woman, a girl really.

"I'm sure you'll like it once you're used to it. The first time is always tough."

The man's voice was indeed much older than the girl's and was familiar.

"I just don't think I'm ready."

Now the girl's voice was familiar ... high school? Was this another encounter from that time?

05:20.

"No one, not even men, are ready, my dear. It's a matter of being *taught*, getting into the rhythm."

"And being ready to learn..." Her voice was faltering. This was followed by the sounds of clothes being manipulated.

Taught? Teacher! Like a flash card being removed to show the answer, Gerry knew. This was Mr. Benton and Cindy—a girl who was among his group of friends. Gerry remembered that she was bright, running rings around him in calculus, but often distracted. She would laugh at some idiotic remark he'd make, appear to want to open up, but then close down

again quickly. He'd liked her—even asked her out once—but she was remote and unapproachable. Maybe this was why. A crushing guilt fell upon him.

"I'll be very, very careful," said Mr. Benton.

04:57 and Gerry's blood pulsed with anger.

Mr. Benton was in the midst of freeing himself from his trousers when someone's hand grabbed the side of his face and inserted a finger into his ear.

With his middle finger pressing into Mr. Benton's ear and his thumb and index finger at very uncomfortable points under Mr. Benton's jaw, Gerry slammed the teacher's head against the driver's-side window.

Cindy screamed.

"Shut up and don't move," shouted Gerry. To Mr. Benton, "Mr. B! Having fun yet? How does it feel to have something unwanted in an orifice of yours?"

Mr. Benton's powerful hand moved to grab Gerry's arm.

"I don't think so," said Gerry, who slammed Benton's head into the window a second time. "Use your hands to put your dick back into your pants."

Once Mr. Benton had adjusted himself—Cindy took the opportunity to re-dress as well—Gerry said, "Good. Now, I promise you, I won't be long, but I insist you answer some questions. One: how many high school girls have you had sex with during your career? And if you say 'only Cindy,' I'll plunge my finger into your brain."

"Uh ... seventeen."

"Over how many years?"

"Er, ten."

Cindy appeared shocked by the figures.

"How do you know our names?"

"I'm asking the questions. So, why isn't your wife sexually satisfying for you?"

"I don't know!"

"Sure you do—it's power. You have power over Cindy, but not your wife. Poor Cindy here not only has to put up with your immoral and illegal behavior, but has to face the fact that you can influence her marks, including the ones that may or may not let her go to university."

Gerry used an instant to actually look at the man. The teacher had a professorial salt-and-pepper beard that clearly was attempting to hide or deflect attention away from his eyes. Gerry then doubted his conclusion. What if Benton was so empty inside that the girls he had abused were just being tossed into this pit in an attempt to fill a missing part of himself?

03:20.

"It's not true! I loved them all!"

The doubt vanished. "You're so full of shit." Gerry turned away. "Cindy!"

"Yes..."

"Why'd you let him touch you?"

"I trusted him. He treated me like I was special."

"Nothing else?"

"You should meet my family," she said, with eerie calm.

But Gerry had; he once dropped Cindy off at home after a school concert. Before he could pull away, Cindy's father—looking like an aging Charles Manson on acid—emerged from the house and started screaming at Gerry that his car emissions were

marking the driveway. At the time he had thought it funny.

"Listen to me very carefully. To have survived an insane family makes you special. And Mr. B. here can tell you that without fucking you."

02:50.

Mr. Benton punched Gerry while his attention was diverted. Gerry released the teacher and was, once again, on his back in the car. Mr. Benton left the vehicle and opened the rear passenger door. Gerry was groaning. Mr. Benton reached in to grab him. Gerry raised his foot, planted it just below Mr. Benton's shoulder and pushed. The teacher landed on the gravel of the dark and deserted parking lot. Gerry moved quickly out of the car and sat on Mr. Benton.

"Mr. B., we need to find some more dignified way of communicating."

02:08.

"I'm giving you the opportunity of a lifetime. Think of yourself as Dickens' Scrooge character. See the folly of your ways and remedy them while you're still relatively young. And uninjured." Gerry moved his weight up and down on top of Mr. Benton. "What do you think?"

"Oooof."

Gerry looked at Cindy, who was scrutinizing him. I really hope she doesn't recognize me, he thought. She was a girl of simple looks: long brown hair, decent skin, and an unbalanced teenaged figure that Gerry figured would be just fine later.

"Do you drive?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good. Take the car and drive to

the bus stop at York Mills and go home from there. Lock the keys in the car. Don Giovanni here can figure out how to rescue his car later."

Cindy didn't move.

"Go!"

Gerry watched the tail lights fade into the night.

01:10.

"And you were worried about the universe."

From the gravel, Mr. Benton looked up to see a man in a tuxedo.

"Do you think he learned anything?"

"I don't know; let's ask: Mr. B., did this evening prove enlightening?"

"Yes. Can I get up now?"

"You're really not very convincing."

00:40.

"Well, Death, do you think we can have a relatively spectacular exit to help this poor man?"

"Don't see why not. But if you wanted him castrated, I could always—"

"No. For an angel, you are pretty bloodthirsty."

"Sue me."

They left in a burst of blue flame.

THE MOVING SIDEWALK RACED THEM through manic scenes of life. Gerry would barely make out a scene or face before he was bombarded by more images.

"What're you getting out of this?" asked Gerry.

"Me? I'm just honoring a gambling debt."

"But you chose the means of paying up."

