

On Spec

more than just science fiction

SUMMER 1999

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"breaking out of the box"

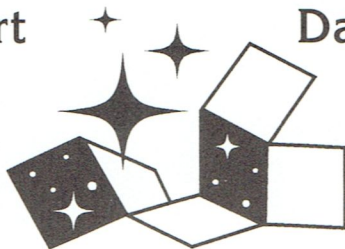
John Clute

(banquet keynote address)

Sean Stewart

**Candas Jane
Dorsey**

**Nalo
Hopkinson**



Dave Duncan

**Yves
Meynard**

**Peter
Watts**

and many more! (TBA)

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On this issue...



ConSpec

Jena Snyder

General Editor, On Spec

On Spec has hosted local readings and launches, we've participated in SF conventions, we've done extensive advertising and subscription campaigns, but now we're ready to really increase our profile—not just locally, but nationally and internationally—by putting on a crowd-drawing, all-encompassing event to promote both *On Spec* and SF in Canada.

ConSpec will offer a symposium-style event featuring at least 10 of the best writers, editors, and publishers in SF today. So far, our speaker's list features exciting and well-known writers and editors such as **John Clute**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Dave Duncan**, **Sean Stewart**, **Candas Jane Dorsey**, **Yves Meynard**, **Nalo Hopkinson**, and **Peter Watts**.

Come join us **Sept. 17-19** at the Royal Inn West Edmonton in Edmonton Alberta for discussions, panels, interviews, book launches, and much more! Registration for all three days is \$58.85 in advance and \$64.20 at the door (prices include GST). Guest of Honor **John Clute** will be giving our keynote address at the Saturday banquet; tickets are \$27.00. You can register by e-mail <conspec@canada.com>, on our website <www.compumart.ab.ca/clear/conspec.htm>, by phone (780) 448-1858, or by mail c/o Clear Lake Ltd., 4310 - 97 St., Edmonton, AB T6E 5R9. Give us a call or drop us a line, and we'll send you a registration form.

Our theme this year is "**Breaking out of the Box**," with "the box" left wide open for interpretation by our speakers.

Our speakers

John Clute was born in 1940 in Toronto, and has been living in London since 1968. He is probably best known as a novelist and critic in the literature of the fantastic, and there are three central strands to his works: the novels (one in 1977, one in 1999); the encyclopedias from 1975; and the criticism, put into volume form in 1988 and 1996. His titles include *The Aspen Poetry Handbill* (1965, editor), *The Disinheriting Party* (1977), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1979, associate editor), *Interzone: the 1st Anthology* (1985, co-editor), *Interzone: the 2nd Anthology* (1987, co-editor), *Strokes:*

Essays and Reviews 1966-1986 (1988), *Interzone: the 3rd Anthology* (1988, co-editor), *Interzone: the 4th Anthology* (1989, co-editor), *Interzone: the 5th Anthology* (1991, co-editor), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993, co-editor), *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia* (1995), *Look at the Evidence: Essays and Reviews* (1996), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997, co-editor), *The Book of End Times* (1999), and *Appleseed* (1999).

Michael Swanwick has received the Nebula, Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards for his work. *Stations of the Tide* won the Nebula Award and was also nominated for the Hugo and Arthur C. Clarke Awards. His short story, "The Edge of the World," was awarded the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award in 1989. It was also nominated for both the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. "Radio Waves" received the World Fantasy Award in 1996. His stories have appeared in *Omni*, *Penthouse*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's*, *High Times*, *New Dimensions*, *Starlight*, *Universe*, have been reprinted in Best of the Year anthologies, and translated for Japanese, Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish and French publications. His books include: *In the Drift* (an Ace Special), *Vacuum Flowers*, *Griffin's Egg*, *Stations of the Tide*, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (a New York Times Notable Book), *Gravity's Angels* (short story collection), *A Geography of Unknown Lands* (short story collection), and *Jack Faust*.

Dave Duncan was born in Scotland and came to Canada in 1955. His many books include a number of series: The King's Blades (*The Gilded Chain*, *Lord of the Fire Lands*—Coming Oct. 99, *Sky of Swords*—Coming in 2000); The King's Daggers (*Sir Stalwart*—Coming Nov. 99); The Great Game (*Past Imperative*, *Present Tense*,

Future Indefinite); *A Handful Of Men* (*The Cutting Edge*, *Upland Outlaws*, *The Stricken Field*, *The Living God*); *A Man Of His Word* (*Magic Casement*, *Faery Lands Forlorn*, *Perilous Seas*, *Emperor and Clown*); The Omar Books (*The Reaver Road*, *The Hunters' Haunt*); and *The Seventh Sword* (*The Reluctant Swordsman*, *The Coming of Wisdom*, *The Destiny of the Sword*). He also has a number of stand-alone novels: *Daughter of Troy*, *The Cursed*, *Hero!*, *Strings*, *West of January*, *Shadow*, and *A Rose-Red City*.

Sean Stewart grew up in Edmonton, Alberta, but is currently living in California. His first book, *Passion Play* (Beach Holme/Tesseract 1992; Ace 1993) received the 1992 Aurora Award and the 1992 Arthur Ellis Award (Crime Writers of Canada) for Best First Novel. *Nobody's Son* (Maxwell Macmillan 1993; Ace 1995) won the 1993 Aurora, and the 1993 Canadian Library Association Award for Best Young Adult Novel of the Year. *Resurrection Man* (July 1995; Ace 1996) received the 1995 New York Times "Notable Science Fiction Book" of the year (one of seven), and was short-listed for the 1995 Aurora. All of his books have been placed on the *Locus* Recommended Reading List over the years. Look for his new novel, *Galveston*, in 2000.

Candas Jane Dorsey was born in Edmonton in 1952, and has been a freelance writer and editor full time since 1980. Most recently, her novel *Black Wine* was published by Tor Books, New York, January 1997 (trade paperback edition, January 1998). *Black Wine* won the 1997 Crawford Fantasy Award (given by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts), the 1998 James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, and the 1998 Aurora Award.

Other publications include *Dark Earth Dreams*, a short story anthology/

book-with-audio-CD; *Machine Sex and other stories* (Porcepic Books 1988, The Women's Press, London 1990), four poetry collections, and *Hardwired Angel* (with Nora Abercrombie, Pulp Press 1987), winner of the 1986 3-Day Novel Writing Contest. "Sleeping in a Box" from *Machine Sex and other stories* won the 1989 Aurora. She edited a special SF issue of *Prairie Fire* in 1994, co-edited *Tesseract's*³ with Gerry Truscott, and this year shares editing duties on *Tesseract's*⁸ with John Clute.

Born in 1964 in Québec City, **Yves Meynard** currently lives in Longueuil. Since 1986, he has published over 40 SF & Fantasy short stories in both English and French, and 7 books in French. His first book in English, a fantasy novel titled *The Book of Knights*, came out in January 1998 from Tor Books. The current literary editor for the Québécois SF magazine *Solaris*, Yves has been an anthologist for several projects, most recently *Tesseract's*⁵, published by Tesseract Books.

He has published stories in English in *On Spec*, *Edge Detector*, various *Tesseract's* anthologies, *Northern Stars*, *Arrowdreams*, *Prairie Fire*, *tomorrow*, *Year's Best SF 2*, and *tomorrow'sf*. In French, his work has appeared in *imagine...*, *Solaris*, and others. His books include *La Rose du désert* (collection, Éditions Le Passeur, 1995), *Chanson pour une sirène* (with Élisabeth Vonarburg, Éditions, Vents d'Ouest, 1995), *Le Mage des fourmis* (Éditions Médiaspaul, 1995), *Le vaisseau des tempêtes* (Éditions Médiaspaul, 1996), *Le Prince des Glaces* (Éditions Médiaspaul, 1996), *Le fils du Margrave* (Éditions Médiaspaul, 1997), and *Un Oeuf d'acier* (Éditions Vents d'Ouest, 1997).

His literary awards include the Prix Solaris (1988), Prix Boréal for best short

story (1993 & 1994), Prix Boréal for best book (for *La Rose du désert*, 1996), Aurora Award for best short story in French (4 times: 1992, 1994, 1995 & 1996), and Grand Prix de la Science-Fiction et du Fantastique Québécois (1994).

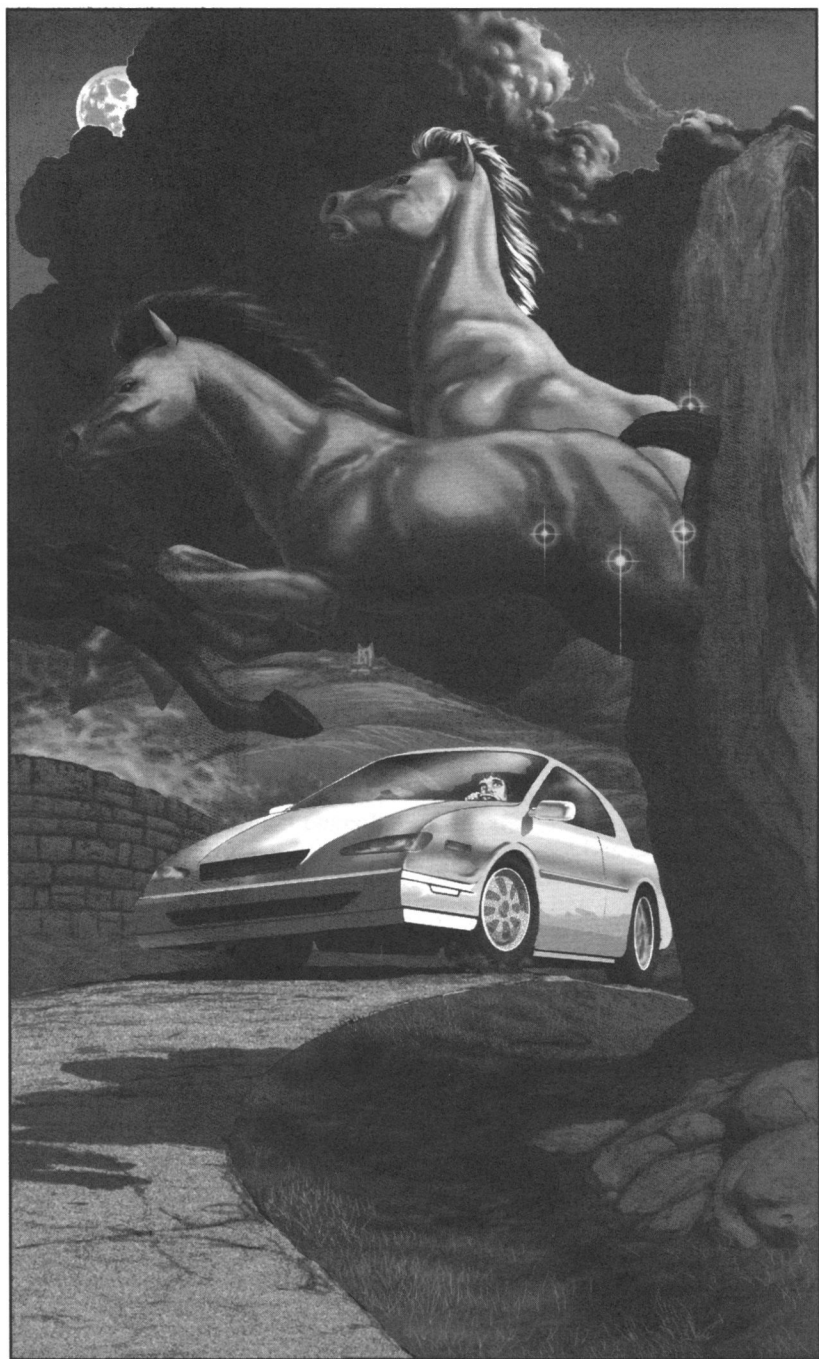
Peter Watts, whose first novel, *Starfish*, will be released by Tor Books in July 1999, has spent much of his adult life trying to decide whether to be a writer or a scientist, ending up as a hybrid of both. He's won awards in fields as diverse as marine mammal science, video documentary, and science fiction. These accolades have not gone to his head since they never involved a lot of cash. Throughout the past decade he has been paid by the animal welfare movement to defend marine mammals; by the US fishing industry to sell them out; and by the Canadian government to ignore them. He eventually decided that since he was fictionalizing science anyway, he might as well add some characters and plot and try selling to a wider market than the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*.

Nalo Hopkinson says: "I've lived in Toronto, Canada since 1977, but spent most of my first 16 years in the Caribbean, where I was born. My writing reflects my hybrid reality.

"I write speculative fiction. For anyone who doesn't know the term, it's fiction in which impossible things happen. It includes magic realism, fantasy, science fiction and horror."

Nalo's *Brown Girl in the Ring* was the winner of the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest, chosen from over 1000 entries. The book has garnered critical acclaim and glowing reviews both nationally and internationally. Her second book, *Midnight Robber*, will be released in the spring of 2000. ♣

Watch www.compusmart.ab.ca/clear/conspec.htm
for ConSpec updates!



Water, Circle, Moon

Sally McBride

illustrated by James Beveridge

HORSES, THREE OF THEM—ROAN, BAY AND DAPPLED GRAY—jumped out of the rock right in front of her, as if sculpted in an instant and set free to run. Leila slammed on the brakes and stopped as fast as she could. The horses laughed like women as they ran away.

Leila turned off the engine, her hands shaking. She remembered to set the parking brake, and got out to stand on the wet grass beside the road, listening, willing her heart to slow.

The horses, which had jumped off the road into a walled field as soon as she'd pulled the car over, were invisible now behind a mist that she knew had come forward to meet them. There was electricity in the clouds overhead, rumbling thunder while the fading laughter beckoned.

Leila looked across the field, hugging her shoulders. *I really saw them, didn't I?*

The wall was made of stones, wet and black, with hard pillows of green-gold moss jammed tight into the cracks between them. Rain was frequent here, and the land grew fogs as trees grew leaves.

And rocks grew horses.

Leila had never seen anything like it, but knew it was something to do with the part of England she was now in; she doubted that anything the eye observed or the ear heard could be trusted. She felt a grin widen her mouth, and a delicious shiver course along her arms.

Now to find a place to stay here in the neighborhood where Innis had been born, and spend a few days walking. *I'll set out in the mornings like the spoke*

of a bicycle wheel, cutting a straight track across the wavy lines of magic, right to the hub.

The magic wheel, turning inside the ordinary world. If you stepped off, ordinary horses would whinny and crop grass in the ordinary way, and raise their heads in mild amazement at the sight of the magical creatures spinning past just across the road.

The rain that had followed her from London had stopped. She went back to the car and opened all the windows. The ones in the back would only go down halfway. The heat puffed out. The sun on the other side, the ordinary side, was hotter; here, though it looked the same, it didn't have the same power. Leila suspected the moon was taking much of it and storing it for night.

Inside the rental car was her meager luggage, hauled from Canada: jeans and sweaters, walking shoes and extra socks, camera, lots of film, binoculars. Would the camera work here? No way to know till she got back to the city and had the film developed. Probably the camera was a waste of time. At least that's what Mother had implied.

She pulled out the binoculars and scanned around. No problem with them, except for a tendency to blurriness at the edges of the viewing area. By staring resolutely straight ahead, Leila could catch, in the corner of her eye, the tentative movement of mist back and forth, as if it were breathing, idly waiting for a good moment to come out and take her. She smiled again.

She re-stowed the binoculars and

climbed back into the driver's seat. The maps from the travel agent in Toronto were useful only for the main roads and larger towns. Other maps she'd got from Innis, who'd assured her they were accurate last summer at least, though probably she'd find the smaller streams and copses in different places now. His notations were on them in little pencil squiggles. Rivers, most towns, and larger well-established forests would stay put, but lanes might change while you were on them, trees move and fences snake suddenly across the fields.

She wouldn't be here if not for Innis telling her she'd be better staying well away. Tight with his magic he was, and not wanting to share with his little sister.

Yet he'd helped her with the maps. They'd conspired like children over them—*don't let Mum know*—and all the while he'd given her subtle digs about bravery and determination and her lack thereof. Might he have some sort of plan? She'd never really understood Innis. They had different fathers; hers a decent Canadian Protestant who owned a chain of dry-cleaning stores and left everyone pretty much alone, Innis's a creature of the moon-forest (according to Mother) who had planted his seed and vanished all aglimmering in the night.

Leila tried to take this with a grain of salt, but she'd seen too much. Mother really was fey, beautiful one day and almost invisible the next, with a constant stream of would-be lovers to disdain. She had made herself comfortable in worldly ways,

dazzlingly interesting when she wielded her small share of power. But she had never really accomplished anything.

What does she see in Father? What can she possibly see in a mortal man, a Canadian businessman for God's sake? Leila shook her head.

Innis, now. Leila loved her brother, but really, he used his magic for such stupid things. Parking spots, women, fantastic bargains on leather jackets. He threw his strength away. Or was he merely practicing for something better? Was she being maneuvered into doing this?

Well, here I am.

She put the car in gear and slowly let off the brake.

But if I had what he and Mother have, oh how differently I'd use it!

She pulled the car ahead slowly, hoping for more horses, but the road lay disappointingly flat. Another hundred yards and there was a sign advertising a bed and breakfast up a short laneway. Right where Innis had marked it with a flourishing X. She turned in and parked in front of the red-stone house.

She walked across a lawn to reach the door, suspecting right away that there was no one home. The grass was all bent away from the house, as if combed; she could feel her ankles prickle as she waded though the tiny lines of force. The owner must be out.

She tried knocking at the door anyway and felt it repulse her gently—her hand couldn't quite rap the wood—then circled the house peering as well as she could into windows. There was nothing to be seen,

of course. A polite, reticent dwelling.

At the bottom of a smooth green lawn were stables. A flagstone path led down, trickling between borders of delphinium and cosmos like a narrow gray stream. It was almost impossible to resist going down the path. A good sign.

"There's magic here, all right. And I'm going to get me some, Innis or no Innis," she said aloud.

It was just after six o'clock. Leila went back to the car and sat in it with the doors open to the breeze, munching on a pub-bought sandwich and a big streaky apple. The apple had little red veins in its white flesh, and tasted wonderful. Her feet, in sandals, rested on the gravel, which had over it the liquid shimmer of water as if it were a stream-bed and not a driveway. It was cool and very nice. Eventually the hair on her arms stood up, a shiver went over her skin, and the shadowed grass rippled back the other way.

"About time," she muttered, brushing crumbs from her lap and standing up. She checked her face in her purse mirror in case of apple skin between her teeth, and noted that her eyes were now a deep clear green. They'd been muddy brown in Toronto, and had started to change the moment she'd got off the plane at Heathrow. A nice effect, really. She snapped the mirror shut and advanced upon the house.

A woman answered her knock, peering up. She was a midget, dressed in navy blue with her hair carefully permed. "Oh, yes," she said. "We've got your room for you."

Leila entered and stood before a

desk behind which the woman briskly scuttled. She clambered onto a stool, her little arms resting like pink dumplings on the mahogany as she wrote Leila's name in the guest-book.

"Leila Corliss, there we are. Third floor at the back all right? Here's your key, dearie. There's a lovely view from that room, right to the river. You'll be wanting an early breakfast."

"Well, that would be—"

"It'll be a good day for walking."

The tiny woman nodded and climbed off her stool. "Unless you'd like to ride?" She shook her head, laughing. "My, but you look like a lot of the lasses around here. All the way from Canada ... well, well, well."

Leila resigned herself to it. She couldn't hide a thing, apparently, even though the house felt quite ordinary on the inside. "It seems very quiet," she said, looking around. "Am I the only guest right now?"

But at that moment two couples in casual tourist garb came clattering down the curved stairs, arguing about where to get dinner. Someone called from the second floor, someone else replied gaily from around a corner. Then the phone rang and the woman reached up for it. Leila could hear ruckus of various expectable sorts, all seeming to have been cued by her question. She picked up her key. As long as there was a real bed to sleep in, and a functioning wash-room, she told herself that it didn't really matter if anyone was actually here or not. *Something* was in residence, or the house wouldn't have let her in.

The room looked as if it belonged to the sort of woman Leila had always wanted to be. Not at all like a hotel room. Lots of books, a flute shiny silver on a stand next to some music, pretty curtains draping in rosy festoons across a big bay window. Potted plants whose leaves moved constantly in a soothing tumble. On the night-table she found a novel that she'd wanted to read for ages.

She sat on the bed and sighed, looking out at the clear of evening. She could hear a horse whinnying from down by the stables, its voice carried by the malleable air. Tomorrow she would start investigating. As for now, might as well indulge in a bath in the enormous claw-footed tub down the hall.

→ ←

BY MOONRISE SHE COULDN'T RESIST ANY longer.

She put the novel down and swung her bare feet out of the bed. The night was calling.

There's no gain in lying a-bed staring at the moon through glass. She pulled on jeans and a shirt.

Outside, the moon's rays showered her with cold fire. The blades of grass were turning in circles, each one moving as if following its own tiny sun. She stayed carefully on the stone path that led to the stables.

A tall spray of cosmos nodded in the night. She reached out to touch a blossom-wheel, but it whipped back on its stem sending dozens of tissue-pink petals down in a clatter, as if they were fingernails hurled away.

As she stepped carefully over the petals, she turned her head, startled.

She'd heard laughter, a group of people laughing. The horses? Could it be them?

The laughter circled her, around and around. She turned to follow it, feeling the air burn cold on her skin. Her hair was swirling very slowly, winding itself around her neck gently, gently, tighter and tighter. She pulled it back and quickly braided it, fastening it with a bit of thread pulled from a button.

Rubbing her neck and hardly daring to blink, she crept along, her toes in their thin sneakers feeling for the steps.

Somehow she'd always pictured herself doing this in sunlight—tramping along through flowers and tall grass toward the spring of magic where she would dip her cup and drink. Not this; it was too soon, and too damned dark.

Then she was at the stable, a looming blackness. She ran her hands along the wall where she thought a door ought to be, and found there was one. It was open, though a large metal padlock hung loosely from its clasp. Turning it in her fingers she saw it gleam briefly copper, then blacken into iron. Holding it made her dizzy. She let it clank back against the door, and turned away, biting her lip. She hadn't the nerve to go in, and the stable felt empty anyway. The horses were out in the night somewhere.

The moon was behind a cloud. It had gone absolutely black.

Maybe, maybe I should have listened to Innis, she thought, feeling her heart pound. *He told me not to come.* The flagstone path poured itself

toward her like water filling the hollow where she stood. *But I thought he didn't mean it.*

She turned and started to walk as fast as she could back to the house. The water rose higher. Suddenly there was something big and pale moving silently beside her. Leila shied sideways, and started to run. Her feet splashed in water she couldn't feel, and more of the cosmos petals flicked against her, hard enough to cut. She held her arms before her face and stumbled faster, up the steps. The pale shape veered away and vanished into the dark.

What if the house doesn't let me in?

But it did, and she stood panting with her back against the door, staring balefully at three bearskin rugs, toothily snarling, that lay each in front of its own fireplace in the entry-hall. The place was much bigger now. The rugs hadn't been there when she'd checked in, but at least they were staying on the floor. She crept to the stairs and up to her room, the rugs' eyes following her.

Leila pulled the covers right up to her nostrils and lay awake listening to the creaks and chirps of night for a long time.



A KNOCK ON THE DOOR WOKE HER.

"Breakfast's up, dearie. Are you awake?"

She blinked and pushed the covers away. "Yes. Yes, I am, thanks! I'll be down in ten minutes."

Dawn was barely breaking. Outside the window was thick mist, just as she'd assumed there would be. Sun was what she wanted, though;

it would rise and burn the moon-mist away.

Oh, Innis, silver-tongued, moon-shadowed, smiling—you might have sent me here to learn my lesson, but I'll learn more than you want. I'll not be the poor clay sister anymore.

"That's right," she told herself, smiling grimly while padding along to the washroom. "Brave words, brave deeds. That's me."

There was a little family already in the breakfast room when she went down. Mummy and daddy, and two little golden-haired girls who peeked at her, giggling, as they ate their porridge. Leila listened to the parents, who seemed to be talking about someplace else. The light on them was different, warmer and stronger. She realized at last that they were really in another country, probably Italy, and were planning their day around some art museums. The children made faces at each other. When the midget woman brought more coffee, the mother said, "*Grazie*," and nodded politely at someone much taller.

Leila drank two cups of coffee and ate toast and raspberry jam. As she got up to leave, the little concierge trotted up with a brown-paper bag.

"Here you are," she said. "Cucumber-and-cheese, and a hard-boiled egg—no meat for you, of course, but there's nothing wrong with an egg—and an apple. All right?"

"Well, yes, that's lovely ... but I really wasn't expecting—"

"Oh, it's all included. The river-water's drinkable, by the way. Will

you be wanting your room again tonight?"

Would she? Maybe she should just leave now. Get a job in Daddy's dry-cleaning firm, take night courses in accounting. "I'm not sure. Can I let you know later?"

"Before six, if you can, dearie—as you can see, we fill up at this time of year."

"Of course. Yes. Um, thanks."

Leila collected her things from the room and put them in the car, just in case, then stood watching the mist rise.

If she left now she'd never come back. She would never have the nerve, and Innis, damn him, would have won. Exactly *what* he'd have won she wasn't able to put into words.

It's not his winning that would matter; it's my losing. I'm at least as brave and worthy as Mother, aren't I, even though she ran home to Canada? Haven't I the right—the birthright—to seek my own destiny? I can't go back, I can only go forward now, or never hold my head up again.

All right, then. Take a deep breath, and go.

Leila changed into her walking shoes and tucked the lunch, the binoculars, Innis' maps, a sweater and a notebook into her knapsack. She took a couple of snapshots of the house, and one of herself by holding the camera out and pointing it back at her own grimacing face, then put it in too. At the last moment she remembered to toss in a pencil, then she slung the knapsack over her shoulders and set off around the

house to the back.

The cosmos petals lay on the stone path, curling in the strengthening sun. She tossed them into the air one after the other and watched them turn smartly against the wind and fly like bees toward the river.

Water, and circles, and the moon. The dry pink petals of a flower. What did horses have to do with it? She hurried past the stables without looking at the door, closed now, and its lock.

After half an hour she realized that it was going to be impossible to march cross-country in anything like a straight line. She hadn't even got close to the river and already it had changed position several times. The magic was getting thicker and thicker. It was having fun, leading her a merry chase. As if she didn't feel inadequate enough already.

She got out Innis' map and scowled at it. The day had turned hot. She traced her finger along the road she'd followed to get here.

"Okay. There's the turn, and that X is the house." She squinted to the south. "The river is that way." When she looked back, the map had turned upside down in her hand. "Damn! Innis, you're not playing fair."

Strangely, the flowers and trees along her path were behaving themselves very well, but this only served to irritate Leila further. She looked around and spotted a tree that seemed climbable and not likely to suddenly uproot itself and shamble away. Taking the binoculars out of her pack, she scrambled up as high as she could and looked around.

Yes, there was the river, glinting smugly behind a screen of willows. Their long yellow whips swayed enticingly. Mist coiled out of the water and fled to the edges of her view.

Someone, or something, was swimming up the river, a dark head making its way swiftly against the current.

Was it a man? She fiddled with the focus. It could be an animal, an otter ... something bigger ... she heard laughing again, quite close. The binoculars lost their focus and she pulled them away from her eyes, blinking.

She wasn't in the tree any more. She was walking, her feet finding their way among roots and brambles without a slip. She hadn't even felt it, but suddenly she'd been drawn right down to the riverbank. She stopped, almost falling.

It was a horse in the water. She could see its forelegs churning as it swam directly toward her, its head high. Distance had made its head look dark against the silver water, but she saw now that it was white. The water slid green and clear as glass over its snowy flanks. It snorted and tossed glittering drops out of its mane, looking right at her.

Then someone called, "*Leila!*" She turned her eyes away from the horse just as it reached the bank—and there was Innis, sitting on a blanket under a willow tree. He had a thermos in one hand and a cup in the other.

"Tea?" He waggled the cup.

The horse had vanished. The river flowed by like silk cloth.

She stood with her hands on her hips, glaring down at him and feeling inordinately angry. "No, I don't want tea! Don't you have anything cold?"

"Look in the basket. There's bound to be something."

In an old-fashioned wicker picnic basket was an insulated nylon pack with two cans of cola in it. Leila opened one, and after a few minutes of nursing it and scowling at the river, asked, "Have you been here all along, you bastard? And I use the term literally."

Innis snorted. "Of course. What did you think? I wanted you here last summer, you know, but then you took up with that creep, what's-his-name."

"If you mean Kevin, he was not a creep. I liked him, damn you. And besides, you tried to talk me *out* of coming here." She glanced sideways at Innis, biting her lip to keep from letting a smile slip out. "I guess your reverse psychology worked. Anyway, I'm here now. And I'm fed up with all these little tricks, I'll have you know."

He shrugged, sipping his tea.

"Were you in the house last night?"

"Yes and no."

"Don't be cryptic. You know I hate it when you—"

"—When I'm fey? When magic curls itself around me? You know I can't help it."

"But you love it, don't you? You and Mother." Leila didn't feel like smiling anymore, she felt like crying. It was all stupid. Glimpses of magic, little peeks into wild madness;

taunting, wicked moonlight... She wanted into that magic world more than anything. Damn them both, manipulating her, laughing and teasing.

Innis got up, put out his hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, help me fold the blanket and pack up the things."

"What, can't you just twiddle your fingers and make it all vanish?"

"Oh, come on, Leila. I can't help who I am." His face darkened for a moment, and he looked almost serious.

"You're going to tell me you hate it? That you'd give it all away?"

His devilish grin came back, and she snorted.

But she helped him with the blanket. He had a car nearby parked at the end of a little lane, and they stowed the picnic things away in the trunk. The boot, she reminded herself.

"Let's walk for a while," Innis said, taking her hand.

They strolled companionably through the sunny morning, making generally toward a wooded area to the southeast. "What do horses have to do with it?" Leila asked, slinging a leg over a low stone wall and hopping down to the pasture on the other side.

