

On Spec

FALL 2001

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paulo DA COSTA

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ART FEATURE

Louis de NIVERVILLE



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ON·SPEC

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On this issue...

Worth Mentioning

Derryl Murphy, Fiction Editor

WHEN A STORY OF MINE HAS BEEN SELECTED FOR “Honorable Mention” in one of the annual *Year’s Best* volumes, I have often noted that said mention and a boot to the head will get me nothing more than a headache. Sure, there’s some nice egoboo involved, but what does it really get me? I don’t make extra sales because of it, I haven’t found that in the heady afterglow my writing attains some Calvino or Sturgeonesque level, and so far no groupies.

That said, it is quite a nice stroke to receive such mention, an acknowledgment from someone who’s editorial judgement and taste I appreciate, to say nothing of an awareness that no, I did not write that most recent story to be whisked away into a great sucking vacuum. Apparently someone out there paid enough attention to actually like it, even though liking it and liking it enough to pay for it yet again are, obviously, two different creatures.

But nothing matches the jolt to the old ego that contributed to my as-of-late swelled noggin as the back (and in one case) front pages of the various *Year’s Best* anthologies that popped up on the bookshelves this past summer. To make it short, *On Spec* had a pretty damn good year.

How good? This good:

Kain Massin’s “Wrong Dreaming,” the big winner in our contest issue, was

included in David G. Hartwell's inaugural *Year's Best Fantasy* (Eos Books, from HarperCollins). In his summary of the year in science fiction, Gardner Dozois in *The Year's Best Science Fiction* (St. Martin's Griffin) said "The other longest-running fiction semiprozine, the Canadian *ON SPEC*, had seemed a bit dull and lackluster the last few years, overshadowed by the more robust *EIDOLON*, but as the Australian magazines head into a rocky patch, it seems to have improved, with the overall quality of the fiction better than it's been in a while, with worthwhile stories by **Cory Doctorow**, **Derryl Murphy**, **Kain Massin**, **Rebecca M Senese**, and others appearing there this year." Gardner gave Honorable Mentions to Cory's "The Fundamental Unit of Memory," Kain's "Wrong Dreaming," my own "Last Call," and Rebecca's "The Echo of Bones."

In Ellen Datlow's and Terri Windling's *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (also from St Martin's Griffin), the list of Honorable Mentions was lengthy and wide-ranging: **Siobhan Carroll** ("Killer of Men"); **John Craig** ("Dance of the Dead"); **Edward Hoornaert** ("Devil, Devil"); **Tanya Huff** ("Now Entering the Ring"); **Wilma Kenny** ("The Wedding"); **Catherine MacLeod** ("The Other Dead"); **Kain Massin** ("Wrong Dreaming"); **Steve Mohn** ("Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter"); **Holly Phillips** ("No Such Thing as an Ex-Con"); **Randy Schroeder** ("The Skeleton Crows"); and **Carl Sieber** ("Jack Be Nimble").

Bicker as you might with Gardner's assessment of how this magazine felt in the past, it's easy to look past that and note how he sees it today. And quite apparently how other editors in this field view *On Spec* as well. It is a pleasing thing.

There's a key factor in all of this, and as a relatively new editor with *On Spec*, it is important for me to point it out: Writing.

That's right, writing. Or, to make it more obvious, our contributors. I have as much to do with this apparent swing over to the friendly side of the playground as do any of our other fine editors. I get the enjoyable task of reading and helping select all these excellent stories, but that's all I have to do, and I think that's the easy (and fun) part.

Those fine writers listed above, as well as others who have shown up in our pages and been mentioned in a positive light elsewhere, those are the people responsible for this good-looking list. And you, out there, having read them and now reading this, you're the lucky ones in this equation. Because the good stories just keep rolling on in.

We're just proud and honored that we were allowed to publish them. •

About our cover artist

LOUIS DE NIVERVILLE is a Canadian art icon who has had solo exhibitions in major galleries since the late fifties including a travelling retrospective organized by the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa. Born in Andover, England in 1933, the artist currently lives and works in Vancouver. His large commissions can be found in airports, hospitals and office buildings and his art is represented in collections including the Canada Council Art Bank, the Joseph H. Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles.

De Niverville has always been interested in Folk Art and the work of Naïve painters such as Rousseau. His own work echoes the three main themes of Canadian Folk Art: reflection, commitment and fantasy. As in folk art, de Niverville's work gives us a look into his secret thoughts and dreams. Many ideas with both personal and universal meanings spring from his use of multiple symbols. This creates images that could be positioned in the realm of art history somewhere between folk art and surrealism. •

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The Super Man and the Bugout

Cory Doctorow

“MAMA, I’M NOT A SUPER-VILLAIN,” HERSHIE SAID FOR the millionth time. He chased the last of the gravy on his plate with a hunk of dark rye, skirting the shriveled derma left behind from his kishka. Ever since the bugouts had inducted Earth into their Galactic Federation, promising to end war, crime, and corruption, he’d found himself at loose ends. His adoptive Earth-mother, who’d named him Hershie Abromowicz, had talked him into meeting her at her favorite restaurant in the heart of Toronto’s Gaza Strip.