"I have less choice about these things than you think. You wanted a

wish; I'm not a genie. I can't bring something into being, but I can give you the chance for wish fulfillment. You still have to do the work."

"Does what I've done so far affect my car crash?"

"That would be telling."

THE BUS STOP AT 33RD AND GRANVILLE was wet and cold. This time, Gerry, unlike his previous appearances, was wearing a raincoat. It didn't fully protect him from the chill. He wrapped his arms close around him.

There was an old lady sitting on the bench. She was well-dressed in a warm coat and well-shined new boots. Her cane was gnarled—carved from driftwood and polished. The handle was a relief of a face transmuting from a female to a male, or perhaps vice versa. She smiled at him. Two teenagers, riddled with earrings in places other than their ears, were arguing loudly about a pop band called White Zombie.

05:45.

Gerry had a very bad feeling about where he was. He wiped a spot on the bench free of moisture with his coat sleeve and sat down near, but not right beside, the old lady.

"Pardon me, ma'am, do you have the time?"

"Yes, it's 8:30."

"This may sound like an odd question, but it's the 23rd, right?"

"Oh yes," she laughed.

"It's amazing how you can lose track of the date when you get too busy."

Gerry wracked his brains. He'd left Richmond when? 8:15? So, about fifteen to twenty minutes to get to 33rd,



given the traffic over the Arthur Laing Bridge?

Gerry's mind was wrapped up in how to flag down the car his other self was driving before the accident.

He suddenly felt stupid. Stopping himself wasn't the problem—he needed to stop the person who stepped out onto the road. The paradox hit him. If he stopped the clumsy stranger from falling onto the road, he would never crash. And if he had never crashed, Death would never have gambled with him and never given him the opportunity to stop the crash or visit the past.

"Young man, you look like you are considering very serious matters."

He turned to look at the old lady. She was wrinkled, but all laugh lines. And her green eyes were as sharp as those of a child.

"I'm struggling with a puzzle. A paradox, actually."

"You mean two impossible notions like 'responsible government'?"

Gerry laughed. "Isn't that an oxymoron? I'm thinking of a personal problem like the famous time travel paradox—where you go back in time and murder your grandfather before your father is conceived. Do you suddenly cease to exist or are you fine?"

"I always found that example rather hard on senior citizens."

Gerry smiled.

03:10.

The two teenagers were fighting, pushing and shoving each other. It was becoming obvious to Gerry, too obvious. Teenager A pushes teenager B into traffic and idiot driver C (him) crashes into a truck.

For reasons he couldn't pin down,

he was convinced this was the correct assessment.

02:50.

Death was sitting beside him.

"Gerry, what's up?"

"How big a liar are you?"

Death peered around him at the old lady. She waved politely.

"What did she tell you?"

"Nothing. Do you know her?"

"Of course. The cute old lady disguise doesn't fool me a bit."

"Who *are* you two?"

"Long story," said the old lady.

02:45.

"Don't you have some decisions to make, Gerry?"

Death straightened his bow tie.

The teenagers who were pushing and shoving each other about were nearing the curb. Gerry glanced down the road. He thought he could see the cement truck.

02:30.

Gerry decided to give himself ninety seconds to think. He believed he was part of some sort of game between advanced beings. Angels, ghosts, gods, whatever—it didn't matter. He wanted to optimize the outcome. An interesting thought. What was optimal? (The teenagers were getting quite loud now.) He had been focused on his feelings about the past and how to avoid the accident. He thought past the accident. Assuming he was right, how would these boys have fared after the accident? Despite his evasive driving, they may still have been injured. Was this something worth avoiding? He honestly thought they were jerks and didn't mind the thought of them suffering broken bones. But, in the end,

he knew that if he could prevent an accident, he would. In addition, his gut told him, despite the risk of death, he really needed this accident to shake him out of his bad driving habits and even worse attitude. He also didn't want to retroactively miss the visits to the past.

01:30.

His decision took less than ninety seconds. The two teenagers were still brawling. Using a closed fist, one young man punched the other on the cheekbone. The howl was incredible.

Gerry stood.

The old lady's and Death's eyes watched him.

"HEY," yelled Gerry. The teenagers froze for a second.

Death smiled, thinking he'd won.

"You want to see a real fight? Watch this."

The teenagers looked on in confusion as a guy in a trench coat grabbed some guy in a tux and threw him into traffic.

Even the old lady was surprised.

"You bastard," yelled Death as he tumbled onto Granville Street.

Gerry was looking for the MR2, but instead he saw himself behind the wheel of a Volvo.

Death stood up, clearly angry.

The Volvo swerved and crashed into the cement mixer.

GERRY WOKE UP IN POST-OP, NOT THE intensive care unit. His head swimming with what was likely anaesthetic, Gerry sat up slightly.

The little old lady stood in front of him, smiling. She wore a nurse's uniform, but still carried her gnarled multi-faced cane.

"How do you feel?"

"What happened?"

The old lady picked up his chart. "According to this, you have suffered multiple breaks and fractures and just finished up in the OR. Prognosis, good. Much better than last time."

"I was dying before."

"Yes."

"Where's Death?"

"Oh. Him. He wasn't really Death. He's an excellent liar."

"Who are you really?—please."

"Think of me as a much cuter than usual Hand of God."

"I have so many questions."

"I'm sure you do, but I am not going to answer them. However, since you made me so happy when you embarrassed him, I want to give you a Christmas present."