"Horses?"

"Laughing horses. And that horse in the river. Where did it go? Didn't you see it?"

"There are lots of horses around here. I guess there are a few wild ones."

"Wild horses? This close to London? Don't be an idiot."

Suddenly he reached for her arm

and held her tight. A bee spiraled past, buzzing very loud, like an airplane almost; it seemed to pull her thoughts away after it.

"Leila, come into the forest with me. I'll show you—"

She tried to pull loose, feeling dizzy, but his grip was crushing. "Show me what, Innis? What *you've* got that *I* haven't?" She bit her lip, suddenly frightened.

He burst out laughing and let go of her arm. She swallowed, rubbing it, and looked at him. She'd never noticed before how large and perfect his teeth were.

He's my brother, my flesh and blood, half-way at least. He thinks I'm a coward, thinks I'll run away from the magic wheel.

"All right, damn you." The sun behind him made his hair bright gold, and she couldn't see his face. "Show me, then!"

She heard him let out his breath, a little crow of glee.

At once the sun began to dim. All the color drained from everything as darkness fell. The sun was still there, but had turned into a pallid silver disk that shed no warmth. Leila found herself clinging to Innis as she watched the sky.

The moon rose, fast, and took its place directly in front of the sun, eclipsing it completely. Stars sprang forth, filling the sky with cold glitter, the queen moon holding her place in the center. They were in the forest now, in a little glade surrounded by sinuous black trees, the moon like a spotlight above them. The branches began to move and whisper.

Leila jerked away, and Innis let

her go. She could hear water rushing all around her, circling. The river had made a ring around them and their little glade.

She turned, every sense alert, scanning the darkness. *Well, I'm in it now, aren't I? I'm at the hub.*

She looked back.

Innis had vanished. She was alone under the moon. She stood still, frightened, exhilarated beyond anything she'd imagined.

Then she saw something ghosting by just out of view among the black twisting branches, footsteps crackling. Hoofsteps. That horse, the horse in the water, a horse that laughed—it was Innis, she should have realized it right away. Shapechanger, magic creature. *Brother.* What did he want of her? Her mouth had gone dry, and her hair was beginning to swirl upward in slow wisps.

Her nerve broke. She began to run, knowing there was no way off the river-island but unable to stay still. In her legs was the overwhelming urge to race and never stop.

Behind her she could hear Innis, running too. She stumbled and grabbed a branch, stopping against the black bulk of a tree. The river gleamed before her, treacherous and fast, a silver collar around the island.

Innis was there, perfectly still, watching her silver-eyed as she crouched trembling.

She drew in her breath sharply. Everything had gone flat, dimensionless in shades of gray with the moonlight in bars across it, silver over pewter over lead. She tried to stand, wanting to rub her eyes but unable to raise her arms to do it. What was

happening? Her body was groaning in sudden agony, as if she were swelling, bursting out of her skin.

"No!" she screamed, looking down. Her arms were lengthening, her hands were forming themselves into hard crescent hooves. She heard her clothes rip and fall away as her legs began to kick and churn the earth. She found herself running.

Innis, dancing close on long white legs, suddenly bit her on the shoulder. She threw her head back and galloped, four-legged, screaming.

There was nowhere to run except in circles, held by the ring of water, Innis behind her nipping at her flanks and howling with laughter. She stopped at last.

"What are you? What are you doing?"

"I'm just your brother." He faced her, snorting, his eyes like gun-sights on her, like moon craters. "Don't you know me?" He stretched out his neck to bite her again, but she reared and backed away. *Oh God, what's happened to me?*

He trenched the ground with silver hooves and danced around her. The branches threw their shadows at him like whip-strokes. "We're more than human, we two, and still less than gods. Don't forget that, little sister." His laugh was like a whinny, wild and rough.

She stood panting, unable to reply, the moon whirling above.

"Haven't you ever wondered about our mother? She was a girl once, just like you."

She said nothing.

"You've always wanted this, Leila."

She stood absolutely still and tried to close her eyes, but couldn't. Her body was so different. To run on four legs, to leap at the moon—

And he was right; he'd known the truth of it. She had always been jealous of him. And of Mother for what she'd found on a magic night twenty-five years ago, and at the same time disdaining her for running. *You took your changeling baby and ran to what you imagined was safety, but the magic won out after all.* The magic, too strong for one body, or even two...

Then she heard another voice, whickering laughter from somewhere in the forest. Leila wished her new mouth could smile. *Mother.* No coward after all.

And more voices, hoofsteps crackling, circling. Dark shapes and pale, pied and golden and brown.

This was true, this night-in-day ruled by the witch-moon. This was where she belonged.

"Yes." She watched Innis move, a white horse against the curious flatness of this unnatural night. Unnatural eyes. She shook her head, the hairs of her mane flying up like mist. "Yes." She bucked and turned and started to run.

And on the other side of the turning wheel, ordinary horses lifted their heads, hearing laughter as the moon spun away and vanished into day. ✨

A Biblical Bestiary #1

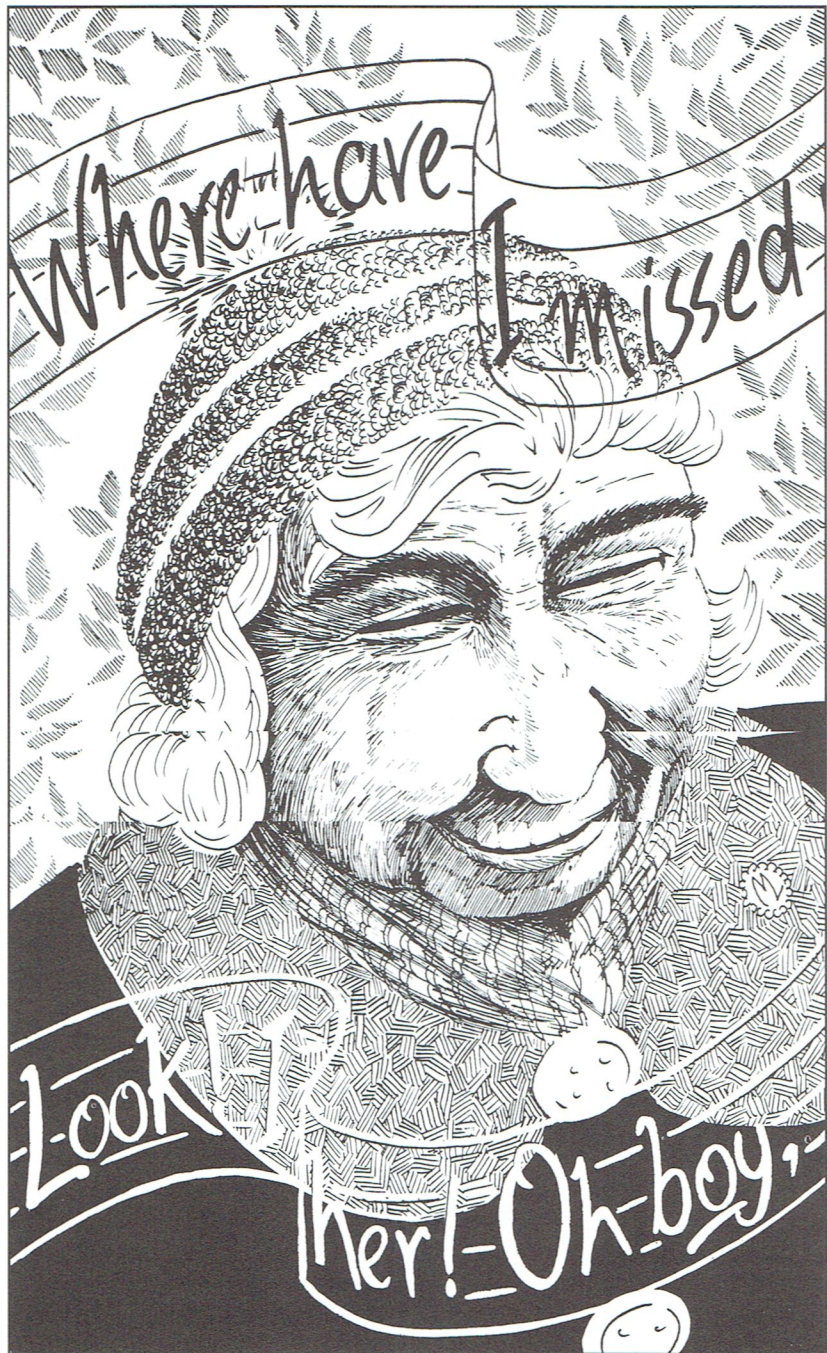
Eileen Kernaghan

*Blind guides, which strain at a gnat,
and swallow a camel.*

— St. Matthew 23:24

In Arabia Felix this is the season
when the camels swarm: huge hummocky windborne
packages of hair and dangling legs and spit
blundering like busses through the ochre air.

The wise traveller, knowing better than to speak
or yawn, will make his way across the sand
in silence.



Where have

I missed

Look

her! Oh boy,

Walking Dogs

Greg Bechtel

illustrated by Murray Lindsay

MIST BEADED AND RAN DOWN HER FADED NAVY OVERCOAT AS Mrs. Deighton slowly worked her way down the stairway, holding onto the wooden rail with both hands. The logs that formed the edges of the cracked asphalt steps were always slippery after it rained. No fall would be a small one for a seventy-two year old, and the hundred-odd steps into the Taylor Creek Valley were treacherous at the best of times. The thin cord of an extendible leash stretched forward and down from her pocket. The Shih-tzu at the other end of the leash faced back up the stairs and shifted from side to side on its paws. It raised its eyebrows and twitched its ears as the old woman edged forward two more steps, then stopped.

"I'm fine, Princess," she said. "Now stop fidgeting, you little worry-wart. I can take care of myself—just be patient."

Five years ago, Jonathan Deighton fell down these same steps. He had been complaining about the breakfast his wife prepared for him that morning. He was in mid-rant: "...and I will *not* stand for..." when he stomped his foot for emphasis, and startled the Pekingese that had just emerged from the top of the steps. The dog ran between his legs, its leash tangling around his ankles, and that was that. Jonathan tumbled, cursing and yelling all the way to the bottom. The leash, still tangled around his legs, dragged the poor dog down with him. The Pekingese had whined and limped about at the bottom of the steps. Jonathan, finally silent, didn't move. He never did like dogs.

Mrs. Deighton found that life hadn't drastically changed with Jonathan's death, except that now she could talk with Princess uninterrupted. And

Princess didn't complain nearly so much as Jonathan. It had been much harder when her son, Jeremy, had moved away, and left her alone with his father. Princess hadn't been around yet at that point. Life was so much simpler this way. She took care of Princess, and Princess, as much as Mrs. Deighton hated to admit it, took care of her.

The old woman reached the bottom of the stairs, turned from the railing, and straightened. "Okay! I made it, no thanks to you. Happy now?" She glared at the Shih-tzu; it glared back up at her. "Okay, okay, I'll bring the cane next time if it will shut you up—God, you're neurotic. Now go and play like a normal dog." Princess sniffed, as if to show her contempt for "normal" dogs, raised her nose high and trotted imperially down the path. Mrs. Deighton followed, muttering under her breath: "Never should have let you keep that name—always putting on airs."

Princess' ears twitched back, then resolutely forward; she raised her head even higher and continued towards the footbridge.

The smell of fallen leaves, wet wood and mud mixed in the damp air. The old woman breathed deeply, and smiled. As Mrs. Deighton crossed the small bridge over the creek, the sun dropped below the clouds. The creek flashed with reflected red and gold, chuckling between soggy banks. "I just can't understand those people at the home. Can you, Princess? All they ever do is sit around and watch TV and complain that no one ever visits. My Jeremy never comes, but you don't see me whining

about it, do you?" The dog looked back and cocked one ear.

"Well, not to them, at least. A son should visit his mother, but there's no point in brooding over it. They sit around and complain and complain, but they never *do* anything. And they think *I'm* the crazy one. I can hear them now." Her voice shifted upwards in mocking imitation: "'There goes old Mrs. Deighton, talking to that damn dog again.'"

She scowled and muttered, "Bunch of dried-up old farts," then chuckled and shook her head. "'Old farts.' Oh, to call them that to their faces... Can't you just see it?"

<Don't you dare. They'd probably throw me down the garbage chute when you weren't looking.>

"You're probably right. They think I'm crazy as it is. They don't like you so much either, what with the 'no pets' clause and all."

A sawing rasp drew her attention back to the path ahead. A tubby beagle was pulling against its leash, its front feet off the ground. At the far end of the leash, a young man in a motorcycle jacket struggled to keep his grip while simultaneously lighting a cigarette. He cursed and scowled as the beagle gave a final tug and the cigarette, finally lit, dropped into a puddle. The frown transformed into an awkward smile as he noticed Mrs. Deighton and blushed.

"Oh ... I'm sorry ... I mean ... I didn't see you. I should have known; she always sees you before I do ... I ... uh... Hi."

"Well hello, Molly!" exclaimed the old woman, bending over the

beagle. Whining and panting, Molly flattened herself on the asphalt at Mrs. Deighton's feet.

<I haven't seen you in so long! There's so much to tell you! I met this big dog, but he was friendly and my mom had these guests over, and they were all really nice, one of them gave me food under the table, and—oh, I can't even remember it all! Where have you been? I missed you!>

"Yes, it's been a long time; you've got so much to tell me. Patience, dear, patience," she said, as the beagle jumped up and planted two muddy paws on the front of her coat.

*<Where are they? I can smell them. Can I please, please, **please** have one?>*

"Molly, off!" The young man jerked the leash, and the beagle dropped to the ground. "Sorry. She's just excited to see you, and no matter what I do..."

"It's okay, I understand," said the old woman, still looking down. "You just want some treats." She scratched Molly behind the ears, and the whining rose in pitch.

*<You bet I do. They've got me on this diet stuff. It's horrible, and they never give me anywhere even **near** enough.>*

"Listen to you! You'd think they never fed you, but I know better. Still, a little extra every now and then can't hurt. Here you go." She retrieved one of the dog treats from her pocket, and dropped it at her feet. The whining stopped and was replaced by wet crunching. She watched Molly for a few seconds, an indulgent smile on her face, then

turned to the young man. They chatted a bit, for politeness' sake, then said their good-byes and parted.

"Bye, Molly!" called Mrs. Deighton.

*<Bye, Mrs. Deighton! Thanks for the treat! Next time bring **more!**>*

The young man waved and hurried off, already struggling to light another cigarette, dragging along the reluctant beagle.

"He's a nice boy, even if he's not very patient with Molly. She is a beagle, after all." Walking onward, she remembered another chance meeting, another boy with a leather jacket, another dog. It had been her last day alone, that day ten years ago.

→ ←

"WATER POLLUTED. NO SWIMMING. No Wading."

Drizzle slips from dead leaves, from the metal sign by the bridge. Water runs off her in slow trickles. It beads on her hair and face, on her new navy overcoat. Jonathan said the coat was too expensive, and ugly to boot, but it keeps her warm. She needs something warm for these damp, solitary walks, and the walks are not a luxury. Even Jonathan can't argue with that. Days of cold rain have swollen the creek to a gray rush. She can hear youthful voices shouting on the far side of the creek, but she can't see them through dark, dripping leaves.

The wooden bridge is slick, and the railing sways beneath her hand as she crosses to the rough secondary path. Dripping branches part before her, revealing churned mud, a clearing by the dirt trail. Raising her

eyes across a sea of glistening brown footprints, she sees the dog first. It's lying at the far end of the clearing, tied to a tree by a scrap of nylon rope around its neck. Patchy silver-gray fur is stained with mud; she can see ribs under taut skin. It has the aching beauty of a malnourished child, like those ones in the UNICEF ads on TV. She always wants to send money to help those children, but Jonathan says it's a scam. One of the dog's shoulders is stained an ugly crusted black around the dirty red of an open wound. Canine eyes meet hers for a moment, one blue and one gray. A boy in a leather jacket steps between them. He looks about thirteen or fourteen; just old enough to resent the title "boy," along with anyone who looks old enough to use it.

A group of children, with one or two more members that might be teenagers, forms a ragged circle around the tethered dog. Their clothes and voices are bright and loud against the muted browns and reds of autumnal trees. Frozen by surprise, Mrs. Deighton watches. Each child holds a rock. Arms are raised; young faces beam bright and flushed. The big one, the one who stepped between her and the dog, has a stick. Her mind has already named him for his tough outer covering: Leather Jacket.

Knobby wood rises, once, and comes down fast. The dog snaps halfheartedly, but doesn't dodge. Children's voices, a few on the edge of breaking, greet the dull thump. Another child, this one no more than ten, takes the stick, and edges nervously forward.

Mrs. Deighton steps off the bridge. Mud shifts beneath her boots. Her stasis breaks, and she charges forward, screeching:

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" It's her angry-mother voice, the one that always worked on little Jeremy. Maybe it will work now.

Leather Jacket turns. He looks a little like Jeremy. *That's right. Just like Jeremy; not so wild or dangerous, just young.* Adrenaline surges all the same. She is shaking. *With rage, not fear, damn it. You were never afraid of your own son, were you? And he used to pull that tough act all the time.*

"How dare you pick on a helpless animal!" She raises the pitch just a little higher—it's got to be just right. *No hysteria. You are definitely not hysterical. Not yet.*

He's walking towards her now. Stomping to a halt, his combat boots splatter the hem of her coat with heavy droplets of mud. He's big, towering over her, and he's smirking. *Just a child.*

"Get away from the poor thing, you ... you beasts!" *The rest are leaving the dog behind ... thank God, they're leaving it alone and they're turning and—*

His face hangs in the air, inches from hers. He doesn't look so much like Jeremy after all. Leather Jacket is missing a tooth; his breath is pungent with alcohol. *More like Jonathan.* She hears more sucking footsteps. Children crowd in her peripheral vision like small ghosts. *Don't take your eyes off him. Stare him straight in the eyes.* That's what Jonathan

says to do with vicious dogs. She doesn't even blink, although her eyes are starting to water.

"What'cha gonna do, granny? You gonna hit me with your purse?" He grins and glances back over his shoulder for approval. "You gonna beat us up for the poor little doggy?" Laughter all around, like the canned laughter on one of those sitcoms she never understands. What's so funny? The voice isn't working. He doesn't recognize, or care, about angry mothers. Maybe his mother never got angry at him. *Or maybe she did.* Another voice, higher and younger, joins in from the side.

"Maybe she's gonna pull some of that Ninja shit on us, like one of those Power Ranger chicks on TV." *Don't—don't take your eyes off the big one.* More laughter, another voice.

"Nah. She's an undercover cop for sure." The laugh track runs right on cue, but she still doesn't get the joke. "Or maybe she's got a gun in her purse, and she's just waiting for an excuse to use it." She could call for help, but no one can see across the creek—too many dying leaves hanging grimly onto gnarled branches. *Don't glance; don't look.*

"You mean an excuse like this?" The hanging face vanishes, replaced by a blotchy oval blur that still smells of stale alcohol. She hears a muffled crackling in the mud. So much for those glasses. The crowd of children is now a darker blur on a gray background, an earthbound cloud shot through with voices. "Nope, not like that." *Say something. Take control.*

"Get away from me! I could have

you arrested! Get away from me now, and I won't press charges. Go... Please!" She hears the edge of hysteria now, the incipient whimper. She can hear Jonathan's voice: *Now you've done it. Now you've really done it.* She waits and knows that silence is her last, best chance. It always is.

"Maybe she needs a better excuse." She feels a tug at her shoulder and snatches blindly, but it's gone. She hears the dull clatter of keys, lipstick, and compact and falling in a heap on the ground.

"Nope. Nothin'. No cash. No cards. No gun. Just a stupid old lady who doesn't know when to shut up." Something hooks her ankle, and she's on the ground. She can feel gritty mud on her cheek; cold water seeps through her coat. She could probably move a little, but she doesn't.

"Yup. Guess she's just stupid." She hears Leather Jacket turn and stomp off, followed by a sucking chorus of lighter steps. Children's laughter fades with distance, punctuated by jokes and shouts.

She waits until all she can hear is the slow drip of rain from the trees. Her hip hurts, and her ankle feels like it might be sprained. Nothing feels broken, though. Rolling onto her hands and knees, she searches in the mud. *They've got to be here somewhere.*

"A little to the left."

"What?"

"Your glasses. They're just a little farther and over to the left." She squints, and she can just see him. A darker blur against the trees. He

sounds young. This boy could be with the others. Could be. If he is, she can't do anything about it. She has to ask.

"I could use some help, you know."

"So could I. Listen—I'll help you, then you help me. Just a little further and you'll have them." She feels ahead in the mud. Plastic brushes against cold fingers, and she's got them. *Don't get up right away. Don't give him a chance.* She sits up, wipes the glasses on the sleeve of her coat, and carefully puts them on. Only one cracked lens remains, but at least she can see—sort of.

"Why couldn't you have just... Oh. I see." The small boy at the edge of the clearing swims into mud-streaked focus. He is sitting on his haunches in the wet leaves and watching her. He looks familiar, but she's sure she's never seen him before. He's thin, heartbreakingly thin, and his T-shirt and jeans are filthy. One grubby hand, dirt under broken fingernails, pushes long dark hair out of wary eyes, leaving a streak of mud on his forehead. The nylon rope around his neck is tied to a tree, and the dog is gone. They must have taken the dog and left the boy behind. "You were with those kids."

"They tricked me. Kind of funny, really." She concentrates on pulling herself upright in the mud, gripping a sapling for balance. "I thought they might know some good games, and it gets boring playing all by myself." Pain shoots through her hip. She gasps and slips, but the sapling holds her weight. Slowly, she limps towards the boy. He tenses, but stays

crouched. Jeremy used to look a little like that sometimes. At the cottage, beside the lake, he could crouch for hours in the shallows, staring at clouds of minnows. But where Jeremy was ready to pounce, this boy is ready to run.

"You shouldn't hang around with those kids. You could get into real trouble. They're not nice at all." How inane, how motherly—she must be in shock. She's beside him now, and he's standing. He only comes up to her chin. Couldn't be more than ten or twelve. He laughs up at her.

"Oh, I play with lots of people. They're not always nice, but a lot of times I trick them. There were those men in their silly uniforms with the big hats—they thought they were somewhere else. Kept asking about spices. I don't know anything about spice, but I know my way around here. I got them so lost and confused..." He chuckles, and continues, "They still haven't figured out where they are." He's always laughing—how can he laugh in a situation like this? Uniforms and hats? Sounds like police officers. They were probably just trying to help the poor child. "They trick me, I trick them. Doesn't matter so much—I always get away anyhow." He must be a runaway, maybe from a foster home. Her fingers slide on the rough nylon as she works at the knot. It's not very tight, and the first loop comes apart easily.

"What's your name?" she asks, for something to say. The next loop comes free. He stands very still, but he's shaking, and she can see the

muscles twitching in his neck. In spite of his confident chatter, he's ready to bolt.

"Oh, I got lots of names. Some people call me little brother, some call me 'Hey, you!' Some even used to call me old man, grandfather, Wakan Tanka, cousin, Ueuecoyotl... All sorts of nonsense, mostly. I don't need a name now. No one left to use it." Definitely a runaway. A ten year old boy tied to a tree in a park and abandoned, alone. Laughing. He scratches his neck and squirms, trying to see the knot. "You almost done?"

"Stand still. And keep your hand out of the way." It's the mother voice again, but more gentle this time. It seems to be working, and the boy seems genuinely stuck, but then again... "You could have untied yourself. It's not a tight knot."

"I'm not so good with knots, 'less I can get at them with my teeth. Could have chewed through the rope, I suppose, but I figured you'd give me a hand. I saw what you did before, remember?" *Saw and didn't do anything.* Could it all be just another sick game, the others waiting, giggling, in the bushes? The final loop comes free. Her hand brushes against something warm and sticky as she lowers it from his neck. His grin falters; his jaw tenses.

"You're hurt. Your shoulder is bleeding. We've got to get you to a hospital."

"No." A petulant scowl replaces the grin. "I can take care of myself—pretty much, anyway. And I don't like those places. Cut you off from everything, all those walls and doors

and glass. Can't go nowhere, and I hate sitting still." The grin comes creeping back. He can't stay serious for long. "Besides, they cut people up in hospitals. Lop off things. All those knives and surgery and stuff. Wouldn't want them to cut off the wrong thing. People would have to call me little sister, then." She can't help smiling at the child's bravado. "No. I can take care of myself, thanks." And she can't stop him. It's hard enough just to stand; she couldn't drag an unwilling boy out of the valley to a phone booth—or keep him there once she called an ambulance.

"Okay then, but let me look at it at least. I used to know some first aid." She reaches into her pocket for a hankie. It's Jonathan's, but he'll just have to deal with that. The wound is full of embedded bits of bark and dirt, but she can at least take out the smaller pieces and clean around the rest. Never take out the bigger pieces; it's better to leave them in. She remembers that much, even if she can't remember why. Her poking and prodding make the bleeding worse, but the boy doesn't flinch again. She wraps the hankie tightly over the wound, and ties it off. "Well, that should at least keep any more dirt from getting in. Does it feel any better?"

"Not really. But I bet you did a good job, anyway." Another grin. "Cuts like that just hurt, that's all." It's true. Little boys are always covered with scratches and cuts. Jeremy never complained about them either. "Well, I gotta go! See you sometime!"

He's already halfway across the clearing. *He can't go yet! He needs help! He's just a little—*

He pauses at the far edge, with a calculating look.

"You got any food? I'm real hungry. Those kids said they'd give me some, but they never did. Part of the trick, I guess." She nods, and keeps her eyes on him as she slides her free hand into the wetness of her coat pocket, feels the plastic and pulls. She holds out the flattened remnants of a ham and cheese sandwich in a torn baggie. The lettuce is wilted. She can't speak.

"Oh, that's great! Thanks!" The boy skips across the mud, grabs the baggie and darts away again. He bolts down the sandwich in three bites and sighs, looking around on the ground for any dropped bits. He slips the mangled baggie into his pocket, looks back up at her, and grins.

"Now you helped me outta pure charity, so I suppose I owe you. It's not good to leave unpaid debts lying around, you know. Not healthy. They got a way of getting paid, one way or another." She waits, silent. As long as he's talking, he isn't gone.

"I know. I know just the thing, the perfect gift. But you have to come over here." He's still smiling, but more gently, less feral. Somehow, he looks older now, and more *solid*. She limps slowly through the mud to the small boy. "Stand still, now. Don't move." The smile is fading, but there's a twinkle in his eye. *What does he want?* What could this scrawny little runaway possibly do for her? She glances into the trees,

apprehensive, but the woods still seem empty; there is no sign that the group of children is returning. The boy looks up into her eyes.

One eye is steel gray, the other is icy blue. The boy steps closer, and his face fills her mud-streaked monocular vision. That thin face and those unblinking eyes. Slowly, he licks the tips of his index fingers, one at a time, and pauses. He pauses, and that slow, gentle smile crosses his face again. He lifts his hands and gently touches her temples on either side, just in front of her ears. One finger on each side. She feels sharp fingernails on her scalp, and something soft brushes her cheek. A rush of voices approaches, and darkness swims up to meet her. As consciousness shreds, she hears his voice one more time:

<You can see okay, but your ears ain't so great. You're tough too, but you don't always have to be so tough all by yourself... Listen, granddaughter, cousin, little sister. Listen and learn what you been missing.>

➤ ◀

ROUGH BARK AGAINST HER BACK, SOFT wetness under her outstretched legs. She opens her eyes. The loose end of the nylon rope hangs across her shoulder, attached to the trunk above. The clouds are orange and red. Mud glistens in the bruised light of the sun sneaking below the clouds. There is a tattered Husky watching her from the far side of the clearing. It yips encouragement as she slowly grips the thick trunk to pull herself upright. She looks down for a moment to shift her grip, and when she looks up again the Husky

is gone.

Shock—that's what it is. She must have fainted ... probably still in shock. *What happened here? ... a boy? ... a dog? ... gone. Mustn't think.* Exhaustion and heavy mud tug at her feet as she shuffles towards the bridge to the main path. He's gone; they're all long gone. It's getting late, and she's on her own again. She's got to get home and start dinner, or Jonathan won't be happy. She limps as quickly as she can down the path.

The twilight haze under glowering clouds brings a sense of fairy-tale unreality to the park as she walks. Halfway up the steps from the valley, children's voices float up from below. She turns, too tired to resist, and waits for their arrival. At least this time it's just her. *So tired.* But no children arrive—only voices, and two dogs playing on the grass in the valley.

<Hey! Over here! Bet you can't catch me!>

<Oh yeah? I'll catch you in two seconds flat!>

<Betcha can't!>

<Can too, you little runt! And when I do...>

Only two of them, then. They sound harmless enough, through the trees that hide them from view. A couple of kids out walking their dogs. She turns back to the steps and slowly works her way to the top. Almost home, she stops to catch her breath, leaning back against a chain link fence. A small voice cuts across the rasp of her labored breathing.

<Hey! Hey you! You got any food? I'm hungry.>

She doesn't turn, and takes a deep breath before speaking. "No, I ... I gave it all away. I'm sorry." She can't turn, can't look. She has to go home and make dinner, or else Jonathan will be upset. "I've got to go." One step at a time, she pushes herself forward—only a little further, just a half-block. Didn't someone tell her once that walking is just falling forward and then catching yourself? Fall—catch ... fall—catch ... fall—

<Hey! HEY! You should sit down! Come and sit! You look like hell! WAIT!>

She takes one last deep breath, like a pearl-diver before plunging into dark water... and turns. The yard is empty; there are no people in sight. A small Shih-tzu stands on the far side of the chain-link fence. As the Shih-tzu wags and barks, the words are clear:

<What happened to you? I bet you could use some company! I'm great company! My name's Princess. What's yours?>

A talking Shih-tzu. The old woman sits down on the soft grass and starts to speak. She's got nothing left to lose but her mind, and it's far too late to worry about that now.