“Not a super-villain, he says. Listen to him: mister big-stuff. Well, smartypants, if you’re not a super-villain, what was that mess on the television last night then?”

A busboy refilled their water, and Hershie took a long sip, staring off into the middle distance. Lately, he’d taken to avoiding looking at his mother: her infra-red signature was like a landing-strip for a coronary, and she wouldn’t let him take her to one of the bugout clinics for nanosurgery.

Mrs. Abromowicz leaned across the table and whacked him upside the head with one hand, her big rings clicking against the temple of his half-rim specs.

Had it been anyone else, he would have caught her hand mid-slap, or at least dodged in a superfast blur, quicker than any human eye. But his Mama had let him know what she thought of *that* sass before his third birthday. Raising super-infants requires strict, *loving* discipline. “Hey, wake up! Hey! I’m talking to you! What was that mess on television last night?”

“It was a demonstration, Mama. We were protesting. We want to dismantle the machines of war—it’s in the Torah, Mama. Isaiah: they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Tot would have approved.”

Mrs. Abromowicz sucked air between her teeth. “Your father never would have approved of *that*.”

That was the Action last night. It had been his idea, and he’d tossed it around with the Movement people who’d planned the demo: they’d gone to an army-surplus store and purchased hundreds of decommissioned rifles, their bores filled with lead, their firing pins defanged. He’d flown above and ahead of the demonstration, in his traditional tights and cape, dragging a cargo net full of rifles from his belt. He pulled them out one at a time, and bent them into balloon-animals—fanciful giraffes, wiener-dogs, bumble-bees, poodles—and passed them out the crowds lining Yonge Street. It had been a boffo smash hit. And it made great TV.

Hershie Abromowicz, Man from the Stars, took his mother’s hands between his own and looked into her eyes. “Mama, I’m a grown man. I have a job to do. It’s like...like a calling. The world’s still a big place, bugouts or no bugouts, and there’s lots of people here who are crazy, wicked, with their fingers on the triggers. I care about this planet, and I can’t sit by when it’s in danger.”

“But why all of a sudden do you have to be off with these *meshuggenahs*? How come you didn’t *need* to be with the crazy people until now?”

“Because there’s a *chance* now. The world is ready to rethink itself. Because—” The waiter saved him by appearing with the check. His mother started to open her purse, but he had his debitcard on the table faster than the eye could follow. “It’s on me, Ma.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll pay.”

“I *want* to. Let me. A son should take his mother out to lunch once in a while.”

She smiled, for the first time that whole afternoon, and patted his cheek with one manicured hand. “You’re a good boy, Hershie, I know that. I only want that you should be happy, and have what’s best for you.”

HERSHIE, IN TIGHTS AND CAPE, WAS CHILLING IN HIS FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE WHEN his comm rang. He checked the caller ID and winced: Thomas was calling, from Toronto. Hershie’s long-distance bills were killing him, ever since the Department of Defense had cut off his freebie account.

Not to mention that talking to Thomas inevitably led to more trouble with his mother.

He got up off of his crystalline recliner and flipped the comm open, floating

up a couple of meters. “Thomas, what’s up?”

“Supe, didja see the reviews? The critics *love* us!”

Hersh held the comm away from his head and sighed the ancient, put-upon Hebraic sigh of his departed stepfather. Thomas Aquino Rusk liked to play at being a sleazy Broadway producer, his “plays” the eye-catching demonstrations he and his band of merry shit-disturbers hijacked.

“Yeah, it made pretty good vid, all right.” He didn’t ask why Thomas was calling. There was only one reason he *ever* called: he’d had another idea.

“You’ll never guess why I called.”

“You’ve had an idea.”

“I’ve had an idea!”

“Really?”

“You’ll love it.”

Hershie reached out and stroked the diamond-faceted coffins that his birth parents lay in, hoping for guidance. His warm fingers slicked with melted hoarfrost, and as they skated over the crypt, it sang a pure, high crystal note like a crippled flying saucer plummeting to the earth. “I’m sure I will, Thomas.”

As usual, Thomas chose not to hear the sarcasm in his voice. “Check this out—DefenseFest 33 is being held in Toronto in March. And the new keynote speaker is the Patron Ik’Spir Pat! The fricken head fricken bugout! His address is ‘Galactic History and Military Tactics: a Strategic Overview.’”

“And this is a good thing?”

“Ohfuckno. It’s terrible, terrible, of course. The bugouts are selling us out. Going over to the Other Side. Just awful. But think of the possibilities!”