"What is it?"

"Knowledge. I'll tell you three things."

"Why three?"

"My favorite number. Now listen. One: Your gambling with him has changed history. Two: The problem is that you don't remember what is now real. Three: you have one ex-wife, who is the same person you recall, but your second wife is going to be here to pick you up. Be nice to her; she's lovely. And plan to have amnesia for a while."

Gerry tried to sit up more, but his battered frame would not let him.

"Wait, what's her name?"

The old lady just smiled, tapped her cane three times and was gone.

Gerry tried struggling with the sheets, managing to get his unbroke arm free, but had to stop due to

a sudden urge to throw up. By the time he calmed himself down, the recovery room nurse was by his bed.

"Well, you seem very alert."

"Yes, I'd have to be."

"Oh. I see. We'll get the doctor to look you over and hopefully he'll let your wife see you."

"That's nice."

What the hell am I going to do? he wondered. His next thoughts fell over the concept of not knowing his own history since ... when? High school?

The doctor arrived, took the usual pulse and blood pressure readings and asked him how he felt.

"I don't feel like I really know where I am. I recall having an accident but other stuff feels hazy."

The doctor assured him he was physically okay and was likely just muddled.

Finally, they put him on a gurney and wheeled him to a room.

Gerry looked away from the door, scared by what or who he might see.

"Hi, sweetie."

He recognized the voice, but it was older-sounding. Gerry turned to see Cindy, the girl he'd rescued from Mr. Benton, all grown up. She held him, kissed him and wept on him.

"I was so worried."

For Gerry, joy and relief fused into a huge wave of emotion. And, to Cindy's confusion, he whispered in a teary voice, "I'm so glad you're safe." 🍀

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** ROBERT FORD has been writing fiction for fourteen years and is still gibbering after finally making his first professional sale. In the unreal world of Vancouver, he is married to a beautiful soprano, works as a systems consultant for his own company, and writes a regular column in *ComputerWorld Canada*. E-mail: <quokka@portal.ca>.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST:** ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN. Please see page 40.

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# The Pandora Consequence

Gary George

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

**T**HREE THINGS HAPPENED SIMULTANEOUSLY AT THE START of all this, although none of them seemed terribly important at the time. They didn't seem associated, but—working together—they put me (and the rest of the world) into the deadly mess we're in. I could really only understand the first two.

The first was the dream:

Karen—*my* Karen—being pulled from the smoking wreck of our Reliant. Wedged like a dark blue doorstop under the rear axles of a teetering MAERSK trailer, the crushed Reliant is the only thing keeping it from spilling into the oncoming lanes. I can smell the acrid stench of burning oil and hear someone shrieking. A boy wearing a firehat—OSTRANDER stencilled on the front in canary yellow—continues to yell at no one in particular. *Surely they don't allow them to join that young?* I think as I look to the car wreck.

They are bringing out her body. Her twisted, bloody body. It's difficult identifying her, but I recognize her singed hair. I used to brush it for hours.

I watch her wedding ring fall in slow-motion to the ground.

Her finger falls beside it.

I woke up hyperventilating like a frightened child, groping for Karen and thanking God she's there. After a time, she gently whispered me back to sleep.

I didn't tell her about the dream, since that would have been daring it to come true. That would have been out of the question, of course: I've lost one wife already, I can't think about losing another.

The second thing was Mitchell walking into the cafeteria on the day he was supposed to be in Chicago. He proudly told the group he knew how to win the

lottery. Just like that: *I can win us lots of money on 6-49. I have a system.* I was worried that he'd be fired for missing the Chicago meeting. He was supposed to be there—the night before, he'd even showed me his airline ticket into O'Hare.

The third was a nagging feeling: a foolish here-and-then-gone idea that shrouded my consciousness like smoke.

I kept thinking *I could have saved us all, if only I'd let Karen die the first time.*

MITCHELL AND I WERE BORN IN THE same month, were raised on the same street, dated the same girls. He was the one who introduced me to Jackie.

We both graduated from college on the same day—he with a marketing degree, I with one in electrical engineering—and one of life's little ironies had us interviewing with and eventually being hired by the same company.

I marvelled at his ease with people. He could tell jokes as easily to longshoremen as to the Ladies' Auxiliary and get the same uproarious laughter. I've told everyone that I'm truly lucky to have him as a best friend.

That's what I said the night I told him I was going to marry Jackie. As a matter of fact, I said, would he consider being my best man? He looked at me with an astonished expression, then he started to cry—*cry*, can you believe that?—and, wiping his eyes, told me he'd be honored to.

We went to the Golden Lion to celebrate. Stumbling home afterward (Jackie supporting us arm-in-arm) we howled at the moon and told each

other that life didn't get any better than this.

Jackie loved him as much as I did. Look:

About a year after we were married, Mitch and I were sitting in our living room arguing the details of time travel. Jackie walked in, calm as a millpond, and said, "Well, boys, I'm pregnant." I worried he was going to have an aneurysm, he jumped and hollered so loudly. We laughed and danced the whole night long.

I can still see Jackie's face—shy and demure, strong and proud—whispering across our pillows that we should name the baby Mitch if it turned out to be a boy.

As it turned out, it was a boy. Unfortunately, we never got the chance to find out what kind of family we might have been. That's why I use the term "aneurysm" so easily; the doctors spent a great deal of time explaining it to me.