Grass and trees whisper a warning: rain is coming, rain is coming. The rising sibilance washes over and around her words, mingling with and softening them. A whisper within a whisper, she tells Princess about her afternoon walk, the children, the dog and the boy.

<Wow! You saw Him? Really? Wow.>

The ground, soft and wet, cradles her bruised hip. She whispers

through the fence, through the glittering, pouring rain. She whispers as glistening drops fall into her hair and run down her scalp. Water trickles down the back of her neck. It streams in rivulets down her forehead, across her cheeks and drips from her chin and her eyelashes. It soaks upward from the ground, through her coat, through her clothes. It soaks through to her skin. She feels the water coming in, words going out. She is not alone. A solitary man with a black umbrella walks by. He averts his gaze from the crazy, drenched old woman. She watches him, his wet umbrella, his dry clothes, and she whispers to the dog in the rain.

→ ←

MRS. DEIGHTON BRUSHED THE MOISTURE from her glasses and cheeks. The sun had fallen below the horizon, and the valley was filling with shadows.

Drizzle started to fall softly as Princess looked back at the old woman, looked forward again, and pulled. A large German Shepherd pup, with big feet and coltish long legs, bounded towards them.

<Look! Look, it's her! Oh boy, oh boy!>

The frazzled, twenty-something woman behind the dog pulled back on the leash, with no visible effect other than to throw herself off balance. She was talking to the puppy.

"What is it, Sammy? You're so hyper sometimes! What's the big— Oh, it's you. I see." The younger woman smiled at Mrs. Deighton, who didn't seem to notice. Mrs. Deighton's face was turned downwards.

"Hello, Sammy! Oh yes, I know you're hungry. Patience, dear. Just a moment..." 🍀

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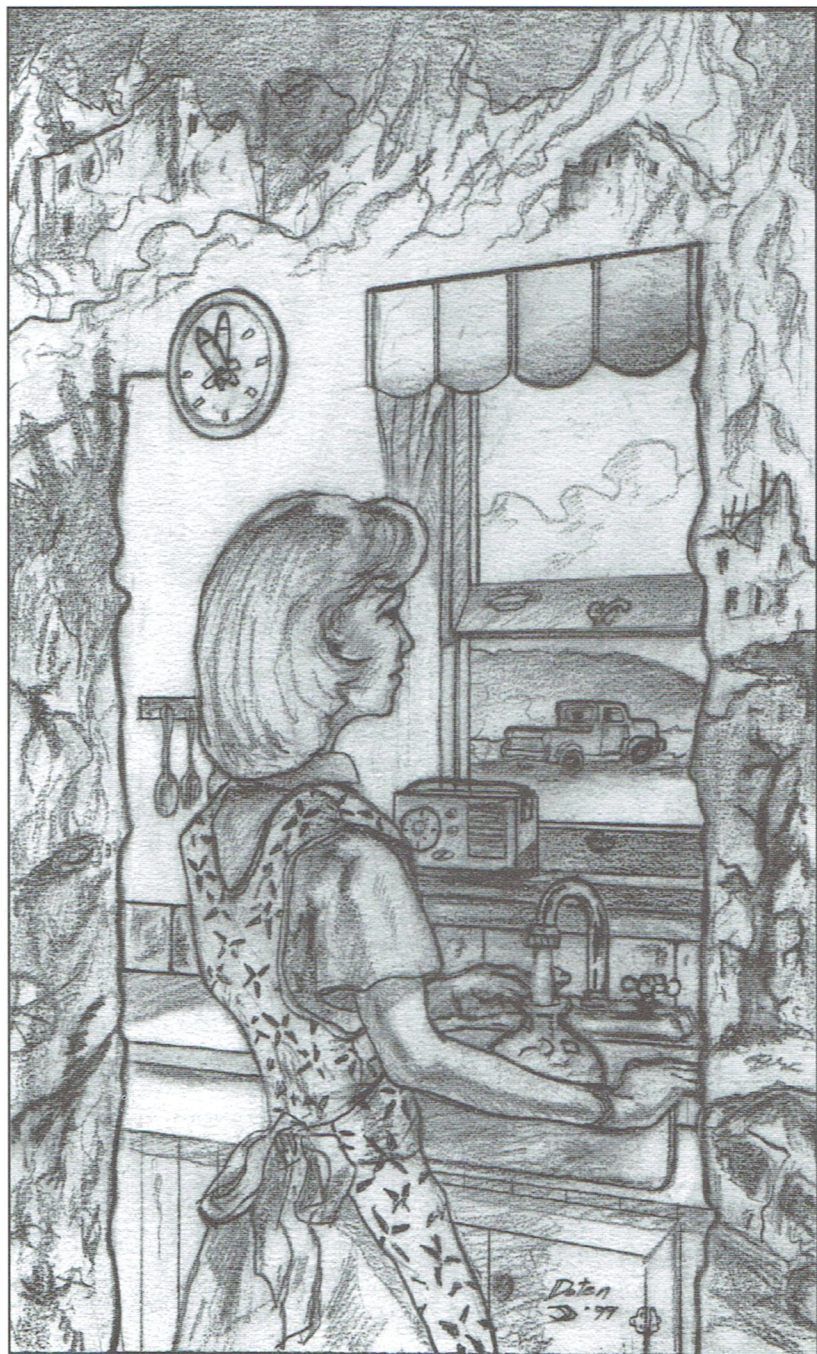
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Bread line

Eileen Kernaghan

That year there was never enough work, and money was short.
Then we heard about this fellow Jesus handing out loaves and fishes.
"We could give it a try—like they say, any port in a storm,"
says my Missus. But nobody set the alarm,
and we went to the end of the line on account of being so late.
It was 90 degrees in the shade, and a hell of a wait.
By the time they reached us, all they had left were stale buns
and some fish heads gone off in the heat.
Another time I'd try the Hare Krishnas,
if it weren't for the spicy food,
and my Missus likin' her bit o' meat.



Nightmares of a Finer Life

A.J. Onia

illustrated by Jeff Doten

JULY, 1964

THE WHINE FROM THE KITCHEN FAUCET SANG HIGHER AS THE water level reached the narrow neck of the glass jug. Rachel moved the next empty under the stream of water and capped the full one. She hummed Buddy Holly's newest song, "Hard Day's Night," which had been playing on the radio before it died. She checked her watch while the jug filled. It was ten to four. At least another hour before Glenn would be home. If he came.

She called, "Sarah, there's another jug to go down, honey." Rachel listened to her daughter's footsteps grow louder as they reached the top of the basement steps.

"Is Daddy home?" Sarah asked.

Rachel looked out the window instead of at her daughter. The low, pale hills looked as peaceful as ever. "Not yet, sweetie."

"I hope he comes soon."

Rachel handed the girl the gallon jug. "Careful, it's heavy."

"It's all right, Mommy. I'm strong. See." Sarah held the jug by its ring with a curled finger.

Rachel grabbed at it. "Don't fool around Sarah, this is important."

The sudden pout on her daughter's face stopped Rachel. She moved her hands to Sarah's shoulders and pulled her close. "It's okay, sweetie, I know

you're strong and you're a big help to Mommy. Do me a big favor and carry the jugs with both hands. I don't want you to trip on the stairs."

As Sarah disappeared through the basement doorway, Rachel turned her attention back to the sink. The jug was almost full. Only one more waited on the countertop. She could not keep her thoughts away from how long the supply would last. How much water would the three of them use in a day? How little would keep them alive? She did not turn the tap off between jugs because the flow seemed to be lessening and she was afraid the water would not come back on.

A roaring outside made her jump. *No*, she thought, *not yet. It's too soon*. She looked at her watch for confirmation. Two minutes before four. The sound increased and she forced her eyes to look out. It was a blue truck, not Glenn's yellow Chevy. A blue truck. She forced her fearful visions of a blue truck out of her consciousness. Those were old dreams. *Look away*, she told herself. Dust billowed, stirred up by the wheels. The dry spring had left the countryside yellow and brown, except in their yard. She and Sarah watered the grass and flower beds every day. The truck disappeared from sight and mind. The dust cloud rolled toward the house, an insignificant version of what was to come.

Sarah returned. "Only one more?"

Rachel switched jugs for the last time. "None after this."

The water was a mere trickle now. The ridge outside their window

turned black for a moment. She blinked and while she waited for the slow stream to fill the container, she tried the portable radio again. Silence. The salesman had assured her that transistors warmed up instantly, much better than the obsolete tubes. Maybe one of its six batteries was dead. She turned the knob off. In the living room, the old cabinet radio was quiet too. She had been listening to her afternoon music program when it was interrupted. The disc jockey said to stand by for an important announcement. The music never returned and there had been no announcement.



RACHEL REMEMBERED SHOWING THE transistor set to Glenn in their yard at the old house. "I can listen while I hang up the laundry," she told him. Her explanation justified in her mind the luxury of a third radio.

Her enthusiasm was short-lived. She remembered the first time the music stopped in mid-song; her throat constricted even now. The announcer had solemnly intoned, "We interrupt regular programming for the following news. President Kennedy revealed this morning that last night, November 28, 1963, American Navy destroyers and carrier planes bombarded Havana in retaliation for the assassination of Vice-President Johnson in Miami earlier this month. The president said conclusive evidence linking Cuba to the murder had been provided to the United Nations Security Council minutes after the military action began. We now return to our scheduled program."

"Mom, the jug is overflowing."

Rachel felt Sarah's tug and swung the tap over to the last container, a bucket from under the sink. "See if there are any more buckets in the garage, honey." Rachel capped the last jug and watched the stream of water slow to a dribble. She'd filled all of them. Glenn's instructions were simple. They had food and water. *To what end?* she wondered, not for the first time.

The argument between them had intensified along with world tension after the president's attack on Cuba. Glenn's voice was always tinged with reason, "Don't you see, Rachel? We'll be safer away from the city."

"I don't see. Do the Russians care about one Canadian city with barely a quarter-million people?" She kept her voice low, so Sarah would not awaken.

Then the exasperation would creep into his voice. "The Russians have enough missiles to blast every town in North America to dust."

Rachel countered with her usual position. "What about Sarah? I look forward to her coming home for lunch every day. She couldn't do that from a country school."

Glenn took his hands from his knees and clasped them together, elbows resting on his thighs. His dark eyes pleaded with her. "Look at her city school. The kids practice running home to see which children have to stay behind when the air raid siren goes. I don't want some principal telling me my daughter can't be with you when..."

"Sshh. Keep your voice down. Sarah's frightened enough as it is by

those stupid drills." She rested her hands on his. "Besides, the last one was over a month ago. Khrushchev backed down and the drills stopped." But Rachel knew he had won even as the words left her lips.

Glenn said, "The drills stopped but her nightmares didn't, did they?"

Nor mine, thought Rachel.

Glenn continued, "I just want a safer place for her to grow up. And for us to live. You'll have time to drive to her new school, if you have to. Maybe we'll get a second car."

Rachel stood and stared out into the night. Across the street, the neighbor's patio lanterns gave the illusion of warmth to the chill December air. She said, "I want to spend Christmas in this house, near our friends. You can start looking for an acreage in the New Year."

She felt his hands on her hips and his breath on her neck.

"Thank you, Rachel. We'll be safer, not afraid, you'll see. Sarah will love it, too. I wonder how she'd like a pony?"

Rachel leaned back into him. She rested her head against his shoulder but the chill would not leave her.



RACHEL'S NIGHTMARES CEASED, AND they moved in late March. To the west of their farmhouse, she could see the mountains. To the east, a low ridge blocked any view of Calgary, but she knew the city was there. During spring break, she and Sarah often packed a picnic lunch and hiked to the top of the outcrop. If it wasn't too hazy from the dust, they could see the top of the two-hundred foot office tower where Glenn

worked. One late afternoon, a rare thunderstorm boomed down the river valley from the mountains. That night, Rachel's nightmares returned. She dreamed she was standing in the farmyard, lightning flashing over her. A brilliant streak blazed from zenith to horizon. The sky was brighter than day for a moment, then blackened. One strand of light the shape of an arrow remained overhead. The white spear shot over the ridge toward the city. Moments later, a dome of light rose from where the city was.

Rachel would awaken, and her terror was greater because it hadn't happened. Yet.



SARAH RETURNED FOR THE BUCKET.

Rachel said, "Did you find any more, sweetie?" The water dribbled from the tap deliberately.

"Here." Sarah's hands reached up to the counter, lifting an old paint can. "I'll take the full one and come back for this."

"Take your time. This will take a while to fill. Be careful." Rachel turned back to the sink, watching the final drops of water.

She heard a crash and felt the floor shake. Rachel whirled around as Sarah screamed, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" The wire handle was hanging from the girl's hand. The anchor had torn loose, spilling the bucket and the water to the floor.

"Are you all right, Sarah?" Rachel stepped in the water and clutched the girl. "It's okay, the bucket broke, it wasn't your fault."

Sarah looked at the handle in her fist. "But now we won't have

enough. What will Daddy say?"

Rachel stood up and turned off the tap, even though the water had ceased. "We'll have enough, Sarah." *We'll have enough.*

Sarah sniffed and wiped her sleeve across her nose. "Daddy'll be mad, won't he?"

Rachel closed her eyes and thought of the missile she thought she had seen, not in her dreams, but minutes ago. Had her mind created the vapor trail and then the intense flash of light beyond the ridge? Her nightmares were coming true. All of them.

"No, he won't be mad, honey. You remembered your jobs well. I'll tell him what a huge help you were. Now run and get a towel to dry your feet." *Not much time left*, she thought.

Sarah tiptoed around the spill and went into the bathroom. Rachel automatically started to clean the floor, then stopped. *Why bother? What's the point of any of it?* Then she heard Sarah's voice singing in the bathroom. *Because of her, that's the point.*

Rachel dried her hands on her dress and looked out the window for Glenn's car. The blue truck was retracing its path. She closed her eyes, wishing it away. She repeated Glenn's calculations from the point of impact in Calgary to the farm. After the light flash, there was only a space of ninety seconds before the ground roll shook the land, then the rumbling sound wave two minutes later, followed by the heat cloud clawing its way along the surface of the earth. Last of all, the fallout

would rain slowly down on the cauterized landscape, trapping survivors in their shelters for who knew how long.

Sarah's singing was close. She carried an armful of towels into the kitchen.

Rachel thought again, *Had there been a flash?* If so, the ground wave should have reached them by now.

"Let's go, Mommy." Sarah pulled her hand.

"Just a second, honey." Rachel looked out the window again. It seemed brighter than before. The blue truck was gone. Had it caused the tremor she had felt when the bucket dropped? She had been shaking from the sight of the truck. Those old dreams. Nightmarish visions of the men in the truck. And Sarah.

She quickly grabbed Sarah's hand and led her toward the stairs. Rachel hesitated a moment at the top. She took a deep breath, then down they went. At the bottom, beyond the

steel door, sat the patiently waiting jugs, the old kitchen radio, the olive-green ration tins and the cots. Rachel stopped and stared at it all.

"Is Daddy coming?"

"Yes." Rachel felt the ceiling pressing down upon her. She heard sound booming from all around them. Sarah buried her head in Rachel's dress. Rachel backed out of the room, pulling Sarah with her. "Let's wait for Daddy on the porch. Outside."

"All right." Sarah's hand squeezed hers as they ascended into the light.

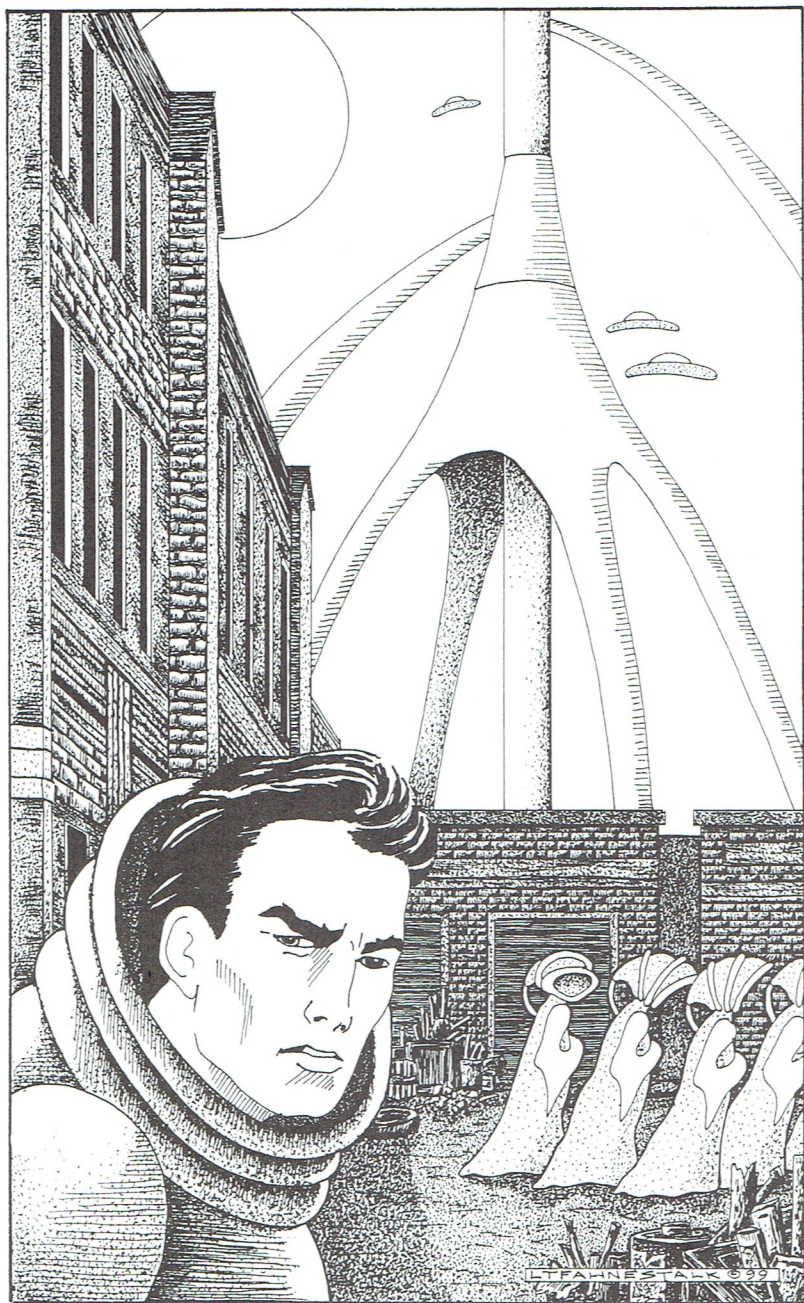
They sat on the porch. "Close your eyes, sweetie. Daddy will come." *Forgive me, Glenn. This is my decision, not yours, not some president's. I choose from love, not fear.*

Rachel closed her own eyes and sat with Sarah resting between her legs. She imagined the burgeoning cloud on the other side of the ridge. She held Sarah very close as she waited for the terminal wind. 🍁

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

JEFF DOTEN says his main concern as an artist is to create images that have an emotional resonance for the viewer. Past clients include Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology, *On Spec* Magazine, the Alberta Science Foundation and private commissions. His work has been featured in a number of galleries and conventions including the World Con and the Society for Vertebrate Paleontologists Art Show.

"Fireflight," the artwork featured on our Summer 1999 cover, was painted in acrylics.



Sunset on Sol III

Janet Elliott Waters

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Sunset.
They'll be returning soon.

I take my mug of amphrit and go out to the stoop of my shop to watch the sky turn red and orange. So it's a tourist attraction now—does that mean we humans can no longer watch our sunsets?

Have they been patented as well by the graben tour operators?

Welsh Jimmy comes out of his bookstore next door and sees me there. His eyebrow lifts and he salutes me with his harmonica. He's right, it's that kind of evening, for music.

My guitar is just inside the door. I lean in and pull it out without getting up. These damn graben robes—fine for their formal no-growth society but bloody inconvenient if you have to move your own arms. But the graben tourists are more comfortable if we dress in a familiar way. At least the tourists who stay here near the space port are. The more adventurous like to see real natives dressed in real native jeans and T-shirts.

We jam for a while, old Celtic melodies. Jimmy used to play neo-Celtic rock, and when I was young, I liked jazz. These days, the old folk songs suit my rhythms just fine. And I'm not the only one going back to the past.

"Shadow fall, Joe?"

"It's that kind of evening, Jimmy." I don't know this one well, but I follow his melody easily. It must be laid down in my ancestral memory like trader trails laid across the heather hills.

We are lost in the music, in the lazy cool evening, and the rosy light slanting through the dust in the air. Jimmy is singing softly in Gaelic, and for a moment I feel good. Then the song is over, and in that still moment after the music ends, when I have, for a moment, forgotten everything but the music, I am startled by the clatter of graben applause.

We are surrounded by them, tall, obscure figures in iridescent field suits. Their clatter sounds like grasshopper wings, and for some reason, I am frightened for a moment. Their features are hard to see behind the quick flashing rose and gold glimmer of their suits, and I hadn't prepared myself to face that expressionless blankness. Humans haven't yet evolved an understanding of it, and it frightens us to almost, but not quite, make meaning of their faces.

Jimmy recovers quickly, stands up, and bows theatrically. They clatter again; they like to see our typical human behavior. I quickly hide my guitar behind the door. I don't want to be asked to make more music. Noga says I should have a better attitude if I ever want to make a profit.

Thankfully they turn away, and continue their stately hurry down the road, heading back to the port after a day sightseeing. We are told they are summoned at sunset by some sound we can't hear to return to the safe comfort of their vessels. In the night I can see the constellation of their great interstellar ships hanging above me like stars.

I suppose it is thought too chancy for them to stay on the planet overnight.

We are perhaps not as civilized as we should be.

As a second group of graben comes down the road, their advance signaled by their small shuffling and clicking noises, people begin to emerge from the shops all around me for the chance of a last minute sale.

The graben walk past us all,

chattering to each other in their language. They seem to ignore us; we can't see what their receptors are looking at, behind their suits. They could be looking at us; we would never know. But at sunset, as they pass on their way back to their ships, they hurry. Perhaps they fear the night, or our contamination.

Tammuz rushes out to them from his shop across the street, waving old pre-contact plastic toys, Barbies and Joes, and post-contact icons made of clay and straw. Usually these are popular souvenirs among the graben. But as he reaches them, their field suits become opaque. Perhaps it is distaste for a pushy native and his uncivilized commerce. Or perhaps it is fear, fear of a dangerous native.

It is true they fear us. A few fanatics did try to kill graben years ago, soon after contact. But for years now they have visited us unmolested. We are no longer the savage natives we once were. Maybe we have lost something of ourselves with that.

After they pass, my neighbors rush to pick among the garbage the graben left behind along their path.

"Look at this!" Lorenzo triumphantly holds up a thin shimmering length, like a bit of a field suit. We know so little about them it could be their equivalent of a sandwich wrapper, or a used tissue.

"A few more of these and I'll be rich!" Lorenzo said.

Graben leavings have become the latest fashion. We rarely know their original purpose. Primitives that we are, we use them in our clothes, and to decorate our walls and

windows.

And I, the lazy native, sit in the dust and sunset, watching the play of humans, and the parade of the last passing graben. Nothing to report, a day like all the rest.

Eventually, the graben garbage captured, my neighbors begin to drift home. The parade is over and the stage darkens, its human actors off duty for the evening. We can go to our homes, perform our rituals, live as humans, unwatched and unremarked. I lock up the shop and go home. Tonight Noga wants me to go to a meeting with some academic political group she belongs to. She is still trying to change the world. One of the many things we don't talk about anymore. But she insisted I come tonight. I agreed too readily, perhaps. I think she has been wondering about me lately. My cover slips a bit sometimes.

Drunks and addicts lie in every doorway. Our Vichy government worries about the poor image this presents to the graben tourists, and keeps trying to hustle the street-people into hostels. But there is no real danger here, except infectious despair.

When I get to our apartment, Noga is already home from the hospital, energetic in anticipation of tonight's meeting. Her agitation annoys me.

"Save any children today?" I ask.

She flinches. I shouldn't have said that; it was a cheap shot. She went into medicine for all the right reasons, social ideals that were rare enough when we were young, pre-contact. It's not her fault the graben's

medical science has reduced her to a bandage dispenser.

When Noga is hurt, she hits back. "Yeah? And what did you do today, Joe? Discover an unknown tribe in the Amazon? Write a book? Or did you play your guitar and try not to sell souvenirs all day?"

I take a breath and wait a moment. Once that would have hurt, and we would have fought passionately in an intimate fervor for hours or days. But now, I feel no hurt, and I know there is an ending in that, when she can no longer hurt me, though I can still hurt her. And I know she doesn't understand what happened to us. Now, I owe her an apology, along with all the rest.

"Sorry. Let's start again. Did you eat?"

I think she's not going to answer me, but at last she shrugs, and we veer away from the brink once again.

"I got something at the hospital. We've got to leave soon for the meeting. Have you decided?"

I don't say anything. I know a lot depends on this, including our relationship. Maybe that's why I keep putting off giving her an answer.

"You're going to have to tell them something, you know."

I shrug.

"I wonder about you, sometimes," she said.

I know she does. But she doesn't know what to wonder, so it makes no difference.



FROM MY FAVORITE PERSPECTIVE, LEANING against the wall at the back, I look around the crowded room at Noga's

friends who used to be politicians, journalists, the intelligentsia in the days when we were all young. They can't seem to accept it is already too late. Jumped-up apes, we humans committee in the face of crisis, come together to solve problems or to huddle together in fear. But there is no crisis, here. The graben have been here thirty years. There has been plenty of time to get over the first euphoria of discovery, the first terror of change, the first narcotic of wealth.

We no longer think of them as angels, or as saviors, or even as some kind of latter-day conquistador. But their effect on us could not be worse if they had been invaders. Or demons. *They are as different from us, and we as unable to fight them, or become one of them.*

This is all so useless, I know. There is nothing that can be done. It is too late.

John, who fancies himself an alpha male, goes to the front of the room to start the meeting.

"We all know why we're here. We all saw copies of the census report. Kiya?"

Kiya, who works for the government agency that keeps track of these things, says quietly, "The birth-rate is now far less than zero. We aren't even close to replacing ourselves, now. The suicide and crime rate is 500% higher than ten years ago, and substance abuse is so rampant, the average life span has decreased by as much as seven years, even with the new medicines."

I know the true figures, and it's much worse than she thinks. And

she doesn't know that suicide is the leading cause of death of those under thirty, or that the addiction rates among the young have hit the high seventies. We don't report this, of course.

"We've been through all this, how many times?" Harriet says. She has hidden her age and bulk in a robe shaped and colored like a graben field suit. It is hard to see her face, read her feelings. In this meeting, her robe is an unsubtle statement of her politics. "We know why this is happening, but what is there to do? We can't fight the graben, we can't join them; all that's left is to adapt."

"And try to make a profit in the meantime," Noga says. "That's what you mean. That's what we have been doing, Harriet, and it's killing us. Our science is dead; we've made no major discoveries since they arrived."

"Joe? What do you think?" John looks directly at me. People think an anthropologist should understand alien cultures; they are looking for me to tell the story that would explain what has happened to us, that would tell them what to do.

I try to think of something to say. There are stories in our history I could tell them, stories of native cultures colliding with more technological societies. I could tell them the story of an old Inuit man I'd met when I was young, who could only weep for the death of his gods, his world, his people. I know the old man's story now. I know it from the inside.

But these histories can't really

explain the graben. As strange and dangerous as we humans were to each other, culture and culture, we were at least all human. We can't afford the mistake of assuming the graben are like us in any way. Even their motives are a mystery. Truly, strangers have come to our campfire, and our fear is instinctive.

I don't know how to say all this. We already know it. It wouldn't help to repeat it. And I can't tell them the real truth, that there is no hope. They wouldn't believe me anyway. Finally, I just shrug, and shake my head.

There is a silence for a moment. I can hear that they are disappointed in me. I am not the man I was. This is true, I have not been that man for a long time. I can feel Noga's shame.

"We could become terrorists," Noga says, perhaps stung by my silence. We have talked about this before. She knows what I think of it. "It's been done before, when a lower culture had to deal with the impossible technological advantages of a high culture."

"But the cost of lives, human and graben," says Andre, who used to be a minister of something. "It's not right. Anyway, it's been tried. It wouldn't work."

"And what have they done to us, after all, to deserve that?" Harriet says, a passionate human voice behind her blank graben robes. "They've helped us, sold us medicine, technology, come to visit us—these are great crimes?"

A palpable hit. Whatever our feelings, we are not young enough to blame the innocent tourist for what

has happened to us.

"So are we Palestine? Or India?" Noga says, still struggling to use the lessons of history. I think she is stung by her own suggestion. A doctor does not wish to become a killer.

John seems to like the idea we could be India. "Passive resistance? It worked for India, in getting rid of their conquerors. What if we don't cooperate? Don't sell to them, don't work for them—"

Rani speaks, her voice as soft as the water-green sari she is wearing (so many of us have returned to our roots, these days). "But that would mean not buying from them, either. No medicine. No weather control, no ecology specialists. If they go, they will take it all back with them. Could we ask people to sacrifice all that? To go back to the way it was before?"

"They would, though," Noga says, standing, passionate. I remember why I loved her. "We would sacrifice anything to be masters of our own house, we always would. It would work, too. The graben would never force us to accept them. If we appealed, if we even just objected—"

"No," Rani says, "No. It's not worth it. The suffering—"

"What do you mean, it's not worth it? We'll get back our dignity, our souls—"

"It wouldn't work, anyway," Andre says. "Just knowing they could help us, could we resist asking them? As soon as we mess things up again—like we did the last time—we'd call for them to rescue us."

This is true, and we all know it. I see the knowledge in all the faces

around me. Whether stubborn, angry, sad or determined, none of us have hope we could make it on our own this time. We couldn't before, and this time we would know there was an easy way out, to be had just for the asking.