“But think of the possibilities? Oy.” Despite himself, Hershie was smiling. Thomas always made him smile.

“You’re smiling, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Thomas.”

“Can you make a meeting at the Belquees for 18h?”

Hershie checked his comm. It was 1702h. “I can make it.”

“See you there, buddy.” Thomas rang off.

Hershie folded his comm, wedged it in his belt, and stroked his parents’ crypt, once more, for luck.

HERSHIE LOVED THE COMMUTE HOME. STARTING AT THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, HE FLEW up and up and up above the highest clouds, then flattened out his body and rode the currents home, eeling around the wet frozen cloud masses, slaloming through thunderheads, his critical faculties switched off, flying at speed on blind instinct alone.

He usually made visual contact with the surface around Barrie, just outside of Toronto, and he wasn’t such a goodiegoodie that he didn’t feel a thrill of superiority as he flew over the cottage-country commuters stuck in the end-of-weekend traffic, skis and snowmobiles strapped to their roofs.

THE BELQUEES HAD THE BEST ETHIOPIAN FOOD AND THE WORST ETHIOPIAN DECOR in town. Successive generations of managers had added their own touches—Tiki lanterns, textured wallpaper, framed photos of Haile Selassie, tribal spears and grass dolls—and they'd accreted in layers, until the net effect was of an African rummage sale. But man, the food was good.

Downstairs was a banquet room whose decor consisted of material too ugly to be shown upstairs, with a stage and a disco ball. It had been a regular meeting place for Toronto's radicals for more than fifty years, the chairs worn smooth by generations of left-wing buttocks.

Tonight, it was packed. At least fifty people were crammed around the tables, tearing off hunks of tangy rice-pancake and scooping up vegetarian curry with them. Even before he saw Thomas, his super-hearing had already picked his voice out of the din and located it. Hershie made a beeline for Thomas' table, not making eye-contact with the others—old-guard activists who still saw him as a tool of the war-machine.

Thomas licked his fingers clean and shook his hand. "Supe! Glad you could make it! Sit, sit." There was a general shuffling of coats and chairs as the other people at the table cleared a space for him. Thomas was already pouring him a beer out of one of the pitchers on the table.

"Geez, how many people did you invite?"

Tina, a tiny Chinese woman who could rhyme "Hey hey, ho ho" and "One, two, three, four" with amazing facility said, "Everyone's here. The Quakers, the commies, a couple of councilors, the vets, anyone we could think of. This is gonna be *huge*."

The food hot, and the different curries and salads were a symphony of flavors and textures. "This is terrific," he said.

"Best Ethiopian outside of Addis Ababa," said Thomas.

Better than Addis Ababa, Hershie thought, but didn't say it. He'd been in Addis Ababa as the secret weapon behind Canada's third and most ill-fated peacekeeping mission there. There hadn't been a lot of restaurants open then, just block after block of bombed-out buildings, and tribal warlords driving around in tacticals, firing randomly at anything that moved. The ground CO sent him off to scatter bands of marauders while the bullets spanged off his chest. He'd never understood the tactical significance of those actions—still didn't—but at the time, he'd been willing to trust those in authority.

"Good food," he said.

AN HOUR LATER, THE PRETTY WAITRESS HAD CLEARED AWAY THE PLATTERS AND brought fresh pitchers, and Hershie's tights felt a little tighter. One of the Quakers, an ancient, skinny man with thin gray hair and sharp, clever features stood up and tapped his beer-mug. Gradually, conversation subsided.

"Thank you," he said. "My name is Stewart Pocock, and I'm here from the Circle of Friends. I'd like us all to take a moment to say a silent thanks for the wonderful food we've all enjoyed."

There was a nervous shuffling, and then a general bowing of heads and mostly silence, broken by low whispers.

"Thomas, I thought *you* called this meeting," Hershie whispered.

"I did. These guys always do this. Control freaks. Don't worry about it," he whispered back.

"Thank you all. We took the liberty of drawing up an agenda for this meeting."

"They always do this," Thomas said.

The Quakers led them in a round of introductions, which came around to Hershie. "I'm, uh, The Super Man. I guess most of you know that, right?" Silence. "I'm really looking forward to working on this with you all." A moment of silence followed, before the next table started in on its own introductions.

"TIME," LOUISE POCOCK SAID. BLISSFULLY. AT LAST. THE AGENDA HAD TICKS NEXT to *Introduction, Background, Strategy, The Day, Support and Organizing, and Publicity*. Thomas had hardly spoken a word through the course of the meeting. Even Hershie's alien buttocks were numb from sitting.

"It's time for the closing circle. Please, everybody, stand up and hold hands." Many of the assembled didn't bother to stifle their groans. Awkwardly, around the tables and the knapsacks, they formed a rough circle and took hands. They held it for an long, painful moment, then gratefully let go.