Apparently it was located deep in her brain and she never had a chance. One minute we were laughing at Jackie's bullshit luck as she rolled her third Yahtzee in two games, the next, she was lying on the floor, smiling twistedly at the ceiling. It took me thirty seconds or so to remember the baby ... but Mitch assures me those thirty seconds wouldn't have mattered one way or another. By the time the ambulance got there, Little Mitch was gone too.

Doesn't God have a strange sense of humor?

The hospital formally apologized to me for spraining two fingers prying the Yahtzee dice out of my hand. I didn't give a rat's ass what they did

with fingers that could never touch Jackie again.

While I wrestled with clinical depression, Mitch decided to sue somebody: the ambulance company, Jackie's doctor, the Surgeon General. *Somebody*. He even got himself declared my "litigation guardian." We didn't have a case, but I felt better that he tried.

It took me nearly three years to get back into the saddle, including the night he and I decided I was finished with the Triavils. The drug had gradually grabbed me by the throat so hard I couldn't even read the word "Jackie" without taking a few. We fought it together and won.

The company was good to me, too—they watched as I produced zip for three years and didn't say a word. In fact, I believe the president, a wiry guy named Wayne Smith, asked Karen (who at the time was his administrative assistant) to cover for me when I needed it. You could say it was Wayne who got us together. Kind of an odd medical plan, don't you think?

We were married soon after. I can now say the word Jackie with fond memories, because Karen put me back together again.

And—of course!—Mitch.

WE'D JUST GOTTEN INTO OUR COFFEE-break seats, I with my bran muffin and tea, Mitch and his butter-drenched bagel and coffee topped up with cream, when out of the blue he said, "I'm going to win us lots of money. I've been watching Lotto 6-49 and I have a system that's guaranteed to win."

I have forgotten much of my

probability theory from university, but I'm reasonably sure the only guaranteed system to pick the correct six numbers out of forty-nine is to buy almost fourteen million tickets—one for every possible combination.

Spend fourteen million to make \$2,500,000? You can see I was a tad sceptical of Mitchell's system.

Strom Carson, the receiving manager, said, "Anyone who says they have a system to win the lottery is full of horseshit. Why would they share it?" He wiped a smudge of marmalade off his mouth with a frayed sleeve.

Teddy, the supply guy, grunted his agreement. He never ate or drank anything at coffee break. "Some people are naturally lucky, and some people aren't, that's what I always say." He spun a marker on the back of his hand with his thumb and little finger. He always looked sad.

"Seriously," Mitch said, sitting forward. "If the four of us kick in two dollars each, I'll guarantee you we'll win *at least* eighty dollars. Would that make believers out of you? Would that make us *partners*?" He sat back, hands out, palms up.

Good old Mitch: marketing works! Quicker than you could say "probability theory," there were six bucks on the table. The Partnership was born.

I REMEMBER THE DREAM THAT FIRST NIGHT with horrible clarity—the canary OSTRANDER, the ring and finger. The blood.

I awoke to the smell of Karen's singed hair in my nostrils.

Sleep eluded me the rest of the night.

•

THE NEXT MORNING, THE NEWS reported the highest tides ever recorded down at Kahle Bay. They interviewed several intellectuals who couldn't explain them. I remember thinking, *Must have been a slow news day*, and dismissed it. Those same intellectuals later said the high tides signalled the start of the Consequence.

I wonder whether we could have fixed things then, had we realized what we'd done?

AT COFFEE, MITCH LAID OUT A SPREADSHEET program he'd worked up and began to explain it with the skill of a motivational speaker. I watched Strom and Teddy hang on his every word, and even I—ever the sceptic—started to warm up to his plan.

"You see," he began, "the way to win these things is to increase your odds of having your numbers picked. The way to do that is to find the combinations that *aren't picked* ... and slowly peel those back, like the layers of an onion—" He made peeling motions. "—until you get the ones that *will be*."

"How will we recognize bad combinations?" said Strom.

I thought, *Who peels onions all the way to the middle?*

"That's the beauty of this. I've already screened out the bad picks, using this spreadsheet program. For example, there is a ninety percent chance that the sum of the six numbers will be between 110 and 190. Therefore, we eliminate all combinations that add to less than 110 or more than 190." He pointed to a column that showed a series of decreasing numbers, starting at 13,983,000 and

decreasing to 84,513.

"Next, we know that the odds of the same numbers coming up in two consecutive draws is astronomical. In fact, there is an eighty-five percent probability that we can eliminate the number combinations from the last seven draws. That's column two."

The second column showed "84,513" at the top, and "46,332" at the bottom. Teddy nodded vigorously. He had no idea what was going on, but was obviously on board.

Mitch patiently walked us through four other columns: half even, half odd knocked off a few more thousand combinations; half above twenty-five, half below removed more.

A couple of other exclusions I couldn't follow removed more layers from Mitchell's "onion." I was reminded of the M.C. Escher painting where two lines of people are climbing and descending stairs along the top of a castle. The more they walk, the more they get to the bottom (or top) of the next batch of stairs. This painting, taken in small pieces, was perfectly logical.

When you looked at the whole picture, though, it was nonsense.

He finally got to the last column, and pointed to eight neat little rows of numbers printed at the bottom. They were:

2	5	19	26	29	33
8	9	24	29	41	42
1	11	12	25	43	44
1	11	21	26	34	35
9	10	24	25	26	47
12	20	24	31	44	48
4	10	13	21	46	49
12	13	20	35	36	39

"Those are our picks, boys!" he



said. "I commit to you that we'll win at least eighty dollars on tonight's draw." I remembered the jackpot was estimated to be \$2,400,000.