"We'll have to learn to live with it, like native cultures always have," Rani says. "Pick up what we can from them. So we will wear their clothes, use their technology—we just won't assimilate all the way. Stay human."

"Japan did it, at least for a while." Harriet says.

"But we aren't one unified culture," Noga objects, "with a long tradition of isolation and belief in our own superiority, like they were."

"May be the best we can do, though," Andre says. "Adapt. Survive. And try somehow to stay human."

"Whatever that means," someone says.

For some reason, my eyes sting at those words.

The meeting fragments after that. We pass a motion to teach more about human culture in school, and one for an advertising campaign

aimed at adolescents to fight the suicide rate. We make plans to revive the old rituals and costumes. The futile gestures of old men and women, out of their time. Finally, the meeting ends, like all our meetings these days, with nothing decided or changed.

What do we say to our children, who dress like graben? Who are killing themselves? We can only repeat to them boring old stories of the triumphs of the past, when we were the only ones we knew in the universe.

I remember how it made us lonely, back then. We dreamed of finding rescuers out there. We dreamed of finding friends.

After all, the meeting ends, and I haven't said a word. I'm sure Noga is even more suspicious. But I've made up my mind.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she says to me in the middle of the night.

No.

Tomorrow I have to report to my employers. I wonder what I will say. Whatever it is, I don't think it's going to make any difference. 🍁

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Creation of the Universe

Derek Kingston Fairbridge

He sprinkles her from head to toe
with a sticker-star constellation.

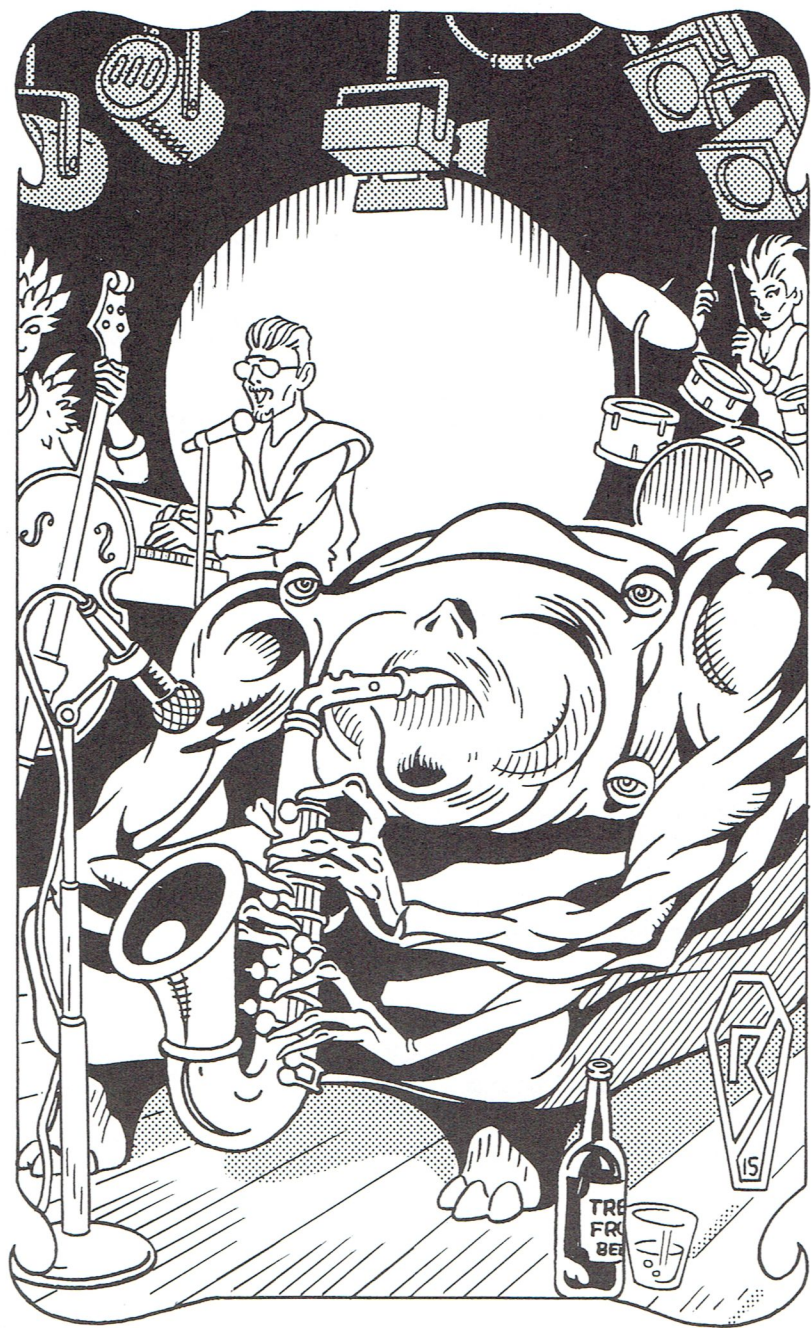
A boxful they stole from Sunday School.

The sky of skin, tongue moistened,
sparkles with blue, silver, purple, red.
His thumb presses down,
creates another cosmos.

She, complete, a body of astronomy,
now does the same to him.

Empties the box of its galaxy.

The sun, frozen high and burning,
browns skin around the glitter,
leaving paler stars
to shine tomorrow.



Paying the Piper

Hayden Trenholm

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

DAVON JONES STARED DOWN AT THE GLOWING COMM-DISPLAY and resisted the urge to put his fist through the screen. Injuring himself would only add to his problems, not solve them. He turned away from the screen and swallowed hard. He and Lasterling had never been friends but they had understood each other at a level so deep it could only be expressed in music. A scattering of notes echoed through his memory. Davon shook his head savagely as if to dispel them and turned back to the glowing screen.

“All right,” he muttered, “Lasterling is dead. I’ll just have to find another saxophone player.” Davon sank into his chair and buried his head in his large dark hands. Ever since the invitation to play at the Imperial Arak coronation had arrived, Davon had felt a deep sense of doom. It now settled over him like a cloak of nettles. He knew the chances of finding another talented saxman, let alone one willing to play on Cantratus, were minuscule. It had been hard enough to put a quartet together in the first place, pulling together relative strangers, whose only connection was Jones himself, into a single unit just for this one gig. *Why*, he asked himself for the thousandth time, *did I specialize in such an archaic art form as jazz if it wasn’t to avoid the Arakans? And why didn’t I head for the hills when the offer came?*

The truth was, he had had little choice. Quite apart from the enormous fee and the ensuing fame that a successful performance would engender, the Arakans were well-known throughout known space for their attitudes toward jilted invitations and broken contracts. Fail to perform at the ball and Davon Jones and the Jazz Masters might still play a significant part in the festivities—as part of the buffet. It would hardly matter they were only one act of several at the more than twenty balls held that night. The Arakans were already jumpy about having outworlders on Centratus, worried about assassination attempts,

but unable to deny the Emperor-in-waiting his every whim. A broken contract would be just the excuse they needed to take out their frustrations on the nearest foreigner. At the very least, a breached Arakan contract meant exile to the backwater outworlds where he had been born and to which it was far too dangerous to return. Davon flicked the comm-unit to send mode and cast his request into the interstellar net.



FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE BALL AND THE quartet was still a player short. There had been offers, though few held any potential. A synth player from Tau Ceti had seemed promising until Davon discovered Jitah, his bassist, was allergic to the Cetan's dander. Too bad, too, because that cat could really wail. But Jitah already knew the arrangements and a combo without a bass line was easily as weak as one without a horn. He'd had calls from two trombonists and a classically trained bassoonist but somehow Davon couldn't see transcribing Coltrane or Parker to accommodate them—and Rath Singh was completely out of the question. Still, there were a lot of great combos who managed with piano, bass and drums. If he threw in a little Corea or Peterson, added some solos in the style of Batticus or Haden or Rich, he might be able to put together three sets. Except for one little detail. Assistant Deputy Slaughtergod Vorpah was expecting a quartet and might view the appearance of a trio as a breach of contract, not to mention an insult to the Emperor-to-be. Like many other races, the Arakans held

the number three to be sacred, perhaps more so because of their own triangular body structures. Unlike most races, however, they took a proprietary interest in the number and had a habit of punishing individuals or even entire cultures that made use of the trinity in an inappropriate fashion. Davon had no desire to test those limits. One hardly needed to give an Arakan any additional reason to take offense. *Perhaps*, thought Davon, *I could get a guitarist or even a singer*, though that presented problems in itself, for who knew how the Arakans might react to hearing a conquered language sung at a Coronation ball. Of course, the point was growing moot. Only a half-dozen worlds were close enough to interstitial nodes to permit travel to Centratus in the few days remaining and none of those had significant human, or even, bipedal, populations. As far as Davon knew, none of the multipedal races even listened to jazz let alone played it. *Though a successful gig at the Emperor's ball could change all that*, thought Davon, turning back to his communit.

The first note, when it came, crept up on him, so deep and low it barely lifted above the background hum of technology. Like a lover's fingers tickling his spine in the middle of the night, the note triggered a pounding in his chest and brought the breath up short in his throat. And then he *heard* the note, tasted it vibrating against his palate, turned to the door even as the sound changed. The note skipped up the scale, rising out of the depths like a leviathan, lifting

higher, higher, almost out of control, almost passing into a screech but hovering just at the edge between music and noise. Then a fast riff down again, twirling now into melody, a clean clear line of notes that rooted Davon in his chair, his hands twitching at invisible ivories. Then the sound slid left, up, over, through the melody to someplace else, a hint of a second answering song, before dropping down again into an ocean of expiation, a grunt, a moan, a sigh and silence.

Davon crossed to the door in three quick steps, flung it open, afraid for a minute it was all a dream, or, worse yet, a recording Jitah had sent as a practical joke. At first he saw nothing, the way you can stare at the solution to a problem but not see it if it's not the answer you're looking for. Multipeds don't play the saxophone, they're not built for it. They certainly don't play jazz, they aren't wired for it. So, at first, Davon simply didn't see the being in front of him. It didn't help that the creature, motionless as it now was, looked more like living room furniture than a living being. Davon stood in the doorway staring into the distance, until the creature suddenly spoke. What he had taken for a non-descript *chaise longue* against one wall of the corridor suddenly resolved into sentience. A long low body supported on four stubby legs in turn supported a thick trunk topped with a pillow-shaped head. A pair of button eyes protruded from each end of the pillow framing a lipless mouth. A tenor saxophone was clutched against the creature's (for want of a

better word) chest, almost obscured by the thick upper arms that held it. A single smaller arm emerged from a point slightly to the right of the being's abdomen.

"Jazz Master Davon Jones, I presume." The voice was breathy like the saxophone itself and filled with a kind of reverence Davon had never before heard. The English was flawless, unaccented. "I am Joe Henderson."

"Not *the* Joe Henderson?" Davon felt like an idiot as soon as he spoke.

"It is my..." Henderson made a sound somewhere between a whistle and a cough. "It is difficult to translate into your language. Something like spirit choice."

"Could we switch to Standard?" said Davon. "My English is a little rusty." He glanced up at one of the ubiquitous scanners. "Besides you know how the Arakans are about inferior tongues."

Henderson shifted slightly and Davon heard a low snap. "As you wish," it said.

Davon looked at Henderson, not quite sure what to say next. "Come in" wasn't practical, since the low flat body was too wide to fit through the door and too long anyway for the small quarters the Arakans had assigned him. He settled on, "Nice playing," since it was now obvious that Joe Henderson had produced those incredible notes a few minutes before. The tenor sax made no doubt of that, despite looking like a toy in the massive four-fingered hands.

"That is indeed a compliment," said Henderson. "I have come in answer to your audition notice. Is the

gig still available?"

"Is it!" Davon's breath burst from him in relief.

"My question exactly," said Henderson, sighing, "I have come too late, haven't I? My planet was only recently conquered by the Arakans and our communication web is still in some disarray. I am sorry to trouble you..."

"No!" Davon bellowed, causing Henderson to scuttle backward. "You are just in time. Rehearsal starts in five minutes. As soon as you sign a contract. The pay is..."

"...irrelevant," said Henderson. "Playing is all that matters."

"Yeah, man does not live by bread alone," said Davon, "but it's always nice to have a few slices in your pocket." Henderson turned his four eyes on him and slowly blinked, whether in amusement or confusion it was impossible to tell.

Davon buzzed Jitah and Brandon to meet them in the rehearsal hall and printed off a standard contract for Henderson to sign. When he returned to the corridor, the sax player was packing his instrument into a large case.

"Need a hand with your things?" asked Davon.

"I can manage," said Henderson, hoisting the instrument case onto his back and grasping a piece of luggage in each of his three arms. It was only then that Davon realized his new band member was missing a limb.



THE REHEARSAL WAS EVERYTHING DAVON hoped for and more. Henderson knew his way around the standards better than Lasterling had

and, if the music lacked the easy camaraderie that the dead saxman had always brought to the hall, it was richer, deeper, somehow more soulful. The notes seemed to rise out of an inner pool of deep and complex emotion, produced by the heart rather than fingers and breath. At the end of two hours, Davon called a break.

Brandon leapt up from her drum kit and gave Henderson a hug. At least she tried to, but her arms could barely reach across the sax player's chest, let alone around his thick torso. "I never would have thought it to look at you, but for someone who looks like a sofa, you are really hep!" she said.

"Appearances can be deceiving," said Henderson.

Jitah cocked his head and clacked his beak. "Hep? Seven? Yes, seven limbs. Hep. Hep Henderson." He clicked in laughter.

"No, man," said Brandon. "Hep. Cool. With it. A hep cat."

The feathers rose on Jitah's shoulders. "I am allergic to cats."

"You explain it to him, Davon," said Brandon. "This bird is too rhomboid to ever dig it. I'm getting me a cup of joe."

Henderson shuffled backward again, a movement Davon interpreted as nervousness.

"Don't worry," Davon said. "She doesn't mean you. Joe is a mild stimulant. Brandon likes to watch ancient vids. It makes her talk funny."

"I should laugh, then?" asked Henderson. A high-pitched whine emanated from somewhere near

Henderson's back end, rising until it faded into inaudibility. Jitah screeched and left the room.

"Ah, maybe you should try to control your hilarity. Jitah is sensitive to ultrasonics." Davon cleared his throat and tried not to stare at the stump of Henderson's missing limb. It was swathed in a bandage the same color as Henderson's grey-brown skin and held tight against his body. "So," Davon said, "did you have an accident? Your arm?"

"An accident?" asked Henderson, his two upper eyes retracted and a faint purple flush spread across his back. The stump twitched and a small spot of darker purple appeared on the bandage. "No, it was deliberate."

"Were the Arakans were responsible for this? One of their 'necessary demonstrations to a subject race'?" The Arakans were nothing if not systematic when it came to conquering worlds.

"Responsible? Yes, to play at the Arakan coronation I had to lose my arm. They are responsible."

It was not the answer Davon was expecting. "I hope you don't hold it against them."

"That would not be wise. The Arakans do not like to be touched. If I held my arm against them they would likely remove my head."

"But you're okay about playing at the Coronation?"

"Is there a more important gig anywhere in known space?" asked Henderson.

"No, but that's not important. Are you going to be able to play in front of the people who...?" Davon's

voice trailed off. He gestured at the stump and then moved his fingers in a way that seemed to encompass the whole galaxy and its grievance against the Arakans.

"It has not stopped you. Despite what the Arakans did to your planet. And to you."

Davon looked at Henderson sharply, wondering how much the alien knew about his past. An image flashed through his mind, an image red with fire and blood. He blinked it away. "That was a long time ago. I'm only in it for the money now."

"Of course. We all have our own reasons for playing, do we not?" said Henderson. "As for me, it is my... calling. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must rest."

"Playing can certainly take it out of you. Especially the way you play."

"Yes," said Henderson, turning to leave. "It does take it out of me."



THE NEXT TWO DAYS WERE EXACTLY THE same. At the appointed hour, Henderson would arrive at the rehearsal hall from the quarters Assistant Deputy Slaughtergod Vorpah had arranged. His movements were slow and deliberate. He would unpack his saxophones, two golden tenors, a brassy alto and a rare silver soprano, for which the band's repertoire never called. He would sit for several minutes, staring at his instruments, listening as Brandon and Jitah warmed up, almost unmoving, save for a spasmodic twitching of his bandaged stump. Then, he would seem to find new energy. They would launch into a few standards before jazzing around with some Coltrane

or Parker. Soon, the whole band would rock and throb with energy and life—none more so than the gigantic alien. They'd finish with the *D Minor Revolution Suite for Saxophone and Piano* by the last of the great sax masters, Branson Twist, written in a concentration camp two years after the Arakans arrived in the Solar Confederacy. It was a death sentence if Vorpall figured it out but the risk of that was slim. Vorpall was a careerist, a bureaucratic lackey who couldn't tell high C from swamp gas. Davon had no intention of playing the number at the ball, where someone might discover the brilliant parody of Arakan religious music hidden beneath the riffs but he felt a certain satisfaction that Twist's centuries-old melodies were purifying the air of the Arakan's home planet. Not that Davon considered himself a revolutionary, not anymore, not since it had been finally proven that change was impossible and that survival was the best one could play for. But he always returned to Twist's *Suite*, telling himself it was the toughest thing he knew and it kept the band on its toes and, most days, that did for the truth. Henderson couldn't truly master the final excruciating solo even with an extra hand for fingering, but he came a lot closer than Lasterling had managed on his best days.

With that one exception, Henderson's only limit was time. After two hours, he would plead exhaustion and retire to his quarters. Davon considered how he could arrange the numbers so the sax player could appear in every set. Maybe if,

heaven forbid, they kept the set breaks short, they could start as a trio, have Henderson play the last number in the first set, all of the second, and as much as the third as he could manage. He still hadn't made up his mind as the final rehearsal drew to a close.

"Jazz Master Davon," said Henderson, after he packed and sealed his case. "I know you are concerned about my stamina."

"I figured we'd fit you in where we could."

"No," said Henderson, "I must be present when the Emperor appears. It is my mission."

"There's no guarantee he will appear..."

"It is the tradition. The Emperor must appear at each of the balls held in his honor. It would be an insult to the host to fail to appear."

"Even Arakan Emperors can't afford to offend the rich and powerful?"

Henderson crossed two of his eyes in a gesture of agreement. "There is a price to pay for every offense." Henderson paused. "It is rumored the Crown Prince is a musician himself. It is said he appears incognito at some of the finest nightclubs on Centratus."

"They have night clubs on Centratus?"

This time Henderson crossed all four of his eyes, a maneuver that left Davon feeling slightly queasy. "Indeed. Perhaps, he will join us for a number. He is after all a jazz fan."

"More of a dilettante than a fan," said Davon. "He only requested us because we're a rarity."

"Still," said Henderson.

"If he makes his way to the stage after you leave," said Davon, "I'll call you."

"No," said Henderson, "this is what I wanted to tell you. I will take special measures. I will play all three sets—more if it's required."

"Well, don't hurt anything," Davon grinned.

"Nothing of value is gained without struggle. And to struggle against the cruelties of the universe must engender pain. And ecstasy," said Henderson. "Now I must rest and prepare for tomorrow." Without another word he turned and left the room, leaving Davon with an open mouth and a gnawing worry in his belly.



DAVON TOSSED AND TURNED THE ENTIRE night, playing his last conversation with Henderson over and over in his mind. What did he mean by the price to be paid? Whose pain did he have in mind and whose ecstasy? Did Joe Henderson have a mission other than the beauty of his music? And what had happened to his missing arm?

Finally, he unhooked the webbing of his sleeper and crawled into his clothes. He pocketed the master key Vorpal had provided, for once glad of the Arakan military mind that viewed the privacy of subordinates as irrelevant. He made his way through the dim lit corridors to Henderson's quarters, pausing outside the thin door to listen. There was only silence within. *What were you expecting?* thought Davon. *An arms factory?* He stifled a giggle at his own inadvertent pun and slipped

the key in the lock.

The door slid back with a faint hiss. Davon stuck his head in the opening and looked around. Huddled in one corner, limbs and head tucked under him, Henderson looked like nothing other than a vast grey pillow. On the other side of the room sat the instrument case.

Davon tiptoed to the case and tried the lid. It was locked. Glancing back at Henderson, he slid a small leather wallet from his belt, praising a misspent youth. He removed a magnetic pick and in a few seconds had the case open. The four saxophones were nestled in black velvet. Around them were a variety of instruments of a quite different nature. Some were obvious. There was a saw, a chisel, a hammer, an electric file and several screw drivers. Somehow, Davon thought, I don't think these are to keep his saxophone in tune. Then he saw it, as he had seen it everyday at rehearsal, invisible because it was right in front of him. Invisible but now all too familiar. No wonder Henderson never played the soprano. It wasn't an instrument at all but a canister of organic explosives—the weapon of choice of suicide bombers, for once installed they were completely undetectable and formidably lethal. A dozen of its keys were plastiflesh detonators. How Henderson had gotten these through Arakan military customs, Davon neither knew nor cared. All he knew was that he and his band were in very deep shit. The Arakans were unlikely to believe they hadn't been involved from the start. He eased the lid shut. There was a creak that

didn't come from its hinges. It was followed by a low hiss. Davon slowly turned to the now-closed door and the alien musician.

"What are you doing, Jazz Master Davon?" asked Henderson. There was a deep purple flush across his chest. He had never looked quite as large as he did right now.

"Making sure you're all right for tonight's performance?" Davon's voice rose in an unintended squeak.

"I do not believe that to be true," said Henderson. There was a long moment of silence before Henderson spoke again. "Speak freely. I have taken care of the listening devices. It would be best if you kept nothing back."

Davon's stomach dropped to somewhere near his knees. *I'm never going to be rich and famous either*, he thought, as he tried to gauge his chances of getting out of the room alive.

"Do you always travel with explosives?" Davon said.

Henderson crossed his eyes. "Curiosity killed the hepcat," he said.

"Satisfaction brought him back," said Davon. "Why?"

"I thought it was obvious," said Henderson.

"Well, everything is obvious once someone spells it out for you."

"The explosives are necessary to my mission."

"That's what I thought," said Davon. "You were sent by your planet to..." He shrugged, unwilling to speak out loud despite Henderson's assurances about the bugs.

"No," said Henderson. "Tell me Jazz Master Davon, where does

music come from?"

"What?"

"What is the source of music?"

Davon shook his head. *Just my luck*, he thought, *to be trapped in a room with a philosophic assassin*. "I don't know," said Davon. "I've never really thought of it."

"Another untruth. You must stop lying. To me or to yourself."

"You tell me."

"It comes from pain."

"Well, yes, pain, or joy, or..."

Henderson cut him off. "For me, it comes only from pain. It is in the character of my people that this is so."

He reached up and pulled the bandage from the stump of his arm. Purple blood oozed slowly from fresh cuts. Henderson reached up and sunk three fingers into the wound. He opened his mouth a dozen clear high notes tumbled forth.

"*La Traviata*," said Davon.

"Yes," said Henderson, "I like all kinds of music from your planet."

"You mean you have to suffer for your art?"

Henderson emitted a high-pitched whine and after a moment, Davon joined in the laughter.

"So the explosives?" Davon asked.

"I told you I would take special measures," said Henderson. "I will place detonators inside my flesh. Each small explosion will fuel my playing. Tomorrow, we will finish the *Revolution Suite*."

"Well, I don't know about that..."

"I do. It is my mission. To achieve the pinnacle of my art. It is the most difficult piece in all of jazz."

"I don't know, Joe. I'm not sure it's

right. To let you suffer like that."

"I will suffer more if I do not play. We will all suffer more."

"But it must be dangerous," said Davon. "You could be killed."

"The detonators won't kill me. If they did, how could I finish the piece?"

"Well, I suppose jazz musicians sticking things in their arms to improve their playing is a long and honorable tradition," Davon laughed. "Still, for a minute there, I thought your mission was to assassinate the Emperor."

"It is." Henderson's voice was a mere whisper.

"Well, good night, Joe. I'll see you... What!"

"When the Crown Prince arrives, we will begin Twist's masterpiece. When I start my solo, you and the others should leave the stage. That moment belongs to me alone."

"But you said the detonators wouldn't kill you. How could they hurt the emperor?"

"The detonators are to fuel my pain. But the last one will be attached to a pod of organic explosive large enough to take out half this building. You will have six minutes to get as far away as you can."

"Where? The first thing they'll do is close the shuttle ports."

"The Arakans are, if you will pardon the expression, only human. They looked in my case and saw only tools and instruments, never weapons. The Arakans travel in armadas and so do not imagine the enemy might arrive in a scout ship, hidden in forests that surround the city. As they cannot imagine that a

conquered people can retain the means and the will to resist."

"But..."

"In the confusion you can escape. Must escape to carry on your calling. The Emperor's death will trigger a civil war that could last a hundred years. No more worlds conquered, no more artists imprisoned."

"Just one dead."

"A small price to pay for freedom, don't you think? And, to be fair, the total is two. I am sorry for Lasterling, but nothing is accomplished without sacrifice."

"You killed Lasterling?"

"Lasterling chose to end his existence—as Lasterling. He has set aside his saxophone for more ... formidable instruments."

"I don't..."

"Art is about truth, Davon Jones. Will you be an artist or merely a player for silver?"

Davon looked at Henderson, no longer seeing the bulky form so like a comfortable sofa but rather the hard and fiery truth beneath the surface. He saw himself as he should have been. Davon closed his eyes and turned away. "I can't," he said.

"You know the way to Vorpals' quarters." Henderson said flatly. "Now, I must prepare myself for this evening's performance." He opened the case and removed a chisel. He turned his eyes on Davon and slowly blinked. Davon hesitated and then caught his breath as the final triumphant notes of Branson Twist's masterpiece echoed in his head. He handed Joe Henderson a hammer. The sax player drove the chisel into his flesh. ♣



The Final Show

Buddy Young

illustrated by James Beveridge

THE KEENING ECHOED THROUGH THE SILENT CANYONS OF decaying office towers. Gabe stopped working and listened, his eyes upraised. The neglected city had been ravaged by lightning-strike fires and hailstorms, floods and blizzards, leaving its skyline jagged as splintered teeth. The eerie call repeated, coming from somewhere deep in the forest filling Winnipeg's Exchange District. The possibility that the cry could be human never touched Gabe's mind. He knew better. Still, he set down the sonic demolition pylon he held and ambled off to investigate.

Gabe hiked along deer trails, following the lonely ululation to a shopping mall. The sheets of wood that sealed the mall's doors had rotted off decades ago. Gabe stepped out of the warm sunlight into the fetor of chilled decay.

Moss covered the concourse skylights, allowing only an occasional ray of sun to slant down into the glade of shade-loving undergrowth that had taken root where windblown leaves had rotted into loam. At the edge of the sunlight, the store facades all bore some variation on the same message that covered every decaying business in the world: "Ceasing Operation" "Closing Forever" "Gone to Nirvana." Even the newest signs—"Checked and Sealed by Restoration Authority"—dated back at least three generations.

The keening drew Gabe through a food court where green creepers dangled from the colorful umbrellas of picnic tables, to a theater. He took a flashlight from his tool belt and slowly panned its beam through the pitch-black mezzanine, over moldering carpet, across a rotted snack counter, to a long-bearded man.

Terrified, Gabe never called out. Speech was not instinctual for him.

The man wore muddy coveralls, unzipped with the sleeves tied around his waist. His shaggy beard fell long and wild down his torso. The sight of the man's leather equipment belt melted through Gabe's fear and he slowly accepted that he was staring at his own reflection in an empty poster frame. He hadn't seen himself often, lately. His cabin had no mirror.

The keening led him into the theater proper.

A section of the roof had collapsed and a marsh had formed inside the flooded ruin. A loon paddled among the bulrushes and skeletal seat frames. Flying down through the roof had been easy for the bird, but the steep takeoff needed to escape was beyond it. Its breast swelled and it cried out, its cry overwhelming in the close darkness.

The loon fluttered nervously as Gabe waded into the stagnant water. He removed his shirt and used it to carefully gather up the bird, then waded down a subterranean creek that had once been an exit corridor, shouldered open a rusted door and staggered into the daylight. Eyes closed against the dazzling sunshine, he tossed the loon into the air and listened to the silk pounding of its wings fade westward. When Gabe opened his eyes, he found himself confronted by the fallen marquee of the death trap theater.

"Final Show," the sign read.

The sign brought him back to thoughts of the impending Census, scant days away. He had plenty of

work left before his own show would be ready.

→ ←

DUSK HAD FALLEN BY THE TIME GABE shoved the base of the final demolition pylon into the ground. He rigged it to send a decimeter-wide pulse scything out in a 180-degree arc and set its timer. Tired and sore from the days of work it had required to seed the city with hundreds of the pylons, he climbed slowly into the cab of his all-terrain roamer and began the long drive back to his cabin.

The crackle and hiss of branches scraping against the roamer's windows covered the electric engine's hum. The headlights picked out pinprick glitters from the eyes of foxes, surprised in the act of hunting rabbits through the overgrown warrens of the suburbs. The roamer climbed up a grassy slope and onto the airport highway. The highway's asphalt had crumbled away, but the gravel bed beneath still kept away most growth. The limbs of the stately balsams and firs intertwined overhead so that it seemed that the roamer drove through a tunnel. After an hour, the trees swept away to either side and the roamer hummed across the runway of the Winnipeg airport.

The airport had once been a base camp for a Restoration crew. Three generations ago, when humanity embraced its extinction, the Restoration program was instituted to minimize the effects of mankind's brief stay on the earth. Armies of Restorationists had cleaned up all pollution or processed it into forms that the ecosystem could reclaim. Fences

were removed; dams destroyed; species reintroduced; forests replanted... Afterward, the Restorationists themselves vanished into Nirvana. Their gargantuan incinerators stood along the southern end of the runway—megaliths in the moonlight.