They worked their way upstairs and outside. The wind had picked up, and it blew Hershie's cape out on a crackling vertical behind him, so that it caught many of the others in the face as they cycled or walked away.

"Supe, let's you and me grab a coffee, huh?" Thomas said, without any spin on it at all, so that Hershie knew that it wasn't a casual request.

"Yeah, sure."

THE CAFE THOMAS CHOSE WAS IN A RENOVATED BANK, AND THERE WAS A PRIVATE room in the old vault, and they sat down there, away from prying eyes and auto-graph hounds.

"So, you pumped?" Thomas said, after they ordered coffees.

"After *that* meeting? Yeah, sure."

Thomas laughed, a slightly patronizing but friendly laugh. "That was a *great* meeting. Look, if those guys had their way, we'd have about a march a month, and we'd walk slowly down a route that we had a permit for, politely asking people to see our point of view. And in between, we'd have a million meetings like this, where we come up with brilliant ideas like, 'Let's hand out fliers next time.'

"So what we do is, go along with them. Give them enough rope to hang themselves. Let 'em have four or five of those, until everyone who shows up is so bored, they'll do *anything*, as long as it's not that.

"So, these guys want to stage a sit-in in front of the convention center. Boring! We wait until they're ready to sit down, then we start playing music and

turn it into a *dance-in*. Start playing movies on the side of the building. Bring in a hundred secret agents in costume to add to it. They'll never know what hit 'em."

Hershie squirmed. These kinds of Machiavellian shenanigans came slowly to him. "That seems kind of, well, disingenuous, Thomas. Why don't we just hold our own march?"

"And split the movement? No, this is much better. These guys do all the poster and phoning, they get a good crowd out, this is their natural role. Our natural role, my son," he placed a friendly hand on Hershie's caped shoulder, "is to see to it that their efforts aren't defeated by their own poverty of imagination. They're the feet of the movement, but we're its *laugh*." Thomas pulled out his comm and scribbled on its surface. "*They're the feet of the movement, but we're its laugh*, that's great, that's one for the memoirs."

HERSHIE DECIDED HE NEEDED TO PATROL A LITTLE TO CLEAR HIS HEAD.

He scooped trash and syringes from Grenadier Pond. He flew silently through High Park, ears cocked for any muggings.

Nothing.

He patrolled the Gardner Expressway next and used his heat vision to melt some black ice.

Feeling useless, he headed for home.

He was most of the way up Yonge Street when he heard the siren. A cop car, driving fast, down Jarvis. He sighed his father's sigh and rolled east, heading into Regent Park, locating the dopplering siren. He touched down lightly on top of one of the ugly, squat tenements, and skipped from roof to roof, until he spotted the cop. He was beefy, with the traditional moustache and the flak vest that they all wore on downtown patrol. He was leaning against the hood of his cruiser, panting, his breath clouding around him.

A kid rolled on the ground, clutching his groin, gasping for breath. His infrared signature throbbed painfully between his legs. Clearly, he'd been kicked in the nuts.

The cop leaned into his cruiser and lowered the volume on his radio, then, without warning, kicked the kid in the small of the back. The kid rolled on the ice, thrashing painfully.

Before Hershie knew what he was doing, he was hovering over the ice, between the cop and the kid. The cat's-eyes embedded in the emblem on his chest glowed in the street lamps. The cop's eyes widened so that Hershie could see the whites around his pupils.

Hershie stared. "What do you think you're doing?" he said, after a measured silence.

The cop took a step back and slipped a little on the ice before catching himself on his cruiser.

"Since when do you kick unarmed civilians in the back?"

"He—he ran away. I had to catch him. I wanted to teach him not to run."

"By inspiring his trust in the evenhandedness of Toronto's Finest?" Hershie could see the cooling tracks of the cruiser, skidding and weaving through the projects. The kid had put up a good chase. Behind him, he heard the kid regain his feet and start running. The cop started forward, but Hershie stopped him with one finger, dead center in the flak jacket.

"You can't let him get away!"

"I can catch him. Trust me. But first, we're going to wait for your backup to arrive, and I'm going to file a report."

A *Sun* reporter arrived before the backup unit. Hershie maintained stony silence in the face of his questions, but he couldn't stop the man from listening in on his conversation with the old constable who showed up a few minutes later, as he filed his report. He found the kid a few blocks away, huddled in an alley, hand pressed to the small of his back. He took him to Mount Sinai's emerg and turned him over to a uniformed cop.

The hysterical *Sun* headlines that vilified Hershie for interfering with the cop sparked a round of recriminating voicemails from his mother, filled with promises to give him such a *zetz* in the head when she next saw him. He folded his tights and cape and stuffed them in the back of his closet and spent a lot of time in the park for the next few weeks. He liked to watch the kids playing, a United Nations in miniature, parents looking on amiably, stymied by the language barrier that their kids hurdled with ease.

On March first, he took his tights out of the overstuffed hall closet and flew to Ottawa to collect his pension.