"There is one thing, though," Mitch said.

"Here we go," said Teddy. "I knew there had to be a catch."

"No catch. If we're going to use this system, any winnings over, say, one hundred dollars, will be split in half. I'll get one half, and you three will split the balance."

"How do you figure that?" asked Strom. His face was red. I wondered why he'd be angry about getting a smaller split of a lottery win he hadn't yet won.

"My system, my effort ... my bonus. Are we agreed?"

I agreed, since I didn't think we had a snowball's chance in hell of winning anything. The others eventually agreed too. Mitch wished it, right?

I decided to keep his spreadsheet, just for the heck of it.

I have to say Mitch's uncharacteristic show of greed puzzled me. I found out later that greed had nothing whatever to do with it.

KAREN AND I LAUGHED AT THE concept of Mitch's system on the way home that night.

"Maybe if his system works, we can get a new car," she said, spanking the dash of our quickly dying Reliant. A plume of dust mushroomed into the air. I wiped at the windshield with my handkerchief and went back to grappling with an article in *Scientific American* about wave theory. Long ago we had decided I'd drive into the office in the morning and

she'd drive home at night.

"If Mitch hits with this system, Karen, I'll eat my shoes."

"Uh-uh-uh," she waved her index finger. "Don't be too hasty."

"Okay. If we win the big one, we'll go out and buy that GMC Jimmy you've been admiring."

"You're on."

I TRIED TO STAY UP THAT NIGHT, WANTING to avoid the dream. Fell asleep.

Until, of course, the finger/ring part. It was easy staying up after that.

Between the haze of sleeplessness and the terror of the dream, I forgot all about the system.

WHILE I SIPPED WARM MILK AND WAITED for dawn to come, an avalanche swept nearly two thousand people in a town in Belgium into eternity. Experts on the scene suggested authorities may never know the full extent of the tragedy, since the entire area was wiped from the map in seconds.

There had never been a recorded instance of a landslide within a thousand kilometers of the town.

The box was open. The Pandora Consequence—the name the media gave it much later—was running amok.

I HADN'T GOTTEN MY BRIEFCASE down THE next morning before Mitch was buzzing around like a mosquito urging me to go to the QuickMart on the corner and get the winning numbers. I picked up a little computer-printed stub and returned to the cafeteria, having wasted five precious minutes of tea.

When I got there, he, Strom and Teddy were already seated, Teddy

spinning a Bic pen on the back of his hand, Strom leaning back on two legs of his chair.

"C'mon, gimme," Mitch said, the actual ticket in his hand. Vaguely amused, I slid the stub to him.

Teddy stopped it, and pulled it toward himself. He gestured to Mitch for the ticket, who obliged.

"The winning numbers are 1, 10, 11, 25, 35 and 43," he said. He began circling the winning numbers on the ticket.

Strom sat forward, shaken. "Some of our numbers are on there. I remember 1 and 11!"

"That's what I've been telling you," said Mitch. He finished his bagel with a smug how-hard-can-it-be look.

When Teddy finished, he shook his head and looked at me. "I'll be damned," he said. "We've got a couple of winners."

I examined the ticket. Sure enough, we'd hit four numbers on one pick and three on another. Mitch shrugged and grinned. "How hard can it be?" He went back to his coffee.

OUR WINNINGS FOR THE FOUR correct numbers were seventy-four dollars and sixty cents, and the payout for three correct is ten dollars; therefore a win of nearly eighty-five dollars beat Mitch's predicted eighty-dollar win. *Barely*. We rolled it over into the next draw, May 6th.

It's crazy, I know, but on the next draw we won a little over fifteen hundred dollars. Strom and Teddy had begun to think of Mitch as The Saviour, his system as Infallible. Even I started to wonder if he had stumbled onto something.

Word spread through the plant, and Mitch politely but firmly refused all requests to be included in The Partnership. He wouldn't even let Karen in.

AN EARTHQUAKE PUSHING THE RICHTER limit of 8.9 hit the southern United States that afternoon. Its epicenter was in Atlanta, almost directly beneath the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Museum, and the quake virtually flattened all of the structures in a ten-kilometer radius. One of the buildings, the Centre for Disease Control, released all its toxic agents when its vaults—previously thought indestructible—were crushed like styrofoam. It took nearly a year for the government to confirm this.

By then, nearly five hundred and fifty million people had died.

A FEW DAYS LATER, BRAKES SHRIEKING, I parked the car, kissed Karen, and wished her a good day. Mitch met me on the stairs leading to the Engineering department.

"We need a bigger win, and now," he said, grabbing my arms. His eyes darted back and forth frantically.

"What do you mean?" I said, turning away. "I'm not sure how you've done it, but if we never win again, you can call your little experiment a success."

He spun me around and shook me, too hard. "You don't understand. I need another, bigger win ... and it has to be the next draw. Those brakes won't hold." He hurried off.

*Whose brakes?* I thought. I couldn't remember telling him mine needed replacing.

AS I CLIMBED THE STAIRS TO MY OFFICE, I went back to my idea. I had been thinking about time lately, and I felt annoyingly close to a formula that would describe how time flows. If I could mathematically describe the flow of time, I reasoned, wouldn't it be theoretically possible to affect that flow?