Gabe's thumper crouched at the northern end of the runway, almost in the shadow of the encroaching forest. The VTOL's payload bay held a single occupant habitation module: Gabe's cabin. When he slept, his feet stuck over the end of his cot into the shower stall and when he cooked, grease splattered onto the communications console. Yet, since the day thirty years ago when he left the kibbutz in which all of mankind's last generation of children had been raised, Gabe had rarely spent a night anywhere but in his cabin—except during the annual Censuses when he and the rest of the Orphan Generation stayed in whatever palace, temple or hotel that year's host had selected. Earlier that summer, Gabe's closest friend, Murasaki, had asked why he preferred his cabin when he could live anywhere in the world. As usual he had lacked the words to suit his thoughts.

"I'll tell you why at the Census, come fall," he had promised.

Gabe entered the cabin, looking forward to a hot shower to melt the lead out of his muscles, and growled when he saw his satellite uplink flashing. He sat down at the console, but didn't activate it immediately.

"Hello." Gabe's voice sounded raspy and off-key. He cleared his throat. "Hello, how are you?" It'd do.

He activated the uplink.

The comsat monitor gave him a view of a pink stucco terrace overlooking a cerulean ocean where the sun had just started to set. The remote camera, automatically trying to acquire a human, panned across a ruined hotel megaplex with curving terraces that descended to a bay where breakwaters had once tamed the ocean into a saltwater swimming pool.

Gabe scowled at the megaplex. The decadent pleasure church was a relic of the Leisure Class initiative, which had instigated mankind's extinction. By the middle of the twenty-first century, the global population had been stabilized at eight billion, but the techno-industrial complex continued to become more efficient: automated factories dominated production of goods, virtual-reality consumer nets palsied the retail sector... even knowledge-intensive professions fell prey to expertware. As unemployment became pandemic, consumer spending dried up. The global economy stagnated. In response, the United Nations Common Market imposed a universal tax in order to fund the Leisure Class—a social class, comprised of the oldest two percent of humanity, whose primary occupation would be the consumption of goods and services.

The remote camera centered on a man dozing on a frayed deck chair. A straw hat covered the his face, but his age could be seen his wrinkled brown hands. Luc was a historian and the final survivor of mankind's Penultimate Generation—the last PenGen. The PenGens

had abandoned their children, the Orphans, into Luc's care to be raised.

"Père," Gabe whispered.

Luc lifted his hat. His yellow eyes were red-rimmed and his accent was more pronounced than usual, so Gabe knew he'd been drinking.

"*Jour, Gabriel. I call about de travel arrangements for de Census.*"

Gabe consulted the travel schedule taped above the uplink console.

"You're not coming with Teresa?"

Luc's shoulders sagged. "Instead of waitin' to be pick up by Teresa, I dropped by de miss' boat early for to surprise her, y'know? But she was gone."

"Gone! Dead?"

Luc looked away and addressed his answer to the dying sun.

"All her t'ings were tidied up 'n box. All her notes 'n projections for de nuclear storage were finis 'n laid out for someone to find. And her plants had been place outside for de rain to fall." Luc shrugged, tired. "She jus' walked away. Nut'ing to be done for it."

Stunned, Gabe could not speak. Luc filled a clay cup from a straw-covered bottle.

"You got some'ting dere, Gabriel?"

Still numb, Gabe filled a thermos cup from a wineskin. They raised their drinks.

"To Teresa," Luc murmured, thickly. "She will be remembered."

→ ←

AFTER GABE TERMINATED THE UPLINK, he ascended an access ladder from the cabin's cooking smells, through the oil-sweet air of the thumper's en-

gine compartment. At last he squeezed out the VTOL's upper hatch and the horizons of his world swept vertiginously away across a thousand miles of pine-scented forest. Lying back on the hull, Gabe sipped whisky from his wineskin and stared up at the stars in the purple-black sky. The night breeze rustled the great forest with a majestic sifting-sand susurrations.

Teresa had been the oldest member of the Orphan Generation, already twelve when the PenGens gave over their children to Luc to raise. After Teresa graduated from the Orphan kibbutz, she settled among the aging Paris community of PenGens. Gabe did not know much of her life until she left Paris ten years later and volunteered to monitor the North American nuclear storage silos. During the next twenty years, he saw her only during the Orphans' annual Censuses. Not a stranger, not a close friend, she was simply Teresa to him until the day her thumper was hit by lightning.

The VTOL's insulation protected it from damage, but an electrical arc in the avionics assembly altered a single byte in the piloting expertware. Convinced that it was now in the southern hemisphere, the thumper struggled to flip itself over, side-slipping until it finally plowed into Bayou Segnette on the outskirts of New Orleans. Teresa found herself trapped inside the overturned craft as mud and swamp water filled its fuselage. Uncertain if her distress beacon had activated, she spent four terrifying hours in the shrinking darkness before the flame of Gabe's

cutting torch appeared above her like a star. By the time Gabe pulled her free, she had turned ashen with shock and hypothermia.

"It was like being buried alive," Teresa said through chattering teeth, frantically scraping the clinging mud away from her jumpsuit as though resculpting herself.

They flew in his thumper across the city to Lake Pontchartrain where Teresa's riverboat was moored.

The *River Queen* had once been a floating casino that had supported the Leisure Class economy of an entire town. Now it was the *Odette*, and it was Teresa's alone. After Gabe bathed in a guest stateroom, he explored the stately stern-wheeler, which Teresa had extensively remodeled in nineteenth century style. The cashier's office had been transformed to a parlor in which framed lithographs hung from porcelain-headed nails. A gift shop had become a library of glass-doored cabinets filled with leather-bound books. But the *Odette's* real glory lay in what was once a slot-machine hall—the ballroom.

Enormous gilded mirrors lined one wall of the ballroom, reflecting a panoramic series of lofty French windows opposite. Beyond the windows, New Orleans' skyline appeared ethereal beneath a lacy veil of Spanish moss—neither less nor more real than its reflection on the glassy lake. The fresh, sweet air left in the wake of the storm wafted through the open windows, stirring the high curtains.

Gabe heard soft footsteps on the hardwood floor behind him.

Teresa wore a dress of pink satin with black lace flounces, a sheer shawl swaddling her bare shoulders. Pale red roses entwined in the dangling braids of her long black hair. Poised on one foot, she used a delicate taper-topped pole to touch fire to the candles of the ballroom's chandelier, each candle casting a shimmering diamond upon the polished floor.

"I hope you don't mind," she murmured, eyes on the candles. "I dress this way when I'm home."

"It's a beautiful gown. Beautiful and grand. Where did you find it?"

"I sewed it. It's not really authentic, though. Ladies wore layers and layers back in those days."

She lifted her hem slightly to show that her legs were bare. Gabe could see the warmth of the shower she had taken in the blush of her skin.

"I can't imagine how they could dance," she said. "I suppose you never learned to dance, did you Gabriel?"

He shook his head. Luc never danced, so neither did the Orphans.

"Shall I teach you?" she asked. He nodded and took the demure hand she offered.

Teresa showed Gabe how to stand, how to step, how to hold her. Hidden speakers sent a ghostly waltz floating through the ballroom. They spun across the floor as the sun sank behind the gossamer city. He nuzzled the roses in her hair. After a time, she talked of Paris.

"We used to dance along the Seine, a hundred of us or more. A *hundred*. We'd have a real band set up on a bridge or on a boat. With

every song, we would change partners and whisper, 'I hope the musicians are sleepy,' for you always spent the night with your last partner."

So they danced. They danced as the stars brightened and the candles died and when the music faded away they danced a few steps longer. She pulled down on the nape of his neck and instinctively he knew to lift her up as they kissed.



THE SUN WAS SHINING THROUGH THE silk flowers of Teresa's window garden when Gabe awoke. He waited in her mahogany four-poster for an hour before giving up and going to search for her. It took another hour before he stumbled on the engine room. He wouldn't have discovered its entrance at all, had the scent of roses not led him to a panel which slid aside at his touch.

The engine room was dark except for computer consoles whose buttons and registers glowed a hundred colors like some treasure hoard from an Arabian fairy tale. Gabe recognized the deadly machines from his history studies—Hermetic Sensual Experience, one of the two technologies that had turned the Leisure Class initiative from decadence to genocide. HSE provided coherent stimulation to all five senses at once, allowing the user to live out preprogrammed fantasies. Gabe wrapped a handkerchief around his hand, then activated a monitor.

An imperial court appeared on the screen. The architecture appeared Roman, though the landscape outside the columned windows seemed to be a talc desert. A

menagerie of female slaves from exotic lands reclined on shapely couches, their low-lidded eyes on the entry where their princely master stood. But the master, a human user's avatar, stood motionless as the desert wind rippled his toga. The user had died, perhaps decades ago.

Gabe searched a hundred programs before he found one with a vigorous human avatar.

A bat-winged general towered above a samite cloudscape, glaring with thunderous eyes upon a sleeping city of gold. Behind the general, the clouds grew red with flames along the horizon and an uncountable army erupted from the boiling mists. The general's titanic body spawned cyclones as he turned to address his army on the eve of the immortal assault ... unaware that he had given that speech thousands of times ... unaware that he was ruled by Lethe.

After generations of the LC program had passed, scientists concocted a method of recycling novelty itself: Lethe. Initially a drug that blocked short-term memory, allowing a song to be heard for the first time hundreds of times, Lethe was continually refined until it became a regimen capable of repressing a person's basic memories, including identity itself.

Hermetic Sensual Experience, combined with Lethe, formed Nirvana.

Lethe allowed an HSE user to suppress the knowledge that he had entered an electronic environment. Lethe took away the real world; HSE gave you back a better one. The motto of the Nirvana riders: "Why

hang-glide over a rainforest when you could be an angel flying through Eden?"

Gabe turned his back on the HSE monitor as Satan began his grand speech. The human user really thought himself Satan on the morning of the final battle. In a few hours the user would forget it all and Armageddon would start again.

The scent of roses drew Gabe deeper into the darkness, to a wig perched on a stand. Roses entwined in its long black braids.

Teresa sat nearby, her upper body slumped over a padded brace and her slack face hanging inches above an HSE archive console. The skin-tight cap covering her bald skull bristled with thousands of translucent microantennas.

Gabe dropped the wig to the floor and fled.



TWO HOURS LATER, SHE FOUND HIM standing cross-armed before the Victorian hunting frieze that dominated *Odette's* dining room, pondering the reasons why the frieze's carver had chosen to give the stag a set of fangs to bare at the pursuing hounds.

"It's not as though it were truly Nirvana," she mumbled at his sullen back.

Of course it hadn't been Nirvana, since Teresa and the other Orphans were the one-in-a-thousand humans who were allergic to Lethe. Otherwise, they would have been cast into Nirvana by their parents at the onset of adolescence. Were it not for the rare allergy, mankind would have become extinct in a single generation of Nirvana. As it was, three

generations later, humanity had dwindled down to the forty Orphans. They would be the last.

"HSE isn't Nirvana, but it's just as unnatural," Gabe said.

A furious flush spread across Teresa's naked scalp.

"You're one to talk of 'natural,'" she sputtered. "The grizzlies in your precious forests were cloned from stuffed museum exhibits. Your wolves came from throw rugs!"

Gabe strode toward the door. She darted around the table and grabbed him by the hands.

"Think, Gabriel. When Nirvana was invented and became universal, everyone knew that it would lead to the extinction of humanity. They could simply have banned it, yes?"

Gabe's answer came straight from the kibbutz's educational expertise. "But generations of the LC program had allowed the need for gratification to replace survival as mankind's most basic instinct."

"And we hate them for it—we blame their decadence for the end of the world. But aren't we doing the same thing? Every generation since the advent of Nirvana has exiled its children to Nirvana. Why do we keep doing it? Why not keep our children and *live*? Because we've fallen in love with death. Three generations of despair have taught us to embrace extinction when it would be so very easy—so very instinctual—to continue the species."

"But if we started again, the species wouldn't really be humanity. Not as it was. It'd be tribes with nuclear weapons. It would be ... artificial."

"Yes, as your animals are artificial," she said, breathlessly. "Artificial but real. Yes?"

"Of course."

She placed his hand on her cheek.

"Don't you want someone to appreciate them? Love them? Forever?"

Gabe had no clue what she meant. He hated the discussion already. He hated words.

"All right," he said.

Something happened in Teresa's eyes. They turned alive, the way they had in the ballroom. Gabe's chest hurt wonderfully.

"I won't tell Luc what you've been doing," he murmured. "It's your life."

Teresa's eyes died.

"Get out."

→ ←

A CHORUS OF HOWLS DRIFTED OUT OF THE forest and across the Winnipeg airport as a wolf pack summoned its stray members for the night's hunt. Gabe stared at the stars and sipped whisky as the howls converged into happy yelps and whines.

Thirteen years have passed since Gabe walked out of the *Odette's* dining room and straight to his thumper. When Gabe had approached Teresa at that year's Census, she had driven him away with civilities. They never spoke again. He had always assumed that someday she would explain everything to him, but now Teresa was dead. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out what he was supposed to have done.

→ ←

AT NOON, A THUMPER SWEEPED LOW OVER the airport and slowed to a hover

above Gabe's VTOL, its prop-wash shaking his cabin like an earthquake. Murasaki had landed by the time Gabe staggered out into the wretched sunshine with the sleeves of his unzipped coveralls dangling around his ankles.

Murasaki and Gabe had been kibbutz bunkmates, the two youngest people in the world. The last to graduate from the kibbutz, she had been left with the miserable job of monitoring the Manchurian Zero-Maintenance catacombs. When Nirvana had become universal among the Leisure Class, Zero-M technology was developed to care for the Nirvana riders' superfluous bodies. Once grafted into a Zero-M crypt, a rider lived out his life on an infinitesimal amount of resources. Zero-M allowed LC enfranchisement to explode from two percent of the population to virtually one hundred percent.

Gabe had visited the Murasaki's Zero-M complex exactly once. The sight of the riders' disembodied central nervous systems floating in the murky Zero-M tanks reminded him of the mosquito larvae that bred wherever rainwater stagnated in street lamps.

As Murasaki climbed out of her thumper's cockpit, Gabe noticed that she wore a heavy sweater beneath her thick flight jacket despite the warm sunshine. He caught himself looking at her silver-streaked hair, then noticed her own eyes flicker toward his iron beard.

"You're early," he growled. Murasaki was not due to help him set up camp for the Census until

tomorrow.

"And you're a grouchy old bear," she chirped as she gave him a body-shaking hug. "But I love you anyway. Are you hung over? Come see what I brought!"

She steered him to the freight module slung below her thumper and through its man-hatch. Collapsible chairs and banquet tables filled the module. Murasaki's eyes danced with mischief as she motioned Gabe towards an equipment locker.

"What's that?"

"The banquet tent you asked me to find."

When Gabe opened the locker, enormous billows of crimson and gold silk rolled out, burying him to the waist. It was an imperial pavilion, doubtlessly liberated from a cultural archive.

"It'll have to do."

Murasaki laughed musically and ruffled his hair with both hands. Gabe stretched some silk between his hands and pretended to be fascinated by the motif of tigers and dragons.

"I talked to Luc yesterday."

"That's nice. How is the old man?"

"Fine. But Teresa won't be at the Census."

"Oh no, not Teresa..."

Murasaki surprised Gabe by embracing him from behind. She rested her chin on his shoulder and they regarded each other's nebulous reflections in the glossy veneer of a banquet table.

"Did Luc say how?"

"She just walked away. No note or anything, but..."

"How are you taking it, Gabe?"

The gentle, guarded tone of the question surprised him. He did not answer right away.

"Tell me if you don't want to talk about it," she murmured.

"Talk about what?"

"About you and Teresa."

"I didn't know that anybody else knew."

"Not many. The whole world."

He did not laugh at the old joke, but he did not pull away either. She caressed his bearded jaw with her smooth cheek. Presently he asked, "Did Teresa talk about it?"

"Quite a bit. She was confused, but Luc helped her see what needed to be done. Eva and I flew in to give her support when she induced the miscarriage."

Lost in her own memories, Murasaki didn't notice the electric twitch ripple through Gabe's body.

"...went smoothly, but Teresa was pretty blue afterwards. I think she was obsessing over might-have-beens."

He subvocalized something non-committal as he disengaged her arms and stepped free of the silk. She followed him out into the sunshine. Head bent and hands clasped behind his back, Gabe walked towards the forest.

"Where are you going?" she called out.

"For a walk."

"You're coming back?"

It seemed an absurd question, until he thought it out. He gave her a lopsided shrug without turning.

"Sure. I promised everyone a show."



TWO DAYS LATER, THE ORPHANS STARTED arriving with the sunrise. Annie and Aksuvar were the first, having crossed the pole from Belarus. Murasaki greeted them out on the runway in a kimono, her hiking boots peeking out from beneath its hem. She helped them carry their platters of Turkish *mezes* into the pavilion.

The sun sent the silk's patterns streaming through air scented by the birch saplings that served for tent poles. Gabe worked on setting a beer keg on a stump. To Murasaki's relief, Gabe cheered up a little as he greeted them and laughed aloud when he saw Aksuvar, dressed in a polar exposure parka, scowl around the pavilion distrustfully as though he expected to find snow lurking under the banquet tables.

Georgette, Bruce and Yule arrived next, sunburnt from gathering fruit in the South Pacific. Clive arrived mid-morning and was booed soundly for being late with the liquor. By lunch, a dozen thumpers had arrived.

A speck appeared in the southern sky. A cheer went up as it turned into a thumper extravagantly adorned with bits of colored glass, painted stones and polished seashells. The thumper had been the kibbutz's "school bus." The pavilion emptied as the Orphans went out onto the tarmac to greet it. Luc's hand shook on Murasaki's arm as she helped him down from the cockpit, but his eyes were bright as he cupped cheeks and kissed foreheads.

"*Bon jour, Dancin' Eyes... Dere you are, Taffy... Lady Gub...!*"

The rest of the day was spent catching up on the news of the year, the conversations continuing over the supper of roast venison. In the evening, they sat around a great bonfire, drinking and mulling over old arguments. Were there a few people still hidden in a rain forest somewhere? Should mankind have invested its excess energy in space exploration instead of the Leisure Class? Would it be a primate or a dolphin that evolved to human-level intelligence and uncovered the cultural archives seeded across the continents, sunk into the oceans and launched into space? At midnight, Luc shooed them off to their tents.

Reports consumed the second day as each Orphan briefed the others on how their personal projects had advanced in the previous year. Satellite surveillance showed that whale populations had stabilized at ancient levels ... the Zero-M complexes were down to four percent occupancy ... the ozone layer continued to improve... All was well, all was quiet, all was as foreseen. Everyone took pains not to yawn at their siblings' life work.

When it was his turn, Gabe reported the bison population had risen to fifteen million and no cases of anthrax or tuberculosis had been found in any of the major herds. The poor bloodlines created by centuries of stunted breeding in conservation parks were well on their way to being corrected by natural selection. Winnipeg was last city in the expanding herds' potential migratory path left to be demolished.

At the end, Luc read Teresa's report.

He abandoned his patois in favor of the neutral speech pattern that the Orphans had learned from their educational expertware.

"Radiation levels in the nuclear repositories are decaying at rates far in advance of silo fatigue..." the report began. "It is clear that further monitoring is not required," it ended. Luc carefully folded Teresa's report and slipped it into his pocket to be uploaded into the archive-net later. He let the silence last for a full minute, then patted his own knobby knee briskly.

"Play time, den."

The Orphans flashed each other puzzled, concerned expressions then burst into laughter as Luc reached into a duffel bag and produced a battered soccer ball from their kibbutz days. Embarrassed at first, but driven on by Luc, they chose up sides and placed chairs out on the runway to act as goal posts. Then they played for the stakes for which they had always played—for De Champeenship of De Whole Darn World. Laughing and shouting, giggling and wheezing, they chased the ball back and forth across the desiccated tarmac as the declining sun sent their lengthening shadows all the way to the forest.

✧ ✧

SUNSET. TIME FOR THE SHOW.

Gabe led the others up onto the roof of a hangar where they had a clear view of the Winnipeg skyline. Gabe waited until the cool breeze had dried the sweat from everyone's face then took a book from his pocket.

"Earlier this year, Murasaki asked

me why I preferred to live in my cabin. I couldn't explain why. Still can't. But this comes close."

Gabe opened the book to a page marked with a pressed leaf and read.

"Emperor Napoleon, having battled the armies of Czar Alexander across fifteen hundred blackened miles, finally drew within sight of Moscow. 'So here is the Holy City!' he cried to his generals. But as the Emperor rode in triumph through the massive gates, no cheers rang out. The cathedrals and the golden domes, the bazaars and the boulevards—all were silent as death. The people had gone.

"Entering into the imperial palace, Napoleon wandered the echoing halls. As the sun slipped behind the empty watchtowers, he came to the Czar's bedchamber. Napoleon looked upon the royal bed, still laid out with sumptuous sheets, then slowly, thoughtfully, turned away. Speaking to no man, he walked out of the palace, out of the city and back to his campaign tent to sleep on his own narrow, iron cot."

Gabe closed the book. Without meeting anybody's eyes, he checked his watch and then turned to the distant city. Time passed.

The sonic detonations produced silent gray puffs along the base of the city skyline. The towers hung in the sky for a heartbeat longer before falling with the floating grace of a waterfall to vanish into the rising dust cloud. The acoustic ripple that eventually reached the hangar was no louder than the sea on a distant coast. All that remained of the city

was a flattening haze, tinted sienna by the setting sun and flecked black by roused birds.

"Good show," someone murmured. "Good show."

▷ ◁

THE FOREST ENFOLDED LUC AND GABE with moon-shadows and the rich scent of damp leaves as they walked away from the camp. The plush moss of the forest floor stole the strength from Luc's legs. He was struggling to breathe the cool air by the time they came upon a clearing and sat together on a log.

On the far side of the glade stood a farmhouse that had once been surrounded by a sea of wheat. Now, young pines and balsams pressed closely around its bleached walls, poking their curious branches through its empty windows. The moon shone down through a gaping gable upon a doe standing with one hoof raised. The doe studied them briefly, then turned her ears in other directions and resumed chewing her cud.

"Why didn't you tell me that Teresa was going to have a baby?"

"Because after I talk to her, she wasn't going to have it at all. So I t'ink: Why tell the boy 'n give him somet'ing more to pace around de night, fussin' 'bout?"

"Were you scared that I might have wanted a child?"

"Yes, dat was it."

Gabe's temples throbbed.

"Maybe I still want one."

"Gabriel!" Luc cooed in dismay. "Teresa didn't want to continue de species. She just wanted somebody for to hold her hand when de dyin'

time come. It didn't matter dat she would sentencing de child to live in loneliness all de long years. Teresa believe the world stop when Teresa stop."

Luc pushed down on Gabe's shoulder with a wicker hand as he rose painfully.

"But you ... you know better, my handsome Gabriel."

Leaning heavily on his cane, Luc limped back toward camp.

Gabe wept.

▷ ◁

THE NEXT MORNING, GABE RETURNED TO camp and found Murasaki waiting outside his cabin. Everyone else had gone.

"They wanted to wait for you," she explained, "but Luc shooed them home."

"How come you stayed?"

Murasaki looked at the ground. "I was thinking ... you must be just about running out of things to do over here. And, um, you know what they say—couples live longer. Would you consider moving to my side of the ocean?"

Gabe looked up at the wide sky for a time before answering.

"Long ago, maybe. But I've invested my life in..." he waved his hand vaguely at the forest. "If I'm leaving behind any kind of legacy, it'll be here. Damn, I wish I had the words."

Gabe paused to listen to the distant call of a bird.

"Teresa thought the world would end with mankind—that history would end. But she was wrong. I know it. Luc thinks he taught me that, but he's wrong." Gabe nodded

at the forest. "This is my teacher. Nothing ends. Nothing is final."

"I understand, old bear."

She hugged him hard and then turned to walk to her thumper. Gabe cleared his throat.

"That doesn't mean I don't love you."

"I love you too, Gabe," she said without turning. "We all do."

He watched until thumper vanished from sight, then went into his cabin and collapsed onto his cot.

→ ←

GABE KNEW THAT HE HAD SLEPT AROUND the clock even before he opened his eyes, for he could remember long, lucid dreams. Epics. He contemplated the ritual of breakfast, but couldn't feign an appetite. So he sat on the edge of his cot staring beyond the cabin's claustrophobic gloom.

The autumn breeze whistled softly beneath the door and blustered like cotton against the wall. Gabe opened the door and breathed the fresh morning air into his lungs until his sternum ached. He sighed. Pausing only to prop open the cabin door with a chunk of tarmac, he walked into the forest.

He trekked west. Sometimes he walked with his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes staring at the ground, but mostly he kept his head up so he could watch the forest pass by.

Near evening, the sun flowed out from under the overhead canopy into clear sky. The prairie stretched out before him—a rippling golden

ocean that melted into a waving haze long before it reached the horizon. Gabe waded into the bluestem grass and was delighted to discover it was still warm from the day. He climbed a knoll and sat on the crest where the wind bent the grass low.

The night passed.

At dawn, the ground trembled as though the rising sun were shrugging itself free of the horizon for the first time. The herd emerged from the northlands, following ancient trails. The bison numbered a million, their passage shaking veins into the earth. By the time the sun reached its zenith in the bottomless sky, the herd had stretched beyond the vanishing point across half the world, tinging three horizons copper. Young bulls roamed the fringe of the herd, expanding the prairie as they butted their heads against the forest's trees and uprooted shrubs with their horns. In some uncounted century, bulls such as they would tear away the trees crowning the rounded barrows of Winnipeg.

"What a show," Gabe whispered through cracked lips. "Oh, what a show."

→ ←

A YOUNG BULL ON THE EDGE OF THE herd lifted his shaggy head to snort curiously at a strange scent carried to him from a distant knoll. The wind shifted ... the scent faded. Once again, all the world was sun-fragrant grass and the cool forest stretching onward forever. ✻



The Discount Shaman

Randy Barnhart

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

I HATED WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT. THE DAY GUYS COULDN'T PUT A tool away properly to save their lives, and I usually ended up having to look through the racks for something as simple as an oil filter wrench. Which was what I was doing when Anna Burton came in. Truth to tell, Burton was one of those women I never look at twice.

Tall and thin with long blond hair that had seen frequent visits from the dye bottle, she wore Birkenstocks, a long flowing skirt and a blouse a color never seen in nature. If I had to guess, she probably had just arrived from Madam Flurensky's Tea House. If I told Flurie once, I told her a thousand times: stop sending your castoffs to me. Still, maybe I was wrong; maybe this apparition from the New Age just needed a new fan belt for her Jeep. You never knew, except for Flurie, and she didn't know all the time.

"Help ya?" I asked. She jumped about a foot and gasped. Damn, I hadn't noticed that I was standing in the shadows. Must have scared her half to death. I stepped into the light and asked again, "Can I help you?"

"Harry Standing Buffalo?" she asked.

She was from Flurie all right. Nobody called me Harry Standing Buffalo except my mom, Uncle Ralph and her. Every white person I ever knew spent a lot of time thinking up tiresome puns on "Harry Standing Buffalo," so I usually went by the name of Harry Standing. One time I got drunk at a neighborhood fair and told Flurie my real name, so now I get a constant stream of folks with problems she couldn't handle. Jeez, ain't life grand.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Harry Standing Buffalo. And I only work on cars. And domestic cars at that. Something wrong with yours?" I wasn't going to make

this real easy. The deal is that she has to specifically ask me for help, and she has to really want it. Otherwise it won't work. Besides, I can't take money for helping people, so being asked is the only satisfaction I get.

She stared at the floor for a heartbeat, and then threw her hair back. "It's Madam Flurensky. You know, the Seer who runs the Tea House down the street?" I nodded, even though I was sneering inside. Seer? Flurie was lucky to "see" tomorrow's weather. She had a little bit of Knowledge and a lot of charisma, which was the only reason she was still in business. Otherwise she'd be fleecing suckers with some bogus three-card monte game down on First Avenue.

She answered my nod with one of her own. "So anyway," she continued, "my name is Anna Burton and I've got this ... problem, and Madam Flurensky said you were the only one who could help me." She searched my face for a hint I was going along with the gag, but my poker face is infamous among the Saturday Night Card Club, and she got nothing.

I could see Burton was grasping. She was asking a total stranger to help her solve an almost unbelievable problem, and she was having trouble. Still, they all had problems making that final leap, and I couldn't make it any easier for them. It was all part of the deal.

She finally got it all out in a rush: "Madam Flurensky says you are a great Native American shaman, the last of a great line of shamans, and only you can help me." She looked

into my face some more. "I need a shaman. Can you help me?" she asked again.

I pointed at the diploma on the wall and said, "Sorry, all I got is a BA in Native Studies, a mechanic's license and a permit to fix motor vehicles." That was also part of the deal: if they could ask for it in an open and sincere manner, I had to help. It wasn't like they'd pull my union card or anything, it's just that if I didn't help, I might find the Knowledge drying up. It was a quid pro quo kind of deal.

Burton was shaking like a leaf. She had just made herself sound like a total moron to a stranger who might burst out laughing at any moment. Instead, I led her to the office, got her a cup of coffee and made sure she was settled down before asking her, "What's the problem?"

She looked me in the eyes and said, "Mr. Standing Buffalo, there's this spirit haunting me..."

Well Jeez, isn't there always?

» «

NEXT DAY, I DECIDED THAT IT WAS TIME to clear things up once and for all with "Madam Flurensky."

The Tea Shop was this little dump made interesting by the perpetual New Age do-dads, like the usual zodiac symbols and other mysterious rubbish painted on the walls. Charlie, Flurie's doorman cum waiter cum boyfriend, tried to block my way, but unlike the Hollywood version of a Native North American, I'm not tall, graceful and handsome; instead, I'm like most real native people: short, squat and powerful. Charlie took one look at my face and

got lost.

"Flurie!" I yelled, "Where the bloody hell are you?"