He touched down on the Parliament Hill and was instantly surrounded by high-booted RCMP constables, looking slightly panicky. He held his hands up, startled. "What gives, guys?"

"Sorry, sir," one said. "High security today. One of Them is speaking in Parliament."

"Them?"

"The bugouts. Came down to have a chat about neighborly relations. Authorized personnel only today."

"Well, that's me," Hershie said, and started past him.

The constable, looking extremely unhappy, moved to block him. "I'm sorry sir, but that's not you. Only people on the list. My orders, I'm afraid."

Hershie looked into the man's face and thought about hurtling skyward and flying straight into the building. The man was only doing his job, though. "Look, it's payday. I have to go see the Minister of Defense. I've been doing it every month for *years*."

"I know that sir, but today is a special day. Perhaps you could return tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? My rent is due *today*, Sergeant. Look, what if I comm his office?"

"Please, sir, that would be fine." The sergeant looked relieved.

Hershie hit a speed dial and waited. A recorded voice told him that the office was closed, the Minister at a special session.

“He’s in session. Look, it’s probably on his desk—I’ve been coming here for years; really, this is ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry. I have my orders.”

“I don’t think you could stop me, Sergeant.”

The sergeant and his troops shuffled their feet. “You’re probably right, sir. But orders are orders.”

“You know, Sergeant, I retired a full colonel from the Armed Forces. I *could* order you to let me past.”

“Sorry sir, no. Different chain of command.”

Hershie controlled his frustration with an effort of will. “Fine then. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

THE BUILDING SUPER WASN’T PLEASED ABOUT THE LATE RENT. HE THREATENED Hershie with eviction, told him he was in violation of the lease, quoted the relevant sections of the *Tenant Protection Act* from memory, then grudgingly gave in to Hershie’s pleas. Hershie had half a mind to put his costume on and let the man see what a *real* super was like.

But his secret identity was sacrosanct. Even in the era of Pax Aliena, the Super Man had lots of enemies, all of whom had figured out, long before, that even the invulnerable have weaknesses: their friends and families. It terrified him to think of what a bitter, obsolete, grudge-bearing terrorist might do to his mother, to Thomas, or even his old high-school girlfriends.

For his part, Thomas refused to acknowledge the risk; he’d was more worried about the Powers That Be than mythical terrorists.

The papers the next day were full of the overnight cabinet shuffle in Ottawa. More than half the cabinet had been relegated to the back-benches, and many of their portfolios had been eliminated or amalgamated into the new “superportfolios: “Domestic Affairs, Trade, and Extraterrestrial Affairs.

The old Minister of Defense, who’d once had Hershie over for Thanksgiving dinner, was banished to the lowest hell of the back-bench. His portfolio had been subsumed into Extraterrestrial Affairs, and the new Minister, a young up-and-comer named Woolley, wasn’t taking Hershie’s calls. Hershie called Thomas to see if he could loan him rent money.

Thomas laughed. “Chickens coming home to roost, huh?” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hershie said, hotly.

“Well, there’s only so much shit-disturbing you can do before someone sits up and takes notice. The Belquees is probably bugged, or maybe one of the commies is an informer. Either way, you’re screwed. Especially with Woolley.”

“Why, what’s wrong with Woolley?” Hershie had met him in passing at Prime Minister’s Office affairs, a well-dressed twenty-nine-year-old. He’d seemed like a nice enough guy.

“What’s *wrong* with him?” Thomas nearly screamed. “He’s the fricken *Antichrist!*”

He was the one that came up with the idea of selling advertising on squeegee kids' T-shirts! He's heavily supported by private security outfits—he makes Darth Vader look like a swell guy. That slicked-down, blow-dried asshole—”

Hershie cut him off. “Okay, okay, I get the idea.”

“No you don't, Supe! You don't get the half of it. This guy isn't your average Liberal—those guys usually basic opportunists. He's a *zealot!* He'd like to beat us with *truncheons!* I went to one of his debates, and he showed up with a *baseball bat!* He tried to *hit me* with it!”

“What were you doing at the time?”

“What does it matter? Violence is never an acceptable response. I've thrown pies at better men than him—”

Hershie grinned. Thomas hadn't invented pieing, but his contributions to the art were seminal. “Thomas, the man is a federal Minister, with obligations. He can't just write me off—he'll have to pay me.”

“Sure, sure,” Thomas crooned. “Of course he will—who ever heard of a politician abusing his office to advance his agenda? I don't know what I was thinking. I apologize.”