AT COFFEE, HE SAT, DISHEVELLED BUT A little calmer. He laid out the spreadsheet on the table, and said, "Gentlemen, here is the only correct pick for tonight's 6-49 draw." I could see the numbers on it:

12 16 17 18 22 25

The footer showed the date: May 10.

He produced the ticket he'd purchased and Teddy grabbed it. I picked up the spreadsheet and slipped it into my pocket where it stayed, forgotten, for three days.

On the way home, Karen commented on the squealing brakes again. I told her I'd get them fixed. *More VISA debt*, I added to myself.

That night I had the worst dream yet.

THE NEXT MORNING, THERE WASN'T time for coffee. Strom and Teddy raced up and down the office area, kissing everyone and whooping it up. I thought of the word "aneurysm" and winced.

"What's going on?"

"We won, partner! We hit the motherlode!" Strom did a Russian Cossack dance and disappeared.

Sure enough, we'd won one quarter of a jackpot that totalled over \$1,793,000. The Partnership's share, to be exact, was \$448,292. That

made Mitch's share a touch over \$224,000 ... and the rest of us each got \$74,715. Don't think Strom didn't have a thing or two to say about *that*, either, but a deal is a deal.

The newspaper took our picture in the lottery office. The photographer said you couldn't slap the smiles off our faces. Strom found out our picture would appear in the next day's edition.

On the way out of the office, I told Mitch we were going to buy a new Jimmy to replace the rickety old Reliant. That's when I finally got the sense that strange things were afoot. Rather than being happy, he was obsessed with us not buying the Jimmy. He was absolutely adamant that we look at Volvos. *Only Volvos*.

I literally couldn't get a word in edgewise. He told me every single thing that could possibly be wrong with the Jimmy (real or imagined), from a lack of a reading light to a structural defect on the welds holding the suspension to the frame. I knew for a fact that one wasn't true, but when I said so, he continued as though I wasn't there. I distinctly remember thinking *this guy is not well*.

Mitch wouldn't hear of a Jimmy from Karen, either.

When I asked him what he was going to do with his share of the money, he pooh-poohed me with something about giving it to a couple who were doing research on the shape of fish skulls or some other such nonsense.

THE NEXT EVENING AFTER DINNER, I opened the newspaper as Karen watched *Entertainment Tonight*.

“Worldwide earthquakes stump scientists” was the headline of a page 4 story. Page 5 carried a story about a scientist who felt that there were such wide variances in normal global temperatures they couldn’t be attributed to El Niño. She conjectured (despite the derision of her colleagues) that the Earth’s orbit was shifting and this was affecting the weather patterns.

Something else as well: when I was looking for the picture of the Partnership, I saw something that made my heart freeze. It was a picture of the newest addition to our city’s fire department. The smiling youngster was two weeks out of fire college.

Randy Ostrander.

ON THE SECOND DAY AFTER WE GOT THE money, Mitch *begged* me to buy the top-of-the-line Volvo. In fact, he knew a dealer in town who could deliver it tomorrow.

What was I to do? As I said, he was Mitch.

We drove away from the dealer that evening in our brand-new Volvo. We were \$46,000 poorer, but squeal-free.

“I just like Volvos, that’s all,” was all Mitch would say.

I slept the whole night that night. The only dream I had involved Karen and—believe me!—talking about it wouldn’t be suitable for families.

I HAD TO WORK LATE THE NEXT EVENING, and that’s when the strangest thing happened:

It was lucky that we had bought the Volvo because Karen had an accident

going home.

It wasn’t a really bad one—messed up the driver’s side and the engine. A MAERSK semi-trailer changed lanes without signalling (sound familiar?) and sideswiped her. She used the antilock brakes perfectly and decelerated away from the rig. No sweat—nothing that \$7500 in repairs couldn’t fix. I shudder to think of what might have happened had we still had the Reliant.

That was the idea that finally forced me to put all the pieces together: *had we still had the Reliant.*

I took a mental inventory of the things that didn’t add up:

I thought about the day Mitch told us he had a system. I *know* he was in Chicago that morning. But he was also there, in the cafeteria.

I thought about his system. When I checked with the university, they literally laughed out loud. There was no way the logic he used would work. *No way.*

Assuming it *did* work, I asked what kind of PC you would need to sort that many combinations to develop a list of winning numbers. They said a Cray supercomputer would need days to sort it out. Mitch has a Packard-Bell 486 that tips over when we play *Myst*. He did it in less than twenty-four hours.

All of that was circumstantial, though: I needed something that proved that Mitch was up to something. I found it the next day, when I put on the same suit I’d worn when we won the big one.

I’d forgotten about the spreadsheet I’d tucked into my jacket with Mitch’s system-generated numbers (the one

we'd won the major jackpot with on the tenth):

12 16 17 18 22 25

On a whim, I checked the QuickMart for the winning numbers. I flipped through the pages in the ratty notebook that held the winning number printouts until I got to the page marked May 10th:

2 5 19 26 29 33

I looked at the spreadsheet. Looked back at the ticket.

I took out the May 3 spreadsheet, and looked at the numbers:

2 5 19 26 29 33  
 8 9 24 29 41 42  
 1 11 12 25 43 44  
 1 11 21 26 34 35  
 9 10 24 25 26 47  
 12 20 24 31 44 48  
 4 10 13 21 46 49  
 12 13 20 35 36 39

Not only hadn't we gotten a single one right on the tenth, but after checking the May 3rd spreadsheet, I had the hard evidence I needed to call him on the scam.