"Back here, and kept it the bloody hell down!" I heard a familiar voice reply.

Flurie was in her Reading Room, but she wasn't prepared for customers just yet. A tiny woman, she was wearing a pink fluffy bathrobe and had her black hair gathered in a ponytail. At first glance she looked like a teenager, but a closer look at her face showed a lifetime of pain and struggle. She was chowing down on a decidedly un-New Age breakfast of bacon, eggs and coffee. Her steady customers would have had a sympathetic heart attack if they had seen her bolting down all that cholesterol. She motioned me to the chair across from her.

"Flurie, what are you doing sending this Burton woman to see me?" I asked. "She claims she's got some Indian ghosts bothering her and that you told her I was the only one who could help." I drew a deep breath. "Let's get this straight. I am an auto mechanic. That's the only work I'm interested in. Now, if you could recommend me to folks needing an oil change...?"

Flurie took her time, finishing her bacon before looking up at me. She knew better than to try the Whammy on me, so she went right to her most endearing quality: her total, unstoppable greed.

"Look. I know you just want to fix cars, and you know you just want to fix cars. But you got the Knowledge, and I don't." She got up and motioned around the Tea Shop with her

coffee cup. "Look at this dump," she said. "Sure I get the usual neurotics who think if they know the future it'll make their lives wonderful. And I know just enough to give them a glimpse, so they keep coming back. Charlie and me are doing all right."

She sipped her coffee and continued, "But what if one of them gets the idea that I really can't help? What if word gets out that Madam Flurensky is nothing more than a window to a possible future, and nothing else? They'll start going to those new Seers downtown. The ones with nice places and good tea..."

I began to feel like a perfect jerk. I had the Knowledge and didn't want it, while Flurie would have traded her life and soul for it, and that wanting meant it would never work for her. Jeez, life really does suck, doesn't it?

Then she said something that sealed it all like a handshake with an angel of the Lord or a Mob guy: "You really gotta help me. If I can't ghostbust or any of that other stuff, I need people to think I know who can, or I'm out of business. Please, Harry, I'm begging you..."

A request for help, made sincerely and openly. No avoiding Anna Burton now.

I slumped down in my seat. One more time for dear old Flurie.

I heard myself say, "Okay, Flurie. I didn't get much from her before she started crying and I had to put her into a cab, so what's the deal?"

It was a pretty straightforward situation. Lady buys a house from a couple strangely eager to sell at any

price. She moves in, but all sorts of weird stuff starts happening, from china smashing to a constant feeling of dread. Being an organized type, she looks into it and discovers her place is sitting on an ancient Indian burial ground (if the popular media is any indication, my folks must have buried people every three feet). So of course that meant that Ancient Indian Spirits, pissed off about how the whole Manifest Destiny thing turned out, were going to revenge the last several centuries of native-white relations by making Ms. Burton's home life a living hell. Sure thing.

I told Flurie to call Burton and tell her to come over the garage that night. I might have the Knowledge, but I still had to look a couple of things up. I mean, I'm not Super-Shaman or anything like that.

Then I got the hell out before Flurie asked me to cure the common cold or bring back the Passenger Pigeon.



So there I was the next night, round about 11:00 PM, trying to get the timing right on an ancient K-Car, when in walks Ms. Burton. Obviously she had read up on "Hauntings, Getting Rid Of" because she was dressed head to toe in black with feathered earrings. I, on the other hand, was dressed in greasy coveralls. When dealing with the Great Beyond, it's best to take it as it comes.

As we shook hands, she asked, "What do I call you?"

I smiled. Maybe something like The Grand Wizard would be appropriate, but the KKK has the patent on stupid titles, as well as stupidity generally, so I said, " 'Harry' will do

just fine. I always thought that 'Mr. Standing Buffalo' sounded slightly awkward."

She frowned. "No, I meant your tribal name ... spiritual name ... ancestral name..." She stopped because I was frowning in return.

"No such thing," I explained. "At least for me. My dad was a tribal policeman and my mom was in tribal politics. Both were orphans sent to residential school, so I really don't know all that much about my ancestors. Let's just keep it 'Harry,' shall we? It's what my parents named me."

I led her into the office so we could have some coffee and a bit of a gab. I needed to know a little bit about how she saw this happening so I knew what to expect when it did happen.

After I got her some coffee, I asked, "So how did you decide that it was the burial grounds causing all the commotion in your house?"

"Well," she replied, "I know how your people got such a raw deal and everything, so I thought that if anybody's spirit had a right to be restless, it had to be... What's wrong?"

I was frowning again. People read crappy novels and watch lousy television programs about my folks, and then were surprised when they got it all wrong. I remember another of Flurie's friends, some kind of writer, who wanted to know all about the "Old Ways." I tried to set her straight, but when I read her novel, it turned out to be a total muck-up of what I had told her. When I complained, she told me to "write a letter" to her publisher. Yeah, sure. To misquote somebody or another, "A lie travels

around the world while the truth's still putting on its boots."

Anyway, Burton clearly had the impression that my folks were so vengeful that they were really going to waste centuries of their afterlife charging around making the owners of that property unhappy. I told her that she wasn't all that important, and my folks' spirits weren't that stupid.

"So what is it?" she asked, exasperated. Like all the children of the Push-button Age, she'd hired an expert and now she expected results.

I smiled. "What we're looking for is somebody who in life was so messed up that they would forego the afterlife to hang around making your life hell," I said. I had a candidate, but I wasn't going to tell her. Flurie had already made too many promises, implied and otherwise. We'd just have to see what we see.

I led her into the office and sat her down on one of the old Volkswagen seats that served as office furniture. I told her, "Most of this is going to be you. If a spirit wants to stay hidden, he or she will stay hidden, no matter what I do. So what we're going to do is make the little critter visible and that's up to you." I smiled, trying to put her at ease. "And how we do that is for you to remember the last time the spirit came to you. I want you to close your eyes and remember every taste, smell, sight... Everything. Okay?"

She nodded bravely, and closed her eyes. I gave her a few seconds and I started after her.

Lots of people have asked me to explain the Knowledge. I tell them I can't and send them to a university professor who has the Knowledge

too. He fills them full of mumbo-jumbo about "innate ways of knowing" and "non-learned methods of seeing." The truth is that neither of us knows anything beyond a few clues. Personally, I think the world is full of unseen eddies and currents that affect events, and some people are born with the knowledge of how these currents work. Through trial and error, people like me learn the rules: our Knowledge is not perfect; we can't personally profit from our Knowledge, and if we try, the Knowing suddenly dries up.

I could feel Ms. Burton sinking deeper and deeper into her memories just as a swirling eddy of light gathered around her, a cross between an aura and a whirlpool. As every little thing about each "visitation" crossed her vision, I could see the whirlpool gather into a form, black and huge and overpowering. A rank stench filled the room, full of ancient evil. When she finally opened her eyes as if to ask me what to do next, she took one look at the black corruption and immediately began doing the right thing: she began to scream.

It moved towards us, and I felt shivers running up and down my spine. Voices in my head told me to run screaming from this accursed place and never return. I was only a man, they said; how could I hope to take on this, the very distillation of hatred and power?

As this corrupt thing shambled closer, I fought to maintain some sense of why I was there. I fought to maintain some sense of humanity, but it was too wondrous and awesome to behold. I wanted to run, hide

away, for this thing was too grand to fight!

Every step back from this thing was a blessing, and I am not too proud to say that I wanted to run like a whipped dog and leave Burton to her fate. In my insanity, when I found my way out blocked by a tool box, I picked it up and tossed it over my shoulder. I gathered myself to run and I distinctly heard an "Ouch!" I turned and saw this ... this thing pulling the tool box I tossed out of its amorphous form!

Wait a minute, I remember thinking, *a spirit that feels pain...?* Then I knew.

"Come to me, evil one!" I called to it. I ignored the voices telling me to run, and began to think of the sun, its form and brightness. Visions of mighty trees and delicate flowers, all the things of life, began to fill me, and I walked with the true spirits of this earth.

When I opened my eyes again, the corruption was already shrinking quickly and assuming a human-shaped form. After a few seconds, it finally formed into the image of a big man wearing the leather jacket and chinos and the DA haircut of the 1950s.

I gathered Burton in my arms, rocking her back and forth until her screaming stopped. I pointed at our vision and said, "Anna Burton, let me introduce you to your spirit, Mr. Bob Moody."

Moody (or Moody's spirit, I never get that right) cringed as Burton finally saw him as he really was. See, these vengeful spirits can only work if they are unseen. Now Moody could be seen, and he wasn't real

happy about it. He flailed his arms around and I could tell by the way his lips were moving that he was trying to say something, but I made sure that he wasn't doing anything or going anywhere, right at the moment.

Burton grabbed my arm so tightly, she was likely to break it, and I tried to soothe her. "Nothing to be afraid of, Ms. Burton," I said. "About forty years ago, Bob here was involved in one of those high-speed chases you hear about. Seems he was wanted on a rape charge and decided take off rather than face the consequences. Anyway, after roaring around the countryside, the cops finally forced him off the road. He died in that crash, Ms. Burton. A crash that took place on what was later to be your property."

She loosened up her grip, and I continued. "Now Bob has a real problem with women. Can't be near one without trying to hurt her. So after that crash, when it came time for Bob to make the trip to the afterlife, his need to hurt women kept him in this world. Not as romantic as revenge for a hundred years of genocide, I'll grant you, but there's your spook."

Burton looked stunned, and I didn't know whether to sympathize or laugh. Here she was all prepared for a real experience with the Great Beyond, and she ends up finding a greasy little sexual predator. This was not going to impress her friends down at the Tarot Club!

I patted her shoulder and said, "Don't worry, I've taken away his ability to hide from you. He's the same as you and me for the moment."

I let the Compulsion around Moody

drop and said to him, "You're going Home, old son..." Just then, though, he screamed and charged me.

You have to expect something like that from a jerk like Moody. As he swung for my head, I ducked under his arm. My hand found the wrench I had set nearby for just such an event and, as Moody swung around from the force of his swing, I belted him right across the kidneys. He went down like a bag of hot air.

I held up the wrench for Burton to see. "Nope, it ain't a Magic Wrench. I just figured if Mr. Moody wanted to stay in this old world, he should have a shape that was a little ... firmer."

I reached down and pulled Bob to his feet. He had crazy eyes, but they were scared now too. I pulled him close, so close I could whisper in his ear.

"You're going Home," I repeated, "And you know what? I'll just bet there are more than a few folks on the Other Side real keen to talk to you about your habits here on earth."

I pushed him to the center of the room and, without mystery or much ado, there was a pop and a flash and he was gone.

→ ←

I got Burton a cup of coffee. As she let the cup warm her hands, she asked, "But how did you know?"

"The thing was," I replied, "you've been brought up believing that native people were somehow extra-human. Believing that we're all extra-human is just the flip side of thinking we're all inhuman. Anyway, you automatically assumed that your haunting was caused by spirits from that Indian burial ground. I, on the other

hand, just looked up odd deaths on your property and there he was: Bob Moody, scumbag deluxe."

"So, will he ever be back?" she asked.

"The Other Side isn't normally a two-way trip," I said. "But if you want to make sure, grow some corn."

She didn't get it. "Corn?"

"Yeah, corn," I said, turning away. I wouldn't lecture her, but she had to know. "Grow just a few ears, nothing fancy. Every year around Thanksgiving, the ears will disappear. In return, they'll make sure their land, and you, are protected."

I turned back to her. "Do you understand? A couple hundred years ago, they took a chance and shared the land. Give them a reason to share it again."

She looked down into her coffee and nodded. At least those old folks buried on her land would have a good reason to trust her and care about her. Besides, they probably hadn't tasted good corn in a long time.

As I was leading her out, she turned to me and asked, "So how much do I owe you?"

Flurie again. She probably expected a cut. I said, "No, it isn't like that. If I took money from you, I might lose the Knowledge." She smiled in disbelief, so I repeated, "No charge."

She closed her handbag and said "That's wonderful! Flurie said..." but I interrupted, "...on the other hand, it sounds like your car needs an oil change..."

Hey, what can I tell ya, I need to eat too. 🍀

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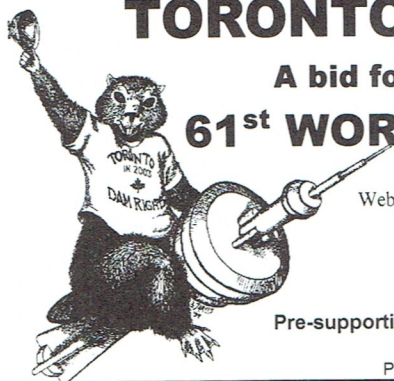


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ASK MR. SCIENCE!

Mr. GB of Surrey, BC, asks:

Q: How do the microwaves in my oven know where the food is?

A: The microwaves in your oven are far too stupid to know, or even care, where the food is. They go rushing madly about in all directions, trying to escape from the cavity. When the unfortunate ones enter and are captured by your dinner, their vain struggles to free themselves heat your food by friction. As you open the door those still free do escape to join their brethren in the universe's cosmic microwave background radiation.

Ms. MM, formerly of Bellingham, WA, asks:

Q: Why does my TV set briefly display a white dot in the center of the screen when I turn it off?

A: Your set was designed by an electronics engineer who, in his spare time, was a fervent student of English grammar. The white spot is the equivalent of the period at the end of a sentence.

Ms. FS of Burnaby, BC, asks:

Q: Why don't pens write upside down?

A: Ink molecules are extremely asymmetrical, with one end being very much heavier than the other. When one writes with a pen in the normal position, the heavy end of the ink molecule which is light in color, is held against the paper by gravity, leaving the light end, which is dark in color, exposed to our view. When writing upside down, the light (dark) end of the molecule is attached to the paper, so that we see only the heavy (light) end. The solution to this problem, if you must write upside down, is to use black paper. Or a pencil.

Ms. BD of Vancouver, BC, asks:

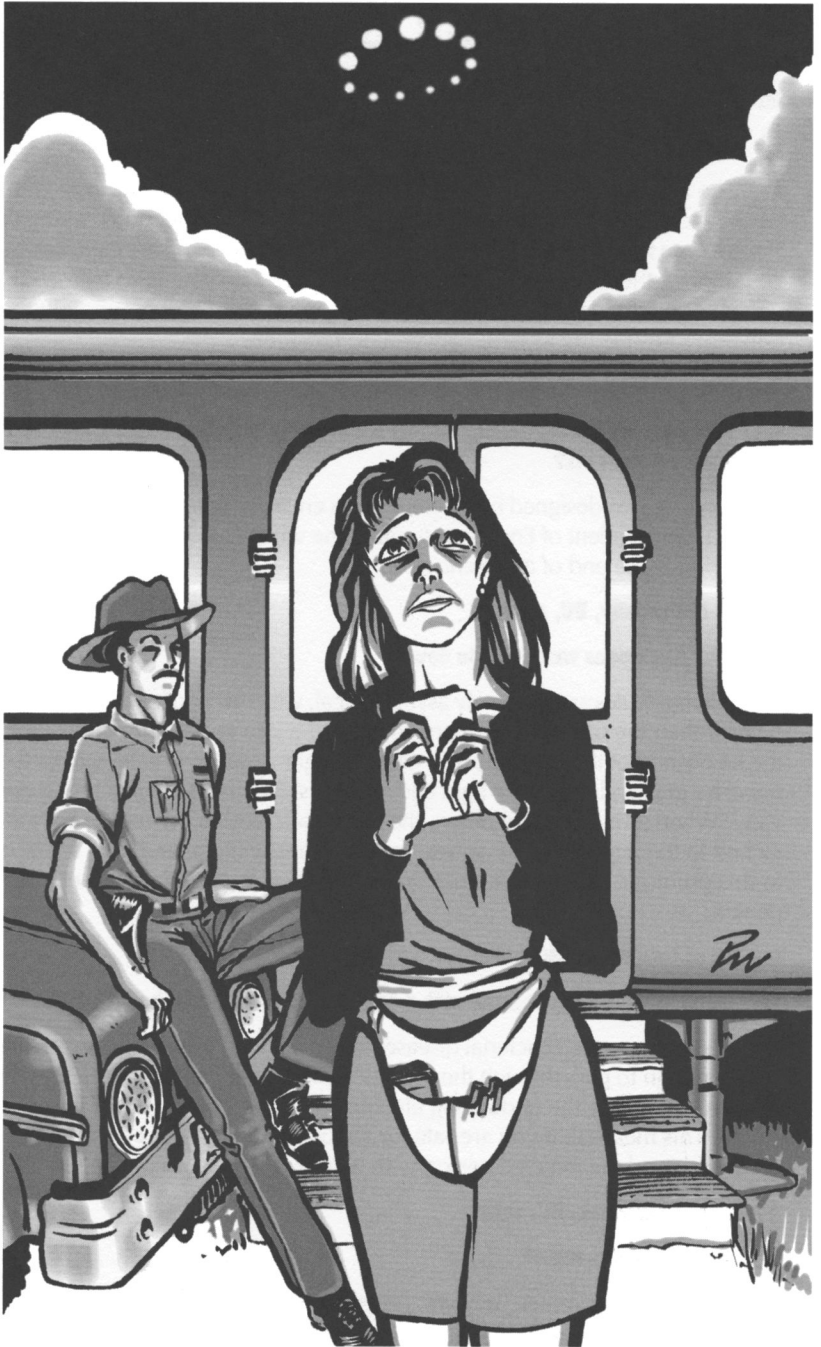
Q: Can I become ill by talking with a sick person on the telephone?

A: You cannot catch bacterial diseases in this manner. Viruses, however, are small enough to pass through the interstices in the telephone wire. They will be driven along by the undulating electric current at about half the speed of sound. This means that you are safe for about ten seconds for every mile between you and the infected person with whom you are speaking.

Mr. DL of Chilliwack, BC, asks:

Q: Why are newts mute?

A: Newts are not mute. They are, however, very shy, and do not speak in the presence of any other living creature, except Mr. Science. ♣



The Abducted

Catherine MacLeod

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

CY BARNUM LOOKED UP AS DARLENE'S HAND SWEEPED PAST HIS FACE.
"Earth to Cy, come in please."

"Funny. "

"You've been staring into your coffee for the past ten minutes. Something wrong with it?"

"It's fine," he lied. "She back there?"

"Her van's there. You going over?"

"Thought I would."

"She gives me chills, Cy."

"Gonna fire her?"

"I'd never get another waitress to work for what I pay her."

"Which is?"

"Nothing."

"For God's sake, Darlene—"

"It was her idea. She said if I'd waive the rent on the trailer, she'd work for tips."

"Then she must be broke by now."

"Not in three days she isn't. She doesn't talk much, but the truckers seem to like her."

"So what's wrong with her?"

Darlene thought hard. It wasn't pretty. "She stops at a wide place in the road, asks for a job, and trades her pay for the use of the trailer. If she doesn't need the money, then she's filling time, like she's waiting for something to happen. Like she knows something the rest of us don't."

"More than likely she does." He picked up his hat. "Maybe I'll ask her."

"Stick around, have another coffee. She'll be here in an hour."

"No, I guess I'd rather keep this private."

Darlene shrugged. "Can't blame me for trying, Cy."

"Yes, I can," he said mildly, and left. Jenny Lester couldn't cough without Darlene telling the neighbors. He didn't have to look back to know she was watching from the diner. She'd know to the minute how long he stayed.

Jenny's screen door was locked. The shower was running. He leaned against her red van and lit a cigarette. Her kitchen radio was playing Eric Clapton, which was fine by Cy. July sunshine fell warm through the alders lining the dirt road. He figured Darlene would have them cleared soon, before they cut off her view.

The shower stopped. He glanced in the van. Freshly-vacuumed, looked like; probably she slept in there sometimes. Roll of cherry Life-savers on the passenger seat, Travis McGee novel on the dashboard.

"Find anything interesting?"

He said, "I like your taste in books." He ground his cigarette underfoot as Jenny opened the door.

"Twice in two days you've been here, Sheriff. Should I be flattered, or are you rechecking my alibi?"

"We got Mona Rhue's killer this morning. Her boyfriend. Argument got out of hand."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

He followed her into the kitchen. He put her at about five foot nine; an

oversized terry robe made her look smaller. Her hair hung in wet tangles down her back. She trailed damp footprints on the tile. "There's fresh coffee, Sheriff." She set a mug and an ashtray on the table. "I'll be back in a minute."

Cy turned down the radio, poured coffee he didn't want, and sipped politely. It was better than Darlene's. He looked around the trailer she rented out by the week. Bits of Jenny Lester were scattered freely. Wire-rimmed glasses on the sideboard. Tube of almond-scented hand cream. Black-eyed susans in a glass on the table, next to Jenny's silver hair clip. He flipped a postcard from the diner; on the back she'd written *Dave Harris*—no message. He lit another cigarette.

"Could I have one of those, please?" She came back in jeans and a grey shirt faded to the color of her eyes. She brought her coffee to the table.

"I didn't think you killed Mona," he said.

"That's nice to know."

"But you show up, first stranger through Emery in a month, and right away we have a murder. I'd be a fool not to wonder. Finding Mona behind your trailer was just bad luck for you."

"Not so good for Mona, either."

"No. But Darlene vouched for your whereabouts."

"I said I was here."

"So did she. Darlene makes a point of knowing where everyone is."

Jenny smiled. It didn't look like something she did often. "I've noticed. What more can I tell you?"

"Well, Ms. Lester, that depends. I checked you out, and they tell quite a story about you up in Toronto." Her expression faded to one of weary patience. It fit better than the smile. "They said you were a high school teacher."

"Yes."

"And one day you just chucked it, and now you travel around doing odd jobs for gas money."

"Basically."

"Seems there was talk of not letting you cross the U.S. border."

"That's only if you're dangerous. I'm just crazy."

He looked at her for a long moment. "You really think a UFO took your son?"

"Yes."

"You wanna tell me about it?"

"No."

"Tell me anyway."

He watched her size him up, gauging the trouble he could cause her. He thought it considerable. The same conclusion showed on her face.

"What do you want to know?"

"All of it."

She lit her cigarette and dragged hard. "Joshua was two when he disappeared. The night he vanished the cops trashed my house.

"Have you ever met the crazies, Sheriff? We're the ones who claim aliens graft hardware onto our bodies, drill holes in our skulls ... take our children... We see strange lights where no one can explain them away. I saw them five years ago, the night my son was taken.

"I was almost home when a circle of blue lights appeared over the

street. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen, and ten minutes later when I saw police cars in my yard, I forgot it completely."

Cy marveled at the stock of memory needed for a single act of mourning: there was grief plain on Jenny's face as she dredged up the details—coming home from the meeting, driving too fast, thinking the babysitter would be angry at being kept late on a school night.

"Laura swore no one else had been in the house, and the neighbors backed her up. Very reliable witnesses—imagine a houseful of Darlenes. They said Laura left the house once that night. She ordered a pizza and went out to pay the delivery boy. The police questioned them separately. They both said strange blue lights appeared suddenly, whirling over the house. They watched for a few seconds, then the lights disappeared. Naturally, the police suspected Laura, but even if I hadn't seen the lights myself, I would've believed her. If her story was a lie, it could've been a better one. If she'd taken Joshua, would she have called the cops?

"She looked in on Josh a few minutes later. However long it takes to eat a slice of pizza. She didn't worry that his crib was empty. Sometimes he climbed out and fell asleep somewhere else. Usually in my bed. Once in the linen closet. But when she couldn't find him after five minutes, she panicked and called the police.

"They arrived just ahead of me. Laura babbled, I cried, and they tore the house down around me. They

looked in the air vents and the furnace duct. They pulled out sections of the wall. I sat in the wreckage and listened to them curse. Finally one of them joked, 'Maybe he was abducted by aliens.' I don't think he meant for me to hear it."

Jenny took another cigarette without asking. Her hand shook just enough to make lighting it hard. Cy held her wrist to steady it. Her skin was cool and smooth. He liked her eyes looking at him across the table. He liked the shape of her mouth. He didn't think much of the story coming out of it, but thought the border guards were probably right—she didn't seem dangerous.

He said, "And?"

"And ... the comment didn't even register until the next day. And when it did, I *knew*. Unidentified lights appeared over my house, and my son vanished in a heartbeat. Gone without a trace. What else could I think? But I didn't ... I *couldn't* say anything. You don't believe such things. You don't ask the cops to track UFOs, especially when no one else admits seeing anything strange that night. You think about keeping your job, because parents don't want a crackpot teaching their kids. You think you can feel your mind slipping, and you keep your mouth shut, because what you have to say, no one wants to hear.

"You become a crazy."

Cy said, "What about your husband?"

"Ex-husband. I called to tell him his son was missing. He hung up on me. I suppose he blames me. Why not? I finished the school year by

pretending Shakespeare and algebra still mattered a damn. I called in sick on days when I couldn't stop crying. My students avoided me like a jinx outside the classroom; I think my knack for losing children scared them. Scared me, too. But what scared me more was how I changed in those few months. I felt removed from my life and the people in it. What did my job matter compared to the loss of my son? My life had narrowed to the place where nothing else seemed real.

"You know, I marvel that the crazies recognize their own so well. One sat across from me in Tim Hortons one morning and said soldiers from the planet Tyla were coming for him. I thought, *He's insane*. But I was in no position to judge. I listened. And I learned the cause of my detachment—I couldn't deal with the world because it wasn't my world anymore.

"Crazies believe in aliens because that's what we are.

"So ... I dropped out of my life. I didn't mind leaving the school. I don't miss having the conversation stop every time I walk into a room. My only concern about selling the house was that Joshua might come back and not be able to find me, but ... I couldn't live there anymore.

"I stay in touch with the police there. His file is still open. No one's dug up little bones while they were planting lilacs. And no one's chasing UFOs but me. I check on every sighting I hear about—and they're infinite. I know some of them are lying, but I can't take any chances. One of them might've seen Joshua's lights.

"That's what I'm doing here."

"You're waiting for Dave Harris."

"You've been snooping, Sheriff."

"Yeah, I have. But, too, Dave's the only one around here ever claimed he saw a UFO. He's visiting his brother in Boston, should be home Friday."

"Good."

"So you'll be leaving Saturday?"

"Probably."

"That's quite a story." She nodded. "You tell it well."

"I've told it often."

Jenny ran a slim hand through her hair. It was drying straight in the breeze through the window, turning the color of butterscotch. She reached past him for the hair clip, and he noticed grey in it. Not as much as in his own, but it still set her at forty-odd.

He said, "Have you ever heard of an organization called Support for Families of Abductees?"

She paused in mid-motion, startled. Then she finished twisting her hair into a bun and pressed the clip into place. "SuFA. I registered with them a year ago. You do surprise me, Sheriff."

"Good. I don't get a chance to surprise anyone too often. What've they done so far?"

She snorted softly. "They've opened a file on Joshua. The secretary called him *the abducted*, as if he'd never had a name. She wanted photos, fingerprints, height and weight charts—she called it tombstone data." He winced. "They haven't been in touch."

He said, "Any idea why a UFO would take your son?"

"No. I'd like to ask. I wish I could tell Josh I'm sorry." She stubbed her cigarette and shoved the ashtray away. "When they took him, he must've wondered where I was."

Penance, Cy thought. Memory this exact could only be an act of penance.

She got up and stretched slowly. "I have to be at the diner in a few minutes."

"I'll walk you up."

"Thanks. And Sheriff? Thanks for not calling me crazy."

"Ms. Lester, I just jailed a guy who killed his girlfriend for burning dinner. Don't tell me about crazy."

"Jenny. Call me Jenny."

"Then you call me Cy."

"Is that short for Cyril or Cyrus?"

"Take your pick—I don't like either." He watched the clouds as she locked the trailer door. He said, "Rain tonight. I guess that'll be a relief for you."

"I don't mind the heat."

"I meant not being able to see the stars."

"Oh." She walked a few steps in thoughtful silence. "You don't believe it, do you?"

"No."

"You think I'm mad?"

"Maybe a little. But I guess I can see how you got that way."

She smiled faintly. "Fair enough."

He swiped a fat daisy from the roadside and gave it to her. "Darlene's the one who might believe it. She watches all those late shows about invading Martians."

"I know. She said Emery was like the small town in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*."

He shook his head over that one. "Haven't seen too many bodies I'd wanna snatch around here." He paused outside the diner. "I think I'll scam before Darlene comes out."

She looked over his shoulder. "You've got about five seconds."

"Right. See you around."

Cy eased his old half-ton out of the parking lot, glancing in the diner as he went. Jenny was putting her daisy in water. Darlene was yammering in her face, no doubt demanding to know what they'd been talking about. It'd been a long time since anyone had told Darlene to go pound sand; he figured Jenny might just make this a red-letter day.

Good woman. Sweet-tempered. He wondered if she realized she spoke of her son in the past tense.

He saw a wishful logic to her thinking. If humans had taken him, Joshua was surely dead. If he'd been abducted there was a chance. Cy thought it was bunk, but if she had to believe that to hold it together he didn't have a problem with it.

He wondered if her sleep was haunted by dreams of mysterious lights. He wondered if one day she'd surrender to the grief and haul her van into the oncoming traffic. He thought about the abducted, and hard shells grown over softness.

He thought it might be best if he didn't go see her again

He thought about fair Jenny, a frayed magi following the star in the sky.

He hoped she found the meaning of the light. ♣

"Future Crime"

-- 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."

The deadline is August 31, 1999, for publication in the Spring 2000 issue of ON SPEC.

(Please, no "hard-boiled private dick with a ray gun and a fedora" stories. We've read enough P.I. stories to open up our own agency, thanks.)

For general submission guidelines, send SASE to:

On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton AB Canada T6E 5G6.

The Guns of Joy

John Aegard

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

THE REGS SAY THAT CAROLA CAN DO NOTHING FOR WILLIAM Bergen. It's laid out clearly in her field manual: a Talent's resources are too precious to be squandered on the hopeless. And Bergen's as hopeless as they come—infection has laced his guts so badly that the surgeons didn't even bother to prescribe an antibiotic. He just gets a sedative, and not a very good one, either. The heavy stuff's in short supply.