HERSHIE TOUCHED DOWN ON PARLIAMENT HILL, HEART RACING. THOMAS' WARNING echoed in his head. His memories of Woolley were already morphing, so that the slick, neat kid became feral, predatory. The Hill was marshy and cold and gray, and as he squelched up to the main security desk, he felt a cold ooze of mud infiltrate its way into his super-bootie. There was a new RCMP constable on duty, a turbanned Sikh. Normally, he felt awkward around the Sikhs in the Mounties. He imagined that their lack of cultural context made his tights and emblem seem absurd, that they evoked grins beneath the Sikhs' fierce moustaches. But today, he was glad the man was a Sikh, another foreigner with an uneasy berth in the Canadian military-industrial complex. The Sikh was expressionless as Hershie squirted his clearances from his comm to the security desk's transceiver. Imperturbably, the Sikh squirted back directions to Woolley's new office, just a short jaunt from the exalted heights of the Prime Minister's Office.

The Minister's office was guarded by: a dignified antique door that had the rich finish of wood that has been buffed daily for two centuries; an RCMP constable in plainclothes; a young, handsome receptionist in a silk navy power-suit; a slightly older office manager whose heart-stopping beauty was only barely restrained by her chaste blouse and skirt; and, finally, a pair of boardroom doors with spotless brass handles and a retinal scanner.

Each obstacle took more time to weather than the last, so it was nearly an hour before the office manager stared fixedly into the scanner until the locks opened with a soft clack. Hershie squelched in, leaving a slushy dribble on the muted industrial-grade brown carpet.

Woolley knelt on the stool of an ergonomic work-cart, enveloped in an articulated nest of displays, comms, keyboards, datagloves, immersive headsets, stylii, sticky notes and cup-holders. His posture, hair and expression rivaled one

another for flawlessness.

"Hello, hello," he said, giving Hershie's hand a dry, firm pump. He smelled of expensive talc and leather car interiors.

He led Hershie to a pair of stark Scandinavian chairs whose polished lead undersides bristled with user-interface knobs. The old Minister's tastes had run to imposing oak desks and horsehair club-chairs, and Hershie felt a moment's disorientation as he sank into the brilliantly functional sitting-machine. It chittered like a roulette wheel and shifted to firmly support him.

"Thanks for seeing me," Hershie said. He caught his reflection in the bulletproof glass windows that faced out over the Rideau Canal, and felt a flush of embarrassment when he saw how clownish his costume looked in the practical environs.

Woolley favored him with half a smile and stared sincerely with eyes that were widely spaced, clever and hazel, surrounded by smile lines. The man fairly oozed charisma. "I should be thanking you. I was just about to call you to set up a meeting."

Then why haven't you been taking my calls? Hershie thought. Lamely, he said, "You were?"

"I was. I wanted to touch base with you, clarify the way that we were going to operate from now on."

Hershie felt his gorge rise. "From now on?"

"I phrased that badly. What I mean to say is, this is a new Cabinet, a new Ministry. It has its own *modus operandi*."

"How can it have its own *modus operandi* when it was only created last night?" Hershie said, hating the petulance in his voice.

"Oh, I like to keep lots of contingency plans on hand—the time to plan for major changes is far in advance. Otherwise, you end up running around trying to get office furniture and telephones installed when you need to be seizing opportunity."

It struck Hershie how *finished* the office was—the staff, the systems, the security. He imagined Woolley hearing the news of his appointment and calling up files containing schematics, purchase orders, staff requisitions. It wasn't exactly devious, but it certainly teetered on the meridian separating *planning* and *plotting*.

"Well, you certainly seem to have everything in order."

"I've been giving some thought to your payment arrangement. Did you know that there's a whole body of policy relating to your pension?"

Hershie nodded, not liking where this was going.

"Well, that's just not sensible," Woolley said, sensibly. "The Canadian government already has its own pension apparatus: we make millions of direct-deposits every day, for welfare, pensions, employment insurance, mothers' allowance. We're up to our armpits in payment infrastructure. And having you fly up to Ottawa every month, well, it's ridiculous. This is the twenty-first century—we have better ways of moving money around."

"I've been giving it some thought, and I've come up with a solution that should make everything easier for everyone. I'm going to transfer your pension to the Canada Pension Plan offices; they'll make a monthly deposit directly to your account. I've got the paperwork all filled out here; all you need to do is fill in your banking information and your Social Insurance Number."

"But I don't have a Social Insurance Number or a bank account," Hershie said. Of course, Hershie Abromowicz had both, but the Super Man didn't.

"How do you pay taxes, then?" Woolley had a dangerous smile.

"Well, I—" Hershie stammered. "I don't! I'm tax-exempt! I've never had to pay taxes or get a bank account—I just take my checks to the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Credit Union and they cash them for me. It's the *arrangement*."

Woolley shook his head. "Who told you you were tax-exempt?" he asked, wonderingly. "No one is tax-exempt, except Status Indians. As to not having a bank account, well, you can open an account at the CUPE Credit Union and we'll make the deposits there. But not until this tax status matter is cleared up. You'll have to talk to Revenue Canada about getting a SIN, and get that information to Canada Pensions."

"I pay taxes! Through my secret identity."