He had gotten his dates a little mixed up.

Mitch had known on May 3rd which numbers were going to be drawn on the tenth.

HE WAS SITTING ON HIS PORCH WHEN I got there, feet propped up on the railing. He popped the caps off two Coronas with a bottle opener. I took a long drink from one as I sat beside him.

"You knew I was coming?"

He nodded. "I was moving too

quickly, and I forgot the damned spreadsheets. Sloppy. But the work's done now."

"What work?"

He paused a second, considering. "I have to be careful what I tell you. But you are entitled to hear why I did it."

"Did what?"

"Came back in time."

There. He'd said it. *Back in time*. Ridiculously, I felt better, knowing I wasn't slipping back into that fog in which I'd lived for three years after Jackie's death.

"I watched you die a thousand deaths after Jackie," he began, "and I promised myself that come what may, I'd always look out for you. Karen too. She's been your strength, you know. She's recreated my buddy ... and for that, I owe her a lot.

"Have you been dreaming of a car crash lately?" he asked pleasantly.

My face reddened and I nearly fell over backward. He held up his hand. "Relax. I know all about it. You see, we actually *lived through it*, you and I.

"In the future—in my time line—you never had those brakes fixed. So when Karen took the Reliant home and the semi-trailer sideswiped her, she had no stopping power. She was dragged under the back part of the van and it tipped onto the car. You've got a good idea of what happened." I nodded and fought back the surge of nausea I felt.

"I knew I needed a way to get her into a car that had good brakes. Also, I wasn't sure whether the accident was caused by poor braking or the trailer falling on her. I thought

of everything—tried several different things, too—and finally this one worked.”

“The Volvo?” I asked, incredulous.

He nodded. “One of the safest cars on the road. If the trailer *did* topple onto her, she still would have been fine.”

“So to get the Volvo, you had to get me some money. To get the money...”

“Exactly. What better way to win than to bet on a sure thing? I knew which numbers would be drawn before we bet on them.”

“Why hide it? Why not just bring back the money and give it to me?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’d take a gift of \$46,000 without asking questions? Especially if I insisted you spend it on a Volvo?”

My mouth opened and I quickly realized how stupid I would have sounded. My mouth closed with a *clack*.

He’d saved Karen by using the only guaranteed way of predicting the future—he waited until it was in the past.

“So, the probabilities you quoted in the little pep-talk you had with Strom, Teddy and me—”

“Total fiction. I remembered from somewhere that the odds of picking six numbers out of forty-nine were fourteen million to one. I winged it from there.”

I had listened to him so long I had begun to accept the idea that time travel was as natural as compact disks or microwave popcorn.

“How did you do it? Time travel, I mean?”

He laughed. “You understand that better than I do, old bud. You’re the

one who created it. You found a way to twist time just enough to go backward ... but not forward. In fact, you’ll make your first major breakthrough in the next few weeks. I’m not sure whether or not it’s because of our little discussion here, but it *is* coming. Me, I’m the guy that talked you through the ethics of doing it. You struggle with the paradoxes and stuff. You know, ‘if you could go back and kill Hitler...’ and all that. For me, it was easy: there wasn’t *anything* I wouldn’t have done so you wouldn’t have to go through losing Karen. Again.”

“Why not go back to before Jackie died? We could get her operated on before the aneurysm burst...”

Mitch raised his hand, silencing me instantly.

“Whoa, hold on. We tried that. There are theoretical constraints to how far back you can go. The energy required is incredible. Your time instrument identifies what you call ‘cracks in fate’ ... those events that can be *adjusted* without radically affecting the present or the future. Jackie’s aneurysm didn’t turn out to be ‘adjustable.’ Sorry, man.”

I nodded, terribly saddened that we’d had a shot that didn’t pan out. But at least Karen was alive.

*Karen was alive.* Good old Mitch!

“Why include Teddy and Strom? And why such a strange split for the winnings?”

“Teddy’s on the verge of losing his house. He has fallen behind on mortgage payments while he pays the hospital bills for a brother who has Alzheimer’s disease. I didn’t want him to lose the house. Remember, I have absolutely no qualms at all about

adjusting those things I can.

"Strom will give much of his money to the Legion, who will use it to help a family in a nearby town pay for food. One of the older children will be so taken by how the old military types treat his family that he will choose the military as a career. He'll go on to command a force that will rescue over four hundred women and children from a group of terrorists."

"All this within those 'cracks in fate'? You'd think those would be things you couldn't mess with."

He shrugged. "That's not the best thing. My split—what was it? \$224,000?—went to a couple whose research grants recently ran out. With this money, they'll make the breakthrough that is needed to cure AIDS. They'll create the equivalent of a little organic robot that unhooks the HIV virus from within the cell. They're calling it the 'Mitchell Knot Cutter,' Makes you kind of proud, doesn't it?"

We sat there in silence for minutes, smiling at each other. We had done it. *I* had done it ... and I wasn't even sure how. "You're sure about the longer-term effects?" I asked.

"Mostly," he said. "You are, anyway. I trust your judgement."

"What about the 'present you'? The first time you talked to us in the cafeteria, that had to have been the 'future you.'"

Mitch nodded. "For the first contact, I chose a time when I knew the 'past me' would be out of town. Add a little makeup, and presto! Instant present-day Mitch. I confronted myself later and explained what we were trying to do."

"Wasn't it hard talking to yourself?"