That's not acceptable to Carola. She sees a hundred Bill Bergens come through here weekly. Treating them, in defiance of the book, used to be something special for her, something she took pride in. Now, it's just habit.

She settles her hands on his greasy brow. Then she centers; grounds herself at four years old, before she knew that there were alien planets, much less wars to be fought on them. She channels the grace of a safe, secure toddler, and drizzles it into William Bergen's head.

A wave of nausea knots up her stomach; contact with the nearly-gone is never easy. Bergen relaxes and sighs, and his bio-monitor changes to a less angry red. But he keeps on dying. This is the best she can do for him, to let him go a little more gently.

She stands up slowly to accommodate her queasy stomach, and allows herself a glance down the ward. It's full of men like Bill Bergen, men for whom she can be the only comfort. One of these days she's not going to be able to face this. One of these days she's going to butt up against the curtain this war is drawing around her heart. She's not going to believe that the idyllic bliss of her inner four year old could have ever existed. And then they'll retire her, put her in a rest home somewhere with all the other burnouts, because she can't do her job if she doesn't believe.



Next up is PECK, SCOTT, PILOT OFFICER. His legs stick out from his cot almost to the mid-calf. Supply bungled up and sent them several cots rated for Proxima heavy-worlders; too short, and with the spring weight to float a howitzer.

Carola's been briefed on Peck. He was shot down last night, just after dropping a retarded tactical on a rebel-held suburb. Then, while he was drifting away on his parafoil, he got curious, he got stupid, he wanted a story to tell. So he looked at the blast, and his visor didn't polarize like it was supposed to. The foil brought him home none the worse for wear, except for the tiny blisters that the five-kiloton warhead raised on his retinas. He's an extremely poor candidate for implants, so he'll probably never see again. The doctors think he's suicidal.

Peck doesn't want to cooperate with Carola. She begs, cajoles, tries every trick she knows, but he's fixated on something powerful, an image she can't push through—the leering skulls of his victims, backlit by a fusion sunrise—

“Nurse?”

The voice, an unfamiliar one, wrenches Carola out of her trance. Peck is left dangling. She turns towards the newcomer and sees that he's a colonel. With Planetary HQ, if she's got the regalia right.

The watch surgeon hurries up behind them. “I'm sorry, Carola, I told them you were with a patient—”

“This can't wait.” The colonel hands Carola an data card. “You've been transferred to General Shayters' staff. Effective immediately.”

Is this some kind of promotion?

she wonders.

“We don't have much time,” the colonel says. “Would you come with me, please?”

→ ←

THERE'S A SKYCAR WAITING. IT TAKES them back almost thirty kilometers, to the center of Jordhaven City. The colonel sits next from her and says nothing on the way. Carola senses he's nervous, though she can't tell why.

They land in a huge parking lot outside HQ, on top of the dimpled scorch marks left by one of the first Corps dropships. The colonel helps her disembark, then escorts her firmly through the command post, hand on her elbow, almost dragging her. This brazen familiarity discomfits Carola. She is accustomed to making and breaking contact at will.

Down some stairs he tows her, through a checkpoint, down more stairs, past huge curtains of anti-fragment netting, through a room full of luggable equipment and urgent people, and then into a tiny office. A large, dark man with baggy eyes and salt-and-pepper hair—the general, from the circle of stars on his beret—stands to greet her.

“Thank you for coming, nurse,” he says with a nod. “May I call you Carola?”

She nods faintly.

He gestures at a chair, and she sits. “Can I get you anything?”

“Water.”

The colonel fills a paper cup and passes it to her. It's fresh and cold. They've got refrigeration here.

“We need your help, Carola,” the general says, when she's finished drinking.

"With what?"

He hesitates. It's clear to Carola that he's not experienced at dealing with Talents. If he was, he wouldn't consider anything less than absolute candor.

"Just your job," he says, finally. "Nothing more."

"Who is the patient?"

The colonel passes Carola a datapad. On its display are mug shots; front and side views of a gaunt, angular face.

"The locals called him Ring. Sound familiar?"

She shakes her head. Maybe she's heard the name. Her memory's not what it used to be.

"Ring was the big chief around here during the occupation," the colonel says. "An administrator for the rebels. Ran the utilities, the police, the docks, everything. Even the youth groups. We hear that he was popular with the kids."

"Yeah, a real saint, this one," continues the general. "He had dissenters pulled from their houses at midnight; he shot some of them, sent others to the docks, where his foremen worked them to death. Government workers got an automatic death sentence. He made an show of them every Saturday in the square. It wasn't enough for him to just hang them. He'd have them jacked up and down, every minute or so, to draw it out."

The general reaches down and thumbs the datapad, which jumps to video footage of the atrocities. Carola looks at it just long enough to see the line of thrashing feet.

"We've heard an account," he continues, "of a man whose daugh-

ter had been kidnapped by Ring. When he got her back, she was pregnant. He shot her, he shot his own daughter, through the stomach. It was the only piece of Ring he could get at. Whatever madness Ring has, it's contagious."

They enumerate more atrocities for her, but Carola doesn't pay attention. Instead, she looks down at the datapad, pages back through the records. Ring's a tenth-generation colonist, a native. He grew up in the shanties and street gangs around Jordhaven, and he's thirty-five local years old. Twenty-eight in Earth years; just a year older than she is.

The general's voice rises, pulling Carola's attention away from the datapad. "Last night, his people tried to sneak him through a checkpoint. We got him, but there's a problem. He anticipated us. He had a psigun on him, and before the MPs could stun him, he pulled the trigger on himself. Now he's a vegetable." Carola senses a sudden wave of anticipation from the general, like a psychic deep breath. "Command doesn't know we've got him. We've heard they're considering a general amnesty. I won't take the chance that Ring escapes punishment. That is unacceptable to me." He radiates relief. Carola can tell that he's rehearsed this declaration extensively.

"You want me to wake him up," she says.

He nods. "Yes. Can it be done?"

"I don't know."

"Will you try?"

She doesn't say anything.

"You'll be protected fully," the general adds. "I've prepared documents to that effect, and filed them in

timed storage aboard the *Dauntless*. You can review them right now, if you like."

She thinks about it, coming up with only a single, weary observation: she repairs killers every day. Ring is nothing new.

→ ←

"THERE'S NO PHYSICAL DAMAGE," THE colonel says as he leads Carola through the doorway of Jordhaven's detention center. "He's completely catatonic, though. Don't know if there's anything left for you to work with—"

"I've seen psigun cases before."

"Of course," he says, and stays silent until they're in the elevator. At close quarters, Carola senses he's nervous again, just like he was in the skycar.

"What do you think of General Shayters?" he asks as the elevator creaks into its descent.

Carola wonders what the right answer is.

"Do you think he's okay?"

"I don't know."

"This isn't usual for him, to step outside the lines like this." He sighs and looks up at the flashing numbers. "We've been here a long time."

The elevator doors open. The colonel leads Carola into the maximum-security wing. At the last checkpoint, four armored MPs fall in around them.

When she finally sees Ring through the pitted, scratchy plastic of his cell window, she pities him. Kevlar harnesses crisscross his body tightly; a bag full of glucose drips life into his veins; tubes and hoses suck from his bladder and bowels. His eyes are just barely open, their pupils

askew.

The guards stop. They look uncertain.

"I need to touch him," Carola says.

The cell door swings open, and the guards move aside. One of them draws his pistol, and clicks the safety off. Carola doesn't let that distract her. Instead, she strokes Ring's stubbly scalp with the pads of her fingers; sending little random lightning bolts into his head, looking for purchase, for connection.

Nothing.

She deepens the link and gets more specific. Pralines. The smell of fresh bread. A caress from a blood-red alien sun. The pleasant flush from a light anesthetic. Carola pushes this at Ring as hard as she can, but she might as well be shouting into the void between Proxima and Sol for the good it's doing.

"Are you okay?" It's the colonel. At least he knows enough not to touch her.

Carola nods, struggling to keep her breathing even. One tactic remains. Some of her patients respond when she pushes aggression on them. It's a hard thing for her to do; she doesn't like dredging up medicine from the reptilian part of her soul. Part of her is tempted to not even try, to march straight back up to the general and tell him sorry, he'll just have to pull the trigger on Ring the way he is.

But she sees the patient, sees Ring's drooling walleyed head, and her nurse programming kicks in. She sets her hands on his skull again, this time with her palms firm against his temples.

—*he's got such a small head, she thinks—*

Then she pours it on. Anger, fury, indignation, just a hint of fear, leaking in from the here and now. When she goes hostile, she has to sacrifice a little control.

From the dark jungle at the back of Ring's mind, a ricochet jumps back at her—

A canal of flames dividing a city, with Ring's people on one side, everyone else on another. Bulldozers and men with shock-prods sweep Ring's enemies into the canal, where they make a sweet burning smell. Ring's people hoot and applaud, and Ring is right there among them, getting off like Lucifer himself.

By the time Carola fights down her repulsion enough to latch onto Ring's vision, it's gone, leaving only a lingering whiff of sweetness and light. Ring wants his holocaust like normal people want ice cream and sex.

That thought ejects Carola from her trance, and makes her vomit all over Ring's pale orange prison coverall. The guards jump forward, but the colonel waves them off, and offers his hand. Carola lets him guide her onto a stool, and puts her head between her knees.

"I can't do this," she says, when she straightens, and Ring's tiny head comes back into focus. She can still smell his pyre, and feel the ashes underneath her tongue.

→ ←

"WHAT CAN WE DO?" THE GENERAL asks an hour later.

"Time. I need some downtime," she says, and it comes out sounding too much like a whine. "I've been at the front for—"

He shakes his head. "We don't have time." He's going to suggest drugs, Carola knows. The Corps has cabinets full of cocktails that will turn Talents into blazing psionic weapons. And ones that'll bring them back again. Usually.

"It's the only thing that'll help," she says, quickly.

"What about dr—"

"No."

The general takes off his sunglasses, folds them up, puts them back on again.

"I can't keep a lid on Ring forever."

"I know."

"How long do you need?"

"Two weeks?"

"Too much." He fidgets with his glasses again. "I can give you one."

That's the best she's going to do, so she takes it. The general outlines one condition: she's to keep a soldier with her at all times. Ring's roots run deep here in Jordhaven. His sympathizers might not want Carola to drag their hero from his abyss.

She accepts her bodyguard quietly, and tries to make plans.

→ ←

THE NEXT MORNING, CAROLA GOES TO the city's biggest orphanage.

The first child she sees is terrified. He jumps inside from his window perch, and shouts something in the local pidgin. Very suddenly, the compound is silent and empty.

"Can you wait outside?" she asks her guard, who's trailing.

He shakes his head, and follows her to the middle of the compound.

"Children? I've got candy for you!" She takes some sweets out of her bag, and holds them high.

Nobody stirs.

An old woman calls out to her, from the shadows of a big, old warehouse. "Who are you?"

"It's okay!" Carola turns herself around slowly, so that everyone will see how the sun glints off the foil wrappers. "I just want to give the children some candy."

One of the older ones, a girl just hitting adolescence, crawls out from a cardboard shanty. Carola uses her best bedside voice. "Hi, sweetie."

The girl sneaks a little closer, and brushes her hair out of her eyes. For an instant, when Carola sees the girl's face, she thinks of Ring. A young Ring, just learning to count out the currency of pain—

The old woman's voice booms again, and the girl freezes.

"I'm—I'm not going to hurt you. Don't you want something nice?" Carola glances at her bodyguard; his mirrored gaze is trained dead on the teenager, and his hand is poised a heartbeat away from his pistol.

The girl beckons, but when Carola takes a step forward, she quickly backs away.

"Okay, okay," Carola mutters, and granny-tosses the morsel at the girl. She catches it and sprints back into her shanty.

Other children appear. She rewards them all, but none of them seem willing to bond further, like she needs.

The older woman extricates herself from her warehouse perch, and approaches. Several of her younger charges tail her, comet-like.

"Why are you here?" she asks, with a thick accent.

"To—to see the children."

The woman points at her bodyguard.

"You need guns to see children?"

Carola reaches out, as if to brush some lint off the woman's lapel, and pushes reassurance at her. This is a tough technique, one that she's never been very good at—

I'm not going to hurt anyone.

"You bring candy, is very kind," the orphan-mistress says, smiling broadly. "Come, children, make sure everyone gets some."

The orphans mob Carola. After the bag is empty, Carola gets a chance to cuddle with one, an untidy little boy who's sucking on a cinnamon-stick.

Forgive me, little one, for using you so, but you'll thank me, you'll thank me when Ring is dead—

Carola rummages around the boy's head, hoping to find a piece of happiness and innocence that will spark a reconnection with her own inner four year old. But when she pushes beyond the trail that the candy is blazing through the tyke's mind, she runs up against something; something ugly, something that looks like a hundred men with guns and speaks with the buzzing pulse of a laser cannon and smells like burnt plastic and interrupted sleep.

It's happened to him already!

Carola extricates herself from the toddler's grasp, frantically seeks out another. And another. And another. They're all the same. Ring's won this round. It'll take more than a bag of candy to kindle some honest bliss here.

She leaves, in tears. Her escort offers her a sterile wipe.

FOR A WHILE, CAROLA WANDERS. FIRST down by the lakeshore, where she watches some Corps engineers muscle a scrubber grid into position—

—*Ring poisoned the water, that's what the briefing said, don't rely on anything that hasn't got a seal on it—*

She watches until it gets dark, then she checks into the last hotel in town with hot running water. The owner, a staunch loyalist, refuses payment when he sees her Corps credentials. Her bodyguard is decent enough to grant her privacy in the huge bathroom, so she takes advantage and settles into a grand jet-bath.

—*distractions, these are just distraction, this isn't going to help you get him. It's got to come from within.*

Carola thinks back to her training. Her instructors tasked her harshly, but they loved her, and when she came out of the academy, she knew she could be loved. That simple fact was at the foundation of the island of grace every Talent was supposed to build.

—*but it's so far away now.*

She slides in over her head, she wiggles her toes into the jets, she orders champagne from the cellar, then teases her guard because he can't indulge.

—*you're just running scared, because your little break-in at the orphanage didn't work. Stealing joy from little children? Ring would approve—*

In the end, she shuts off all the lights and turns the jets down to low, and just stares up at the ceiling.

→ ←

TWO DAYS LATER, CAROLA AND HER escorts shuttle up to the *Dauntless*. The

Corps has a sensory-deprivation studio on board. There's usually a six-week wait for time in it, but a word from the colonel is enough to boost her past the queue.

A psychology bot meets her in the waiting room. It asks her all the standard questions: how much experience does she have in sensory-depriv, how much in freefall, does she vomit, does she panic? Then it gets her suited up in a synth-rubber SD suit, and tows her out into the *Dauntless'* gravity-free core.

There she hangs, eyepieces dark, nothing in her nose but cool, neutral air, ears deadened by the SD-suit's interference generators. That's the most magical thing of all for Carola, that she can't hear anything, not even her heartbeat. She hasn't known quiet for a long time. Life at the aid station was constantly noisy; distant artillery, radio chatter, moaning casualties.

She makes herself forget about those noises, lets their memories slide away into the dark. As each little unpleasantness fades, she pushes herself further back, towards innocent times when it was just her and Daddy and Mommy in the big house on the cliff with frilly curtains and big soft pillows—

—*what does that mean when I've held bowels together with my bare hands, so that the machine could get the staples through cleanly?*

The academy, her instructors, her colleagues, they loved her, they really did—

—*but if I'd gone through before they started the new program, they just would've drugged me up to spec and put me on the front lines.*

She's doing good here, she's putting men back together—

—*and all because of him. People like him put me here; I wouldn't have to do this if it weren't for him. I should ask the general to let me do it.*

She pictures Ring convulsing and dying at her hand; the idea is so hot that it wrenches her out of her centered state. Now she's spinning slightly.

"Music on, please," she says.

The opening beats of Calvin's *Anthem*—a piece she requested from the ship's archive—materialize around her, as loud and perfect as if she were perched within the drumhead. Carola lets herself descend into the music; her pulse rises and falls with the drums, her teeth dance to the rumbling double bass, her heart imagines itself as the pickup of the first electric violin—

—*and Ring is there too, sneering as he marches to Calvin's tight four-time. Funny, she hadn't thought Ring the parading type—*

Damn.

"Louder."

Anthem booms into Carola's skull, volume set just on the edge of comfort. It makes her want to dance. She twists, bops, jerks, even screams along with Calvin. The music speeds, takes a harder, faster sheen, and suddenly she's kicking and gouging and spitting and imagining Ring hanging from a rafter.

Her puke-hose silently sucks away the spit.

"Turn it off."

Anthem snaps off. It's no good. She's panting, sucking all the air that the hose will give her, and it's no

good. She might as well have flayed Ring's skin off and stepped into it rather than the SD suit, for all the distance she's managed to put between them.

The synth-rubber absorbs the tears from her eyes before they can run down her cheeks. She's not sure if she'll ever be able to listen to Calvin again.

✧ ✧

SHE TRIES TO REST THAT NIGHT AND ONLY partially succeeds, drifting in and out of a feathery, unsatisfying sleep until her bodyguard wakes her in the early hours of the morning. The colonel is calling, he tells her.

"All right," she says, groggily.

The colonel's face, painfully bright and many times larger than life, appears on the wall. "You're excused," he says to the guard, who leaves. Then he nods at her. "How are you, nurse?"

She doesn't answer.

He blinks away from the camera. "I'll come straight to the point, then. I'd like this conversation kept between us."

"What about the general?" she asks, sleepily.

"This is for his benefit." The colonel licks his lips. On the wall-screen, his tongue is enormous. "I would like you to tell him that you can't do anything for Ring."

The mention of Ring pulls her fully awake.

"Don't misunderstand me," the colonel continues. "I want to see justice done as much as he does. But we're going to hit the edge of deniability very soon. The people at home are starting to ask questions."

For a second, Carola is relieved. She

can walk away, from Ring, from the general, from this scheming colonel—

“General Shayters is the best field commander in the Corps. If he should be removed, then I promise you that your aid stations will be a lot more crowded.”

—but of course, as soon as this is over, she’ll be dumped back into the aid station. She wonders how she can do her job with the specter of Ring hanging over her.

“I’m sorry to pressure you, but I need an answer.”

“I’ll have to—I—I’m not a very good liar, Colonel.”

“So you think Ring is bigger than the whole campaign?”

Why are you dumping this on me? she wants to ask. *It’s not enough that I have to deal with Ring’s shit but now I have to deal with yours too?*

“You want this war to go on forever? Do you want to be working that aid station for the rest of your life?”

“Please,” she says.

The colonel ignores her. “Because that’s what’s going to happen, if they force the general out.”

She shakes her head. “Colonel, please, no, don’t ask me this—”

He frowns, and his voice goes flat. “Very well. He glances downward. “I see you’ve put in for a Morale Team overnighter. The general has asked me to expedite your request. I don’t anticipate any scheduling problems.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s all, unless you have anything more.”

She shakes her head. The colonel cuts the channel, and the room is suddenly dark.

Carola lies awake in her bed for the next few hours, the colonel’s voice echoing in her memory.

You want this war to go on forever?

No, she thinks. *Of course not.*

→ ←

THE MORALE TEAM SEES HER THREE days later, on the last night of her leave. Two men and a woman, all of them low-grade Talents, show up in her quarters at the ring of nineteen hundred. For most of the next twelve hours, it’s like they’re sharing a single skin between the four of them; they know what she wants before she can articulate it; they know when to seize and when to abdicate control; when to caress and when to excite; when to let her dream, and when to pull her fully awake.

Carola stays swept up in their magic until just before the ultimate moment, when she catches herself chanting *can’t take this, Ring, it’s mine, it’s mine*, to the time of her panting.

Everything that they’ve created, the intimacy and adventure, everything except for the cheap sensation itself, turns to ash.

The team tries to compensate, tries to pull her away from her fixation, but they can’t. It’s a rare failure, but they’re too well-adjusted to let it get to them. They leave at oh-seven hundred, to catch the dirtside shuttle, they say.

Carola doesn’t cry this time. She just sits in her quarters, contemplating the emptiness that’s pushed all of her hurt and anger and rage aside. With all those feelings gone, she can afford to give way to simple pragmatism, and damn the consequences.

→ ←

"I NEED TO SPEAK TO THE COLONEL," Carola says to his assistant that morning.

"One moment, please."

The screen flickers and the general's head appears.

"Yes, Carola?" he says.

"General—I was expecting—"

"The colonel has resigned from his position," he says, shortly. "You'll be returning to Jordhaven today?"

She nods.

"Good."

"But I—I need one more thing."

He struggles to keep a sour look off his face. "My resources are not infinite, Carola."

"I need some Abelmytine."

He looks puzzled for a second, then nods, slowly. "All right. I'll notify *Dauntless*."

They exchange a few more words. He confirms her itinerary; she confirms the dirtside arrangements. He excuses himself; with his staff chief gone, he's very busy.

Carola goes to her bed, which still smells faintly of the Morale Teamers, and waits.

→ ←

THE PHARMA-BOT ARRIVES TWENTY minutes later, and dispenses two skintabs—a double dose—of Abelmytine.

She stares at them for a while; innocuous pink tabs vaccu-wrapped in cellophane, with warnings printed diagonally across them in little white block capitals. Her final gambit.

—no, not a gambit, just a tactic, just a force multiplier—

She presses them to the inside of her wrists, and waits as they light a fire in her head.

The men come, not too long after,

to escort her to her shuttle.

And, oh boy, is she ready.

→ ←

"LEAVE US ALONE, PLEASE," SHE SAYS when she gets to Ring's cell.

They won't, of course. But it doesn't matter to Carola. Her Abelmytine-fired ego is pinballing around her skull, looking for places to inflict itself, things to influence—*Ring*.

The guards part for her. She walks up to Ring, puts her palms to his temples, and she *hammers* him.

Teddy bears. Moonlight through the window. Dreams of angels. Mommy's breast. Watching the parade from Daddy's shoulders. Cherry pipe tobacco. First kisses, first gropes.

Ring's mind sparks over, begins to stir. Carola hits him harder.

Strawberries. Hang-gliding. Laughter at a smoky comedy club. Mud spas. Sea air. Silk against skin. Fresh-smelling twin nieces.

His eyes open wide, but he's not seeing a shitty Jordhaven cell, he's seeing what she wants him to see, feeling what she wants him to feel.

Roller skates on the boardwalk. Sunday morning sleepins. The cathedral choir on Christmas Eve. A koala's cooing trill. Baby sheep. Baby ducks. Baby turtles.

Dislodged by her barrage, warm memories begin to cascade through Ring. Carola catches one, examines it; it's a place he once knew, a place where no one could find him, the operating tower of an decommissioned atmosphere-processing station. She feeds that memory back to him, amplified and layered with feelings of safety, security, tranquillity. He responds magnificently. All of his

faculties come fully awake, and he's ravenous for more of Carola's good feelings. She complies with his wishes, feeds him one more hammerblow of sensation—

—the moment that he stole from her in orbit, the perfect sensation not only of pleasure but of intimacy and perhaps even love, between her and the three Morale Teamers. Ring gets every earth-shattering millisecond of Carola's climax, played through in slow-motion, freeze-frame, and reverse. The Abelmytine is that good.

His eyes come fully open, but Carola senses that he's still uncertain about where he is. "Thank you," he whispers, through his cracked lips. "Oh, God, thank you, yeah, thank you." If not for the restraints, he would have caressed her.

Thank you?

She claws her nails into Ring's scalp, shows him his little-boy fortress smashed and broken. She turns the sun into a giant flaming eye; shows him lying naked in a desert of jagged glass with that eye the sun above him, and there's no clouds so it never blinks. *This is you, Ring.* She grabs a double handful of his mind and squeezes. *You're going to die. You're going to die. You're—*

"Carola!" It's the general. She didn't know he was here. "That's enough!" He pulls her off Ring, mindless of the danger of touching her when she's juiced on Abelmytine.

Ring's eyes dart around the cell. He whimpers softly as the guards wheel in a dolly. They strap his stretcher onto it, put a black bag over his head, and take him away.

✧ ✧

CAROLA IS STILL TENDER FROM THE

Abelmytine when the execution commences at ten forty-five the next morning. She and the general watch it from his hovering skycar. In its close confines, she has no shelter from the anticipation that's boiling off him.

That feeling peaks as another car lands in the square beneath them. A squad of MPs wheel Ring from the car to the pole that's been erected for him. He can't struggle or even move; he's restrained too tightly. The MPs fasten him to the pole, then step away. The officer in charge radios the general for permission to proceed. The general gives it, and raises his binoculars.

Carola looks away.

The firing squad shoots. Carola feels it through the general, a surge mixed equally between thrill and disgust and celebration and regret.

"He's still alive," the radio says, a few seconds later.

She glances at the skycar's computer, which is showing Ring's lifesigns. Lots of brain activity; pulse one hundred sixty beats per minute, blood pressure dropping steadily but slowly. The nurse in Carola knows the wounds are fatal, but not immediately so. The firing squad has botched their first volley.

"Again, general?" asks the radio.

"Wait," he says, studying the read-out. Half a minute passes, counted out by the chronometer in the corner of the computer screen.

"General?"

The general takes a deep breath. "Proceed," he says.

They do, and another of the general's surges hits Carola. This one is powerful enough to carry a visual

image; Ring's right arm, freed from its restraint by a stray shot, swinging like a pendulum—

The computer drones a flatline. Quiet satisfaction floods the sky-car cabin.

Carola feels that satisfaction lapping around her, soothing her, washing away the ugly of the last few days. She stretches for it, grabs as much as she can, tries to stuff it down inside herself. Then the general's mind turns back to rational things, like explanations and damage control. His contentment evaporates, leaving Carola adrift. Automatically, she grabs at his arm.

The general looks up from the computer, which still shows all of Ring's zeroed lifesigns, and covers her hand with his own.

"Thank you," he says.

Then he pulls away from her and taps his pilot on the shoulder. The sky-car banks away and heads for HQ.

→ ←

WORD OF RING'S DEATH BLAZES through Jordhaven. Rebel sympathizers hit the streets just minutes after the final volley. The loyalists respond in kind, and by noon the Corps military police realize that they're over-matched. They pull back to the outskirts, and wait.

From spybots and surveillance satellites, they watch as Jordhaven implodes into something lower than war; with no thoughts to tactics, or to maneuvers, or to anything other than simple rage, the loyalist and rebel factions tear into each other with everything at hand; lasers, slugthrowers, sharpened sticks, teeth and nails.

The riots last for three days. When

the MPs finally go back in, they see devastation layered upon devastation, rubble smashed into smaller rubble, and a people angered beyond rage, but too tired and hungry to act on it.

For now.

General Shayters resigns his command as the disorder draws to a close, before the timelagged communi-ques from Earth can relieve him. In the administrative mess that accompanies his abdication, the orders transferring Carola back to her frontline unit are lost.

And, for a while, the war forgets about her.

→ ←

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any candy for you this time."

The orphan turns back to his puddle. Carola tries to crouch next to him, but the Abelmytine's still giving her the shakes, and she topples right into the middle of the mud.

The little boy's dimples crinkle up into a grin.

"Can I play too?" Carola asks.

The tyke thinks about it, then nods.

They romp in the mud for the rest of the afternoon, and Carola coaxes a half dozen more shy smiles out of her new playmate. Later, when the sun goes down, she tucks the boy and a couple others into their rude little beds, and sits with them while they fall asleep.

She can't bring herself to leave them, so she stays all night. And, when she senses she's needed, she connects with them, tries to nudge their dreams towards better places, and away from the canals of fire. 🍀



Jubilee

Steven Mills

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

I'M A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTER, FOR WHAT THAT'S WORTH. Not a lot these days. Not since the noises in the church basement.

"Mice," Mr. Berkowitz said, and bought some traps. He laid them in the corners, and near the back of the fridge in the mint-green kitchen. Mrs. Miller stepped on one, broke two arthritic toes in the snap, and, popping nitro pills like Pez candies, had to be rushed to the hospital.

Mr. Berkowitz caught no mice, but the noises persisted. The Board of Managers agreed to have a work bee on the Saturday next, the twenty-fifth, to tear the paneling from the basement walls so that they could expose those "wretched vermin" to the light of day. And smite them.

That Sunday worship sported a typically low July attendance, about sixty-five parishioners and a handful of visitors. Unfortunately, my sermon on the Water-to-Wine story in John 2 was a little flat: I could hear the crinkling of candy wrappers begin at the four-minute mark. Usually I can hold the sweet-tooths off for nine or ten minutes, but with this muggy July heat I just didn't have it in me.

Right after the Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession, toward the end of the service, I paused and stared as bubbles thick as dirty motor oil simmered on the Presbyterian blue carpet. I cleared my throat and announced the final hymn, "Rejoice, O people," number 299. In that moment the bubbles swirled together and a white lamb slurped up out of the floor. It shook its floppy ears, skipped down the aisle and sprang up onto the pew beside Mrs. Miller.

Mrs. Donnally fainted into the aisle. People rose from their seats. "It's a

miracle!" Hands waved, palms to heaven. People stepped over Mrs. Donnally to get a better view. "Amen! Hallelujah!" Shouting drowned out the first chords of the hymn.

The lamb blinked again, then morphed into a wooly behemoth of mucilaginous slime, howling and towering over Mrs. Miller.

Someone in the choir said, "Holy shit!"

It reached down, clamped a shaggy limb onto Mrs. Miller's blue-tinted head, then lifted her right out of the pew and shook her. Slime splattered the wall. The Board of Managers just had the sanctuary painted a delicate robin's egg blue the month before.

Parishioners scrambled to get away—tumbling over the backs of the pews, or scrabbling on all fours underneath the pews. Somebody snatched Mrs. Donnally from the path of the faithful rushing toward the doors.