"But does this..." he made quote marks with his fingers, "*secret identity* declare your pension income?"

"Of course I don't! I have to keep my secret identity a *secret*!" His voice was shrill in his own ears. "It's a *secret identity*. I served in the Forces as the Super Man, so I get paid as the Super Man. Tax-exempt, no bank accounts, no SIN. Just a check, every month."

Woolley leaned back and clasped his hands in his lap. "I know that's how it used to be, but what I'm trying to tell you today is that arrangement, however long-standing, however well-intentioned, wasn't proper—or even *legal*. It had to end some time. You're retired now—you don't need your *secret identity*," again with the finger-quotes. "If you already have a SIN, you can just give it to me, along with your secret identity's bank information, and we can have your pension processed in a week or two."

"A week or two?" Hershie bellowed. "I need to pay my *rent*! That's not how it works!"

Woolley stood, abruptly. "No sir, that *is* how it works. I'm trying to be reasonable. I'm trying to expedite things for you during this time of transition. But you need to meet me halfway. If you could give me your SIN and account information right now, I could speed things up considerably, I'm sure. I'm willing to make that effort, even though things are very busy here."

Hershie toyed with the idea of demolishing the man's office, turning his lovely furniture into molten nacho topping, and finishing up by leaving the man dangling by his suit from the CN Tower's needle. But his mother would kill him. "I can't give you my secret identity," Hershie said, pleadingly. "It's a matter of national security. I just need enough to pay my rent."

Woolley stared at the ceiling for a long, long time. “There is one thing,” he said.

“Yes?” Hershie said, hating himself for the note of hope in his voice.

“The people at DefenseFest 33 called my office yesterday, to see if I’d appear as a guest speaker with the Patron Ik’Spir Pat. I had to turn them down, of course—I’m far too busy right now. But I’m sure they’d be happy to have a veteran of your reputation in that slot, and it carries a substantial honorarium. I could call them for you and give them your comm...?”

Hershie thought of Thomas, and of the rent, and of his mother, and of all the people at the Belquees who’d stared mistrustfully at him. “Have them call me,” he sighed. “I’ll talk to them.”

He got to his feet, the toe of his boot squelching out more dirt pudding.

“HERSHIE?”

“Yes, Mama?” She’d caught him on the way home, flying high over the fleabag motels on the old Highway 2.

“It’s Friday,” she said.

Right. Friday. He told her he’d come for dinner, and that meant getting there before sunset. “I’ll be there,” he said.

“Oh, it’s not important. It’s just me. Don’t hurry on my account—after all, you’ll have thousands of Shabbas dinners with your mother. I’ll live forever.”

“I said I’ll be there.”

“And don’t wear that costume,” she said. She hated the costume. When the Department of Defense had issued it to him, she’d wanted to know why they were sending her boy into combat wearing red satin panties.

“I’ll change.”

“That’s a good boy,” she said. “I’m making brisket.”

BY THE TIME HE TOUCHED DOWN ON THE ROOF OF HIS BUILDING, HE KNEW HE’D be late for dinner. He skimmed down the elevator shaft to the tenth floor and ducked out to his apartment, only to find the door padlocked. There was a note from the building super tacked to the peeling green paint. Among other things, it quoted the codicil from the *Tenant Protection Act* that allowed the super to padlock the door and forbade Hershie, on penalty of law, from doing anything about it.

Hershie’s super-hearing picked up the sound of a door opening down the hallway. In a blur, he flew up to the ceiling and hovered there, pressing himself flat on the acoustic tile. One of his neighbours, that guy with the bohemian attitude who always seemed to be laughing at poor, nebbishy Hershie Abromowicz, made his way down the hall. He paused directly below Hershie’s still, hovering form, reading the note on the door while he adjusted the collar of his ski-vest. He smirked at the note and got in the elevator.

Hershie let himself float to the ground, his cheeks burning.

Damn it, he didn’t have *time* for this. Not for any of it. He considered the

padlock for a moment, then snapped the hasp with his thumb and index finger. Moving through the apartment with superhuman speed, he changed into a pair of nice slacks, a cable-knit sweater his mother had given him for his last birthday, a tweedy jacket and a woolen overcoat. Opening a window, he took flight.

“THOMAS, I REALLY CAN’T TALK RIGHT NOW,” HE SAID. HIS MOTHER WAS ANGRILY drumming her rings on the table’s edge. Abruptly, she grabbed the bowl of cooling soup from his place setting and carried it into the kitchen. She hadn’t done this since he was a kid, but it still inspired the same panicky dread in him—if he wasn’t going to eat his dinner, she wasn’t going to leave it.

“Supe, we *have* to talk about this. I mean, DefenseFest is only a week away. We’ve got things to do!”

“Look, about DefenseFest...”

“Yes?” Thomas had a wary note in his voice.