"It's hard for the 'past you' the first time—I think you'll find out soon—but after that, it's a little like watching a home videotape of yourself. A little more interactive, that's all."

We laughed then, and hugged and drank and laughed again. When Karen found us later she joined in too.

We didn't tell her, of course. In retrospect, that was probably the only good decision we made. At least she died guilt-free.

A glorious day.

One of the last.

THAT OCCURRED JUST OVER FIVE YEARS ago. I had the breakthrough Mitch told me about: I can see now how simple the idea of "cracks in fate" really is, and after you understand them, the idea of time travel really is quite simple. We've been looking at these kind of things for years without knowing it.

I beat it. I created a working time machine just over eighteen months ago. Used it cautiously.

I showed Mitch how to use it too. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

AS I SIT HERE, TRAPPED AND STARVING AND waiting for the fire to arrive, I've had the time to reflect on what I've done.

I've found if I turn my head far enough to the side I can lap up barely enough of an oily trickle of God-knows-what to survive.

Things came true almost exactly as Mitch spelled them out. Karen and I lived happily in a house that had no written references to either "aneurysm" or "Reliant."

The youth joined the military. Teddy kept his house.

I saw myself. At the beginning, I was talking to me fairly often. I began to look forward to my visits. Then the “future me” became more quiet, more nervous, more interested in looking for something. I stopped seeing me months ago.

The temperature on the planet shifted dramatically. Tropical zones became arctic wastelands. Thousands of people flocked to the Canadian north and Alaska where the temperature was bearable. World-wide flooding wiped out most of the arable land. As the end approached, Bombardier’s boat construction division grew faster than Microsoft ever did.

Here’s what I think happened:

I think Mitch and I, for all the best intentions in the world, broke something.

I think his time travelling changed the way the Earth spins. I think the energy he used to save Karen created extra mass, the same way a file on a computer can be copied, doubling its size. I’ll bet he copied the whole Earth several times. I think there’s just enough difference in the copies to shift the Earth’s orbit, like a hubcap that’s just off center.

When I realized this, I had to go back, trying to figure out if I could do anything. I tried not to talk too much to the “past me”; I didn’t want to spoil his/my happiness. I quickly found there was precious little I

could do. If it was the mass thing, how could I fix it? What can you do with millions of tons of excess mass? Shovel it off into space?

Every time Mitch or I went back in time, things got worse. I think Mitch went back often, and, in the end, I did too.

I’d opened Pandora’s Box and I couldn’t get it closed.

SO, I’VE ARRIVED AT THE END OF THE story. Mitch died in an explosion two years ago and Karen was one of the last to succumb to one of the viruses released from the CDC. I just cremated her a couple of weeks ago. Again, the irony.

Four days ago a tornado threw a car—a Volvo, no less: tell me God isn’t a practical joker!—which, on one bounce, crushed me against the concrete front of our long-closed Subway. No one has found me.

Who’s left?

The good news is I’ve memorized which sandwiches have fewer than 6 grams of fat.

I’d give anything to taste 6 grams of fat.

I can’t feel anything below my breastbone. By the look of my legs, that’s probably a good thing.

The fireball rolling up Queen Street is picking up speed, fed by burst gas lines and high winds. Mercifully, seconds remain.

At least it makes sense to me now.

I could have saved us all, if only I’d let Karen die the first time. 🍀



*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* GARY GEORGE has published non-fiction articles in several trade journals. His fiction has appeared in *Millennium Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Although he's traipsed across much of Canada, he currently lives in Burlington (not Toronto) with his wife and two daughters.

*ABOUT THE ARTIST:* LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has been a professional illustrator, graphic designer, and cartoonist for eighteen years. Her work has appeared in numerous publications across North America. Lynne lives in Coquitlam, B.C., with the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk.

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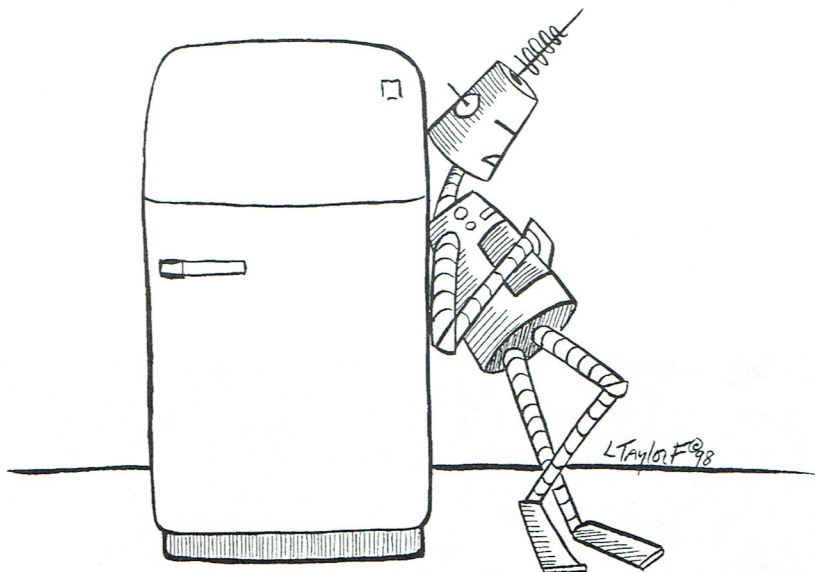
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# On the edge

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk



"I DON'T KNOW, MADELEINE,  
YOU JUST ALWAYS SEEM SO COLD LATELY."

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