The sour-smelling fingers held Mrs. Miller under both sides of her jaw and behind her recently-coiffed head while she hung there, kicking. Stubborn, she dug her hands into the slimy wool and tried to pull herself free.

Then the creature plopped Mrs. Miller onto her butt-worn pew and shrank back into a lamb. It leapt off the pew and darted up the aisle, melting into the carpet as it ran. Oily smutches ripped to the four corners of the sanctuary.

Mrs. Miller scraped mucilage out of her hair with her hands.

I thought I was dreaming. I just

kept thinking, *Mrs. Miller—good choice!* Quite unbecoming, of course, but she and I had had our battles, and had settled on a polite, seething truce for the past few years. But I dream about her often. Usually she does not fare well.

So I figured this was just another one of my tabloid-style dreams. Slime Lamb Attacks Church Elder in House of God. Nothing unusual.

But no, this actually happened.

The sanctuary was empty now except for Mrs. Miller and me.

She raised her arm, like God in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, although I don't think creating was what she had in mind. She pointed at me. I was barely protected by the pulpit.

"You," she hissed. "This is *your* doing!"

I've come to realize over the years that there are parishioners in every congregation who view the minister as responsible for whatever ills befall the family of God—poor attendance, tight budgets, fallen Angel Food cakes ("It was a mix, it should not have fallen, would not have fallen if you hadn't let all that cold air in, Reverend."). Mrs. Miller was one such bane.

"Me?" I said.

"Yes, you. I've known all along. The handiwork of the devil."

"You don't even believe in the devil, Mrs. Miller. You told me so yourself."

She eased to her feet, back straighter than usual (a little bit of free slime-chiropractic work never hurt anyone, I thought) and stalked

out of the sanctuary to meet the approaching wave of sirens.

I sat down in the chair behind the pulpit.

I've read that God exacts retribution: locusts, floods, plagues. And I admit, Mrs. Miller can indeed be trying. So maybe that's what this was, godly retribution.

Or maybe there *is* a devil. Ha. Maybe he's looking for recruits—little spindly blue-haired ones.

Well ... maybe it was me. Maybe I *did* let my fear of her get the better of me. If I'd—

Now just hold on a minute. We're talking a lamb grew out of the church floor and turned into a slime creature. Yeah right, in my dreams.

I shrugged to myself. Yikes. What if it were true. I could have toasted Mrs. M. right then and there. (Opportunity knocks, and if you don't—)

"Excuse me." The RCMP officer was standing at the back of the sanctuary, hat in hand. "Can I talk to you?"

"Yeah, sure," I said.

He came forward, extracting a notebook and pen after tucking his hat under his bulging arm. I notice biceps. Mine are kind of weenie. Too many years of books, not enough football. I regret that sometimes, the—

"Can you tell me what you saw, Father."

"Just call me Dave, Officer," I said. I told him about the lamb.

He nodded, but he didn't take any notes.

→ ←

I CALLED MRS. MILLER ON THE PHONE the next day, even though it was my

day off.

"I had to use beer," she said, "real beer, to get that goo out of my hair. I actually had to go into the liquor store. My word, if anyone saw me. And stink, I'll probably smell like a barnyard for the rest of my days."

And through the phone line I could taste her indignant acrimony. There was a distinctly Mrs. M. taste to the energy, a bitter, aspirin-like flavor. I could tell as clearly as if I were reading her mind that she believed quite sincerely that I had *created* that lamb to attack her.

→ ←

ON TUESDAY AFTERNOONS, I DO MY hospital visiting. One of my least favorite duties. That smell in hospitals—maybe it's the cleaner they use, or maybe there's anesthetic floating around in the air. Bleah. Makes me nauseous. Even after twenty-nine years of ministry.

I found Lisa Michaels sitting up in bed, flipping through an issue of *Sports Illustrated*. The one with the bathing suits.

Lisa has been depressed ever since her breast cancer diagnosis. The surgeon removed a lump six months ago and gave her a clean bill, but then last week she found another lump. She and her surgeon began discussing the M word. And now here she was, contemplating surgery.

"Hey, Lisa," I said.

"Hi, Dave." She whipped the magazine across the room. It smacked against the wall and dropped into the garbage can. A perfect shot.

I went and got a chair, but before

I could get my butt into it, Lisa said, “Dave, will you say a prayer for me? I know this is all supposed to be God’s will, and such, but I just don’t want to go through with this. Will you say a prayer? For healing?”

Jeeppers. These are the put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is kind of prayers: let’s see what this God of yours can actually *do*, choirboy.

Lisa is a very sincere Christian and a committed churchwoman. But it’s been my experience that God doesn’t seem to have a whole lot to do with cancer—neither giving it nor taking it away. Although a person’s good faith does seem to help keep their immune system strong. It’s not that I don’t believe in miracles. I do. Honest. I’ve just never been party to one. God never seems to want to use me to pull them off.

“And do a laying on of hands,” she added.

I smiled (although it felt more like a grimace), placed my hand on her shoulder and closed my eyes to hunt around for some appropriate words. I felt her fingers curl around mine and she slid my hand down onto the side of her breast, and squeezed. I pretended not to notice. But there was the lump, irregular and hard, about half the size of a golf ball.

Her terror wailed loud inside my head. I tasted dry wood ash—my mouth seemed filled with it and my body overflowed with a scorching mix of Lisa’s fear and grief and ember-hot rage.

“Dear God,” I said, stunned. And then the lump was in my hand, a slippery mass of hard tissue.

She gasped. I gasped. I jerked my

hand away. The cancerous lump smacked on the floor and rolled under the next bed.

Lisa ripped open her gown, groping at her heavy breast.

She shrieked and leaped from the hospital bed. “It’s gone!” she shouted. “It’s gone!”

I dropped to my hands and knees and grappled for the lump. I needed the evidence. Lisa was pulling at my clergy shirt.

There, I had it.

She jerked my to my feet and threw her arms around me. She was laughing and crying. She thrust her breast at me. “Feel it.”

I felt it. The lump was gone. Or rather, it was in my left hand. We just stared at it.



THAT SUNDAY, WORSHIP WAS A TAD tense, but at least the sanctuary was packed. Lookie-loos, reporters, even the police were there. I was sweating, wishing I’d polished my sermon a little more—I’d pulled it together later than usual Saturday night. It had been a very weird week.

The service started off smoothly though. Call To Worship. Only the usual peculiar noises from the basement. Prayer of Adoration and Confession. No lambs slopping up out of the floor.

First hymn. And it was a bad one. Don’t know what I was thinking when I picked it. Maggie, the organist, butchers it every time.

I could see little bumps of dark goo—as Mrs. Miller called it—bubbling around Maggie’s Phentex-slipped feet.

The hymn finally ground into its

Amen without an eruption of slime violence. The bubbles glooped back into the carpet leaving only a thin, viscous film.

Jennifer Keeley (her maiden name), recently divorced from husband Roger (speaking of slime) and raising three kids, rose to read from the Old Testament—Leviticus 25, the Jubilee section.

Roger had gone off to find himself last year after being fired from Sears, but all he found was a twenty-three year old “chickie-poo” with big red hair and even bigger boobs. That’s how Jenny put it. I never much liked Roger. His little adventure seemed to tear the guts out of Jenny’s self-confidence.

I slipped down into the front pew as I usually do for readings—a much better view, and it allows me to nip over my sermon notes without the congregation seeing.

Jenny cleared her throat and began to read. “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you when each of you shall—”

She faltered. I looked up. She was fiddling with the buttons on her blouse—or rather, clenching them.

Then I could feel it. The slippery tendril of energy coming from somewhere behind me in the pews. Suddenly I could taste it, a corn-syrup sweetness with an aftertaste of fish. Made me think of portly Edgar McDonald for some reason, a quiet member of the Board of Managers whom everyone liked.

I was about to turn and confirm the source when I heard a soft pop,

then a ping, and then Jenny’s green skirt hit the floor around her high-heeled ankles. I don’t know what Edgar hoped she was or wasn’t wearing under that skirt, but he wanted to know, wanted to know something fierce. I hope the pink cotton underwear and knee-high nylons were worth it.

Jenny’s face streaked scarlet. I assumed embarrassment at first, but then I heard it inside my head, the soaring howl of her humiliation and rage. “Sweet Jesus,” I muttered as I watched the acrid power roar out from her, blasting every stitch of clothing off Edgar McDonald’s pasty Scottish body.

There was a collective gasp, and then a silence so sudden and so deep that God should have been checking in on us.

Glenda, Edgar’s wife, generally had that demure, eyes-downcast look. Not at this moment, though. In fact, she had the look of someone with a confirmed hunch. And if Jennifer Keeley didn’t kill Edgar outright, I was certain Glenda would.

Mrs. Miller started in on her nitro pills—I could feel her eyes searing my head. The press went wild, flashes blinded me. Jenny yanked up her skirt and started down the aisle. I could feel her pooling her energy. I intervened—I had visions of her splattering Edgar into bloody little bits of middle-management flesh. It would take weeks to clean him off the newly-painted ceiling.

“Get the hell out of my way, Dave,” Jenny growled at me.

“Jenny...”

“Y’know, Dave, it’s high time I

had a little chat with Roger," she said.

Roger? Yeah, Roger, her ex.

She tugged on her skirt. "There are a few things I've been meaning to say to him," she said, "but I just haven't been able to work up the nerve before now."

Indeed, Jenny suddenly seemed to have her old confidence back. I got the hell out of her way.

People started yelling. Someone threw a sports jacket over Edgar. The press and police surged forward.

There seemed to be no use continuing to worship, so I just raised my hands and hollered out the benediction. Maggie, the organist, leapt in with the chords of the choral Amen, but they were drowned out by all the shouting.



THE AIR CONDITIONER IN THE MANSE'S living room was losing the battle. I was down to my underwear, T-shirt and bare feet. Not a pretty sight.

The spaghetti sauce was plopping on simmer in the kitchen and I was waiting for the noodle water to boil. I like my big meal at lunch time.

I set my beer on the end table, grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. I hoisted my feet up onto the hassock. Monday is my day off. Mondays, beer, and TV are a tradition for me, a tradition that started with my first congregation, where the retiring minister, a wrinkly Edinburgh Scot, stayed on as a parishioner, having ministered there for nineteen years. He insisted that Monday was the cleric's Sabbath, and was to be spent with a good

thick book and a pint of good scotch whisky. To help him relax. I never could get the hang of the whisky.

And after the mayhem following yesterday's service, I certainly needed to relax.

I sipped my beer and flipped to the read-along cable news channel. Along the bottom of the screen I read, "—rain falling in Africa. Astronomers announced today that the Hubble Telescope has detected another fold in space. This second wrinkle is between the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. Last week, astronomers announced the discovery of the first fold. They assure—"

I turned off the TV and got out of my chair, beer in hand, and began to wander. Out the living room window I could see four 1967 Corvettes—each a different color—parked in Joe Frederick's driveway. The kind he goes on and on about. The kind he never used to have.

Two houses up is Brigitte's place. She's a single mom on social assistance. The ceiling in her kitchen fell in last month and that slimy troglodyte-cum-landlord told her if she wanted it fixed she could bloody well go turn a few tricks and make the money herself.

Brigitte's finally lost it, I thought. She was outside, standing on a kitchen chair, picking leaves off the spindly maple tree the city had planted last year to "green up" the neighborhood. I got my binos and took a closer look. Gadzooks. She was picking *money* off the tree, fifty-dollar bills, and stuffing them into a green garbage bag.

The phone rang. I set the binoculars

on the TV and went into the kitchen. The noodle water was boiling finally.

"Hello?"

"Reverend?"

Oh, joy—Mrs. Miller. I gave up trying to get her to call me by first name years ago. And I sure as heck don't call her by hers. What is it anyway? Starts with an L, I think.

"Mrs. Miller. Well, what can I do for you?" (This is my polite way of helping parishioners get to the point when they phone.)

"Francis wants to talk to you."

Francis is Mrs. Miller's forty-five year old handicapped son. I could hear him in the background: "Hi, Dafe. Hi, Dafe. Hi, Dafe. C'mon. C'mon. C'mon. Hi, Dafe."

"Put Frank on the phone."

"No. He wants you to come here. He wants to say... He... Please, Reverend, come talk to him." Mrs. Miller has never actually *asked* me for anything before. She's always told me what to do, what she thought I should be doing that I wasn't, mostly ordering me around like a ten-year old kid. Like she orders Frank around, actually.

"I'll be right over," I said, and hung up. I turned off the gas under the spaghetti sauce and the noodle water, then poured my beer down the sink. It'd be flat by the time I got back anyway. What good is beer without fizz?

I slipped on my Birkenstocks. Figured I'd just walk over. Mrs. Miller lives quite close to the manse. Too close.

Jeepers Murphy! I need to put on some shorts: I'm in my flipping un-

derwear. I hate summer.

→ ←

THE MIDDAY HEAT WAS STIFLING.

I nipped across the street and scooted down a back alley, taking the shortcut to Mrs. M.'s big two-story house.

I noticed that the Berkowitz's had replaced the chain-link fence around their back yard with a heavy, high board fence, and painted it a lovely emerald-green color. There was such a curious sweet-cinnamon energy swirling in their backyard, and suddenly I was able to look right through the new board fence as if it weren't even there, just because I wanted to see what they might be up to.

Mr. and Mrs. Berkowitz were lying under their oak tree, which was now much taller and fuller than it used to be, giving them sweet, cool shade in the midday heat. They were nude, lying on the afghan she'd crocheted last winter. There was a plate of Fig Newtons between them. They were talking and laughing and eating Fig Newtons, and all the while Mr. Berkowitz stroked Mrs. Berkowitz's breast with the backs of his curled fingers.

I always knew they really liked each other.

→ ←

FRANK WAS UP IN THE MOUNTAIN ASH tree when I got there. Mrs. Miller was on the lawn, in front of her favorite perennial bed, demanding that he come down right this instant.

Frank is a worker, always cutting grass or raking leaves or shoveling snow around the neighborhood. He has a regular paying clientele of

church and non-church folks. I've always wondered how much of that money Frank got to keep—I figured the old bat was probably robbing him blind. I'm sure that this is my own hardness of heart. Mrs. M. just can't be that mean. And not that she needs the money either. Her dead husband left her and Frank very well cared for financially.

"Leave me alone, leave me alone! Bossy, bossy, bossy! I want to leave, I want to! You're not the boss of me, y'know, you're not. I'm grown up."

"Hey, Frank," I called out.

"Hi, Dafe!" Frank gave me a big grin. "I'm gonna fly away, Dafe, live by myself. Just want to say 'Bye.' I'm gonna fly! Bye, Dafe!"

"How'd he get up in the tree?" I whispered to Mrs. Miller.

"Don't talk 'bout me!" Frank hollered. "Not nice!"

"I'm sorry, Frank. You're right, it's not nice. I'm sorry. How'd you get up in the tree?"

"I fly!" he said. "I fly!" He began flapping his arms. "Bye, Dafe. Bye, Mom. Bye!"

"No!" Mrs. Miller pleaded. "No, Francis! Don't leave me!"

But he did. Flapping his arms and kicking a little with his big feet, he leapt from the tree and flew up over the two-story house. He looked jerky at first, like when he walks, but soon his arms flapped smoothly with the strength years of raking and shoveling had given him. And then he was gone.

Mrs. Miller started shaking all over. I'd seen her shake like that before when she was so mad at me she could hardly talk. But I was sure

it wasn't rage that had control of her now.

She started to wail, tears erupting from her eyes. I cuddled my arm around her—she's actually quite tiny—and walked her up the stairs to the porch. Tea, I was thinking, I'll make her some tea. My own heart was breaking for her. For Mrs. Miller. Good heavens, I thought, what's the world coming to when I feel sorry for this little demon?

"I'll make us some tea," I said.

→ ←

TUESDAY MORNING I STOPPED IN TO visit Julia Castle, an elderly woman on our membership roll who never comes to church.

"David, how timely. I was thinking I might call you today and ask you to come by," Julia said. "I have something to get off my chest. Please come in." She stepped back, sweeping me inside with her hand. Her apartment was refreshing and cool.

I have spent many hours here with Julia over the past ten years. Although her heritage is staunch Scotch Presbyterian, she hasn't been to church since she was in her twenties. She professes atheism, but gives regularly to the congregation and reads systematic theology for fun. Julia is frightfully well read (she thinks television is for idiots). In fact, I don't think the woman sleeps much anymore, but instead spends her long nights devouring books.

She made tea and brought out the Peek Freans, my favorite, and some home-made scones. Julia hasn't made scones for tea in years. Serving me with her Royal Albert Country Rose china, she chatted lightly

about her various neighbors' feats and foibles.

Finally, she sat in her Queen Anne chair with Matthew Fox (named after the theologian), her golden Lhasa Apso, curled up in her lap like a cat. Matthew Fox looked quite comfy. Stroking him lightly, she sighed.

"I am afraid that I am finally losing my faculties," she said. "And since I have no other living relatives, as you know, I wanted to confirm with you your role as executor of my will."

I took a Peek Frea. Julia isn't one for histrionics.

"I don't really know how to explain," she said, "so I'll simply come out and say it. I have been having delightful intercourse with Matthew Fox all week." I have explained to Julia on several occasions that we rarely use the *i*-word for anything but sex anymore. She doesn't seem to pay heed to my advice. On the other hand, Julia doesn't get out much, so it probably doesn't matter. "You see," she continued, "he ... he has been participating. In fact, he is becoming quite the interlocutor. I am discovering that he has a unique and poignant perspective. Quite refreshing, I might add."

I swallowed my Peek Frea.

"The first thing he said to me was, 'No.' Just like a child. An important first word for anyone wishing to develop a critical mind, don't you think? 'No, what?' I asked him. We were about to have tea, just like this. 'No, thank you,' he said. 'That's very good,' I told him—it's always important to reward good manners—but

that wasn't what I meant. I explained that I wanted to know *why* he said 'No.' 'I don't like Peek Freans,' he said, 'and we always have Peek Freans now. You used to make scones. I like those better.' So I made him some scones. He was quite beside himself with delight."

Matthew Fox looked up at her, a perfect Disney-dog gaze.

"It's not you, Julia," I said, thankful that I would no longer have to share the Peek Freans with the dog. "You're not losing your marbles. The universe has gone kind of wonky. Not really in a bad way, though." Slime grabbing Mrs. Miller by the head wasn't such a bad thing, was it?

I told her about Mrs. Miller, and about Frank and Lisa and Brigitte. I left out the part about the Berkowitzs. "I'm not really sure what God has in mind," I said to her as a kind of conclusion.

Julia stroked the rim of her teacup with her index finger. "Honestly, David, it sounds to me as if God is quite out of the picture. God just doesn't have this rich a sense of humor; God has more of a knock-knock-joke sense of humor."

I chewed. Atheists will use anything to get a leg up in the existence-of-God debate.

Julia fed Matthew Fox a piece of scone.



I STOPPED IN AT MRS. MILLER'S ON THE way home from Julia's. I'm not sure why. I just felt I needed to.

I had never heard Nathan shout before, but he was shouting now. "You asked me to come, and I agreed. But I've had enough. I'm

leaving!”

Whoa. Wait a second. Nathan is dead, remember? You buried him, for Pete’s sake. Three years ago.

“Please, Nathan, please stay.” Mrs. M. was actually begging.

She must have felt me come into the dining room because she turned to me, her eyes wide. “I just want to talk to him, if only for a while. It’s been so long. Please, David, please, make him stay.”

David. Wow, she was desperate.

“Hey, Nathan. Uh, good to see you again. You’re looking great.” He looked younger than I remembered. In fact, he looked better dead than he had those last couple of years before his heart attack.

“Hi, Dave. You’re looking pretty good yourself. You lost some weight?”

I blushed. “Yeah,” I said, “I’ve been working out this summer.” That was a bald-faced lie, but I pumped my arms up and down to show him anyway. I made a mental note to order some new short-sleeved clergy shirts—mine *were* getting snug around the biceps.

“Reverend!” Mrs. Miller stamped her foot.

“See?” Nathan said. “You always nose in, take over the conversation, work it around to something *you* want to talk about. And since I’m here anyway: that’s not all. Remember how you were always accusing me of running around on you, rolling in the hay with some secretary from work? Well, I’d have been nuts to: you’d have skinned me alive. So just so you know, I never did, even though you never believed me.

You’re just a jealous, bitter-hearted woman. And you have been from the day Francis was born.”

“That’s not true. Tell him that’s not true, Reverend.”

I held up my hands, more to protect myself than to defer. I’m as afraid of her as Nathan was. But he’s already dead and I’m not, and I don’t want to be, so I just kept my mouth shut.

There was silence. A stalemate. But something had changed in Mrs. Miller. I could taste it, more like black pepper, less like aspirin. She looked at Nathan and spoke, her voice soft, quiet, like I’ve never heard it before. “Did you ever love me, Nathan?”

“Yes, Lil, I did. For a long time. Then, after Francis was born, things changed. Inside me, inside you; between us. And it was never the same after that.” He sighed. “How is Francis?”

“He left home, Nathan. He flew away.”

Nathan simply nodded, as if Frank’s flying away was an ordinary thing. An expected thing.

“What’s going on, Nathan?” I said.

He looked at me and shrugged. “The universe is growing up, Dave. It’s transmogrifying—I think that’s what Calvin would call it.”

“John Calvin, the Reformer?”

He snorted. “No, Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*.”

“Oh,” I said. *That* Calvin. Mrs. Miller used to complain that Nathan did all his reading on the toilet. (The things people tell you when you’re a minister.)

Nathan shrugged again. "The universe is going through a gawky adolescent period right now. Bending, folding—melting down all the walls. Your lives will soon be more like my life, more like what life is like on this side.

"But until those barriers are gone completely, I'd rather stay over here on my side." He turned to Mrs. Miller. "It's been too long between us, Lil."

Something snapped inside my head. I heard it, like the crack of a timber under weight. I tasted wood ash again.

Mrs. Miller nodded slowly. "All right," she said. She took a moment to look at him, to really look at him. "Good-bye, Nathan."

Nathan said nothing in response, but waved at me, then slowly dissolved into the air.

Mrs. M. tipped her head back and howled. Like one of the Hounds of Hell. The windows rattled. I slapped my hands over my ears. The house began to shake and white-hot flames roared around us. But there was no rage left in her, just sheer, unadulterated grief.

I reached out, pulled her tiny body against mine, and held her hard. I was no longer afraid. Of her, or of anything else.

Her howling filled me, wound through my body, coursing electric. I tasted her bitter life. It melted in my mouth. The bitterness became turmeric, then lemon rind. I wanted to spit it out of my body, but it was part of me now. Had always been part of me.

After a long time the howling ebbed. Then, slowly, the flames fell back, as this first wave of grief eased.

Then there was silence. And the gentleness that comes after the long, harsh storm.

So, the universe is transmogrifying, I thought. Growing up. The dead should know.

Might as well get used to it, I told myself.

And so, as I held Mrs. Miller, I rained iris blossoms on us, right there in her dining room, because I remembered that she said once how much she loved irises. They rained like purple snow, their rich sweetness surrounding us, filling the air we breathed. ♣

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Authors

JOHN AEGARD ("The Guns of Joy") Clarion grad John Aegard is probably living in Seattle right now. His work has previously appeared in *Pyramid* and *Northern Fusion*.

RANDY BARNHART ("The Discount Shaman") still works as a fisheries manager in Prince Rupert, BC, with a lovely daughter, Val, his brilliant wife, Barb, and two very cute Miniature Dachshunds. He is also a Mohawk of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte (and one of his degrees is in Native Studies). This is his second story for *On Spec* (the first was "Wild Thing," Fall 1998).

GREG BECHTEL ("Walking Dogs") is currently living and working in Kitchener, Ontario as an Educational Assistant at a local high school. Having previously published one story in *Challenging Destiny*, Greg is currently working on an urban fantasy-adventure novel, as well as a burgeoning novella. At the moment, he is investigating the possibilities of actually *making money* as a writer. Teaching's good—writing's better.

DEREK KINGSTON FAIRBRIDGE ("Creation of the Universe") was raised in Penticton, BC, and lives in Vancouver. This is his third poem to appear in *On Spec*. His work has also been published in *Geist* and *Contemporary Verse 2*, and is due to appear in *Dandelion*. He is the editor of *Vanilla Crow*.

EILEEN KERNAGHAN ("A Biblical Bestiary #1" and "Bread Line") has published three adult fantasy novels set in bronze-age Europe. The second in the series, *Songs from the Drowned Lands*, won the Casper Award (later renamed the Aurora) for 1983-84. *Dance of the Snow Dragon*, a young adult fantasy with a Tibetan Buddhist background, was released by Thistle-down Press in 1995. Eileen's short stories and poems have appeared in a number of anthologies, including *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Northern Stars*, *Ark of Ice*, and several of the *Tesseract* anthologies. She is also one-fifth of the poetry group Quintet, whose first collection, *Quintet: Themes & Variations*, has just been released by Ekstasis Editions.

CATHERINE MACLEOD ("The Abducted") has published short fiction in *On Spec*, *TransVersions*, *Horizons SF*, and *Talebones*. Her current addictions include white chocolate, green tea, and *Black Harbour*.

SALLY MCBRIDE ("Water, Circle, Moon") lives in Toronto, and is married to writer/artist Dale L. Sproule, with whom she publishes *TransVersions*, a magazine of speculative fiction. Sally's stories have appeared in *F & SF*, *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Tesseract*, *Northern Frights* and others. She received an Aurora Award for Short Fiction in 1995. She has taught speculative fiction, written for comics, women's and general interest magazines, and is currently at work on her second novel. She says, "The British landscape has always seemed knee-deep in magic to me, of a different sort than North American magic. Mossy and green and sinister—caution is advised when travelling there."

STEVEN MILLS ("Jubilee") after a brief fling as a Presbyterian minister, now works irregularly as a flagger, ambulance attendant, and janitor to buy time in front of his barely souped up 486. He lives in Appledale, British Columbia, with his partner and four cats. This is his second appearance in *On Spec* (the first was "Chasing the Dragon on the Sea of Tranquility," Summer 1998).

A.J. ONIA ("Nightmares of a Finer Life") is a native Calgarian and a member of The Imaginative Fiction Writers Association. He has previously published fiction in *Marion Zimmer*

Bradley's Fantasy Magazine and in the Canadian SF anthology *North of Infinity*.

HAYDEN TRENHOLM ("Paying the Piper") is a playwright who lives in Calgary. His speculative fiction has appeared in *On Spec* and *Tesseract*⁶. In 1992, he won the 3-Day International Novel Writing Contest.

JANET ELLIOTT WATERS ("Sunset on Sol III"), in her mundane life, has a PhD in Psychology and is a college instructor with a private psychotherapy practice. She recently moved to the Sunshine Coast in BC, which she finds is an inspiring area for writing. She is working on an SF/Magic Realism/Psychological Thriller/Murder Mystery.

BUDDY YOUNG ("The Final Show") is a graduate of the University of Waterloo Psychology program, and the University of Windsor English/Writing program. He alternates between teaching English in Asia and working as a screenwriter in North America.

Artists

JEFF DOTEN (Cover: "Fireflight") Please see page 35.

JAMES BEVERIDGE ("WATER, Circle, Moon" and "The Final Show") is still creating aesthetic turmoil whenever he is given the opportunity. He perpetrates this with ink, paint (hand & airbrush) and pixel. As well, he has been building cut-scene backgrounds for Prelusion's new game. For more, please see his website: <<http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>> or contact him via ICQ: 7069051.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK ("Sunset on Sol III" and "Jubilee") has been illustrating and cartooning professionally for 18 years. She lives in Coquitlam, BC with the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk. Lynne can be reached at <lynnnetaylor@earthling.net>.

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN ("Guns of Joy") Adrian's repertoire of superhuman skills includes drawing and painting, sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, jewelry-making and computer art. He also does artwork on commission, draws and inks comics professionally. Check out <<http://www.geocities.com/~devon7/Adrian>> to see more of his stuff.

MURRAY LINDSAY ("Walking Dogs") is an artist, writer and all around space nut. Recently, he had been doing his artistic part in helping the Calgary Space Frontier Society get up and going. Given any choice in the matter, he'd sure like to do more SF&F illustrating and less in the way of graphically designing "corporate identity packages." For more, please see his website at: <<http://www.cadvision.com/mlindsay>>.

PETER MACDOUGALL ("The Abducted") works in pen and ink, watercolor, acrylic, digital and digital 3D media doing design and illustration. He has done work for both *On Spec* and *E-scape*. In addition, he writes speculative fiction, reads voraciously, tinkers with computers, and even earns a living. He reports that he is native to the Canadian coast, either east or west. To see more of his artwork, visit <<http://home.istar.ca/~pem/index.htm>>.

RONN SUTTON ("Paying the Piper" and "The Discount Shaman") regularly illustrates for the *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* monthly comic book published by Claypool Comics. The May 1999 issue of *Saturday Night* magazine featured his color illustration of an unshaven, gun-toting, Rambo-esque "Babar the Elephant." No kidding. 🍁

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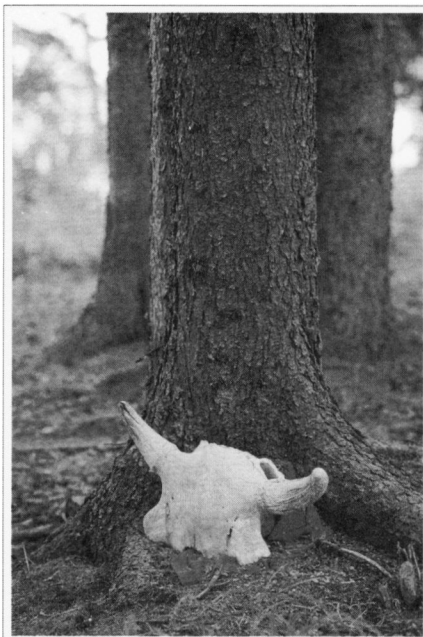
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