Hershie’s mother reappeared with a plate laden with brisket, tsimmis, and kasha. She set it down in front of him.

“We’ll talk later, okay?” Hershie said.

“But what about DefenseFest?”

“It’s complicated,” Hershie began. His mother scooped up the plate of brisket and headed back to the kitchen. She was muttering furiously. “I have to go,” he said and closed his comm.

Hershie chased his mother and snatched the plate from her as she held it dramatically over the sink disposal. He held up his comm with the other hand and made a show of powering it down.

“It’s off, Mama. Please, come and eat.”

“I’VE BEEN THINKING OF SELLING THE HOUSE,” SHE SAID, AS THEY TUCKED INTO slices of lemon pound-cake.

Hershie put down his fork. “Sell the house?” While his father hadn’t exactly *built* the house with his own hands, he had sold his guts out at his discount menswear store to pay for it. His mother had decorated it, but his father’s essence still haunted the corners. “Why would you sell the house?”

“Oh, it’s too big, Hershie. I’m just one old lady, and it’s not like there’re any grandchildren to come and stay. I could buy a condo in Florida, and there’d be plenty left over for you.”

“I don’t need any money, Mama. I’ve got my pension.”

She covered his hands with hers. “Of course you do, bubbie. But fixed incomes are for old men. You’re young, you need a nest egg, something to start a family with.” Her sharp eyes, sunk into motherly pillows of soft flesh, bored into him. He tried to keep his gaze light and carefree. “You’ve got money problems?” she said, at length.

Hershie scooped up a forkful of pound-cake and shook his head. His mother’s powers of perception bordered on clairvoyance, and he didn’t trust himself to speak the lie outright. He looked around the dining room, furnished with faux

chinois screens, oriental rugs, angular art-glass chandeliers.

“Tell Mama,” she said.

He sighed and finished the cake. “It’s the new Minister. He won’t give me my pension unless I tell him my secret identity.”

“So?” his mother said. “You’re so ashamed of your parents, you’d rather starve than tell the world that their bigshot hero is Hershie Abromowicz? I, for one wouldn’t mind—finally, I could speak up when my girlfriends are going on about their sons the lawyers.”

“Mom!” he said, feeling all of eight years old. “I’m not ashamed and you know it. But if the world knew who I was, well, who knows what kind of danger you’d be in? I’ve made some powerful enemies, Mama.”

“Enemies, shmenemies,” she said, waving her hands. “Don’t worry yourself on my account. Don’t make me the reason that you end up in the cold. I’m not helpless you know. I have Mace.”

Hershie thought of the battles he’d fought: the soldiers, the mercenaries, the terrorists, the crooks and the super-crooks with their insane plots and impractical apparatuses. His mother was as formidable as an elderly Jewish woman with no grandchildren could be, but she was no match for automatic weapons. “I can’t do it, Mama. It wouldn’t be responsible. Can we drop it?”

“Fine, we won’t talk about it anymore. But a mother *worries*. You’re sure you don’t need any money?”

He cast about desperately for a way to placate her. “I’m fine. I’ve got a speaking engagement lined up.”

THERE WAS A MESSAGE WAITING ON HIS COMM WHEN HE POWERED IT BACK UP. A message from a relentlessly cheerful woman with a chirpy Texas accent, who identified herself as the programming coordinator for DefenseFest 33. She hoped he would return her call that night.

Hershie hovered in a dark cloud over the lake, the wind blowing his coat straight back, holding the comm in his hand. He squinted through the clouds and distance until he saw his apartment building, a row of windows lit up like teeth, his darkened window a gap in the smile. He didn’t mind the cold, it was much colder in his fortress of solitude, but his apartment was more than warmth. It was his own shabby, homey corner of the hideously expensive city. On the flight from his mother’s, he’d found an old-style fifty-dollar bill, folded neatly and stuck in the breast pocket of his overcoat.

He returned the phone call.

THE SUPER WASN’T HAPPY ABOUT BEING ROUSED FROM HIS SITCOMS, BUT HE grudgingly allowed Hershie to squirt the rent money at his comm. He wanted to come up and take the padlock, but Hershie talked him into turning over the key, promising to return it in the morning.

His apartment was a little one-bedroom with a constant symphony of groaning radiators. Every stick of furniture in it had been rescued from curbsides

while Hershie flew his night patrols, saving chairs, sofas and even a scarred walnut armoire from the trashman.

Hershie sat at the round Formica table and combed Thomas.

"It's me," he said.

"What's up?"

He didn't want to beat around the bush. "I'm speaking at DefenseFest. Then I'm going on tour, six months, speaking at military shows. It pays well. Very well." Very, very well—well enough that he wouldn't have to worry about his pension. The US-based promoters had sorted his tax status out with the IRS, who would happily exempt him, totally freeing him from entanglements with Revenue Canada. The cheerful Texan had been *glad* to do it.

He waited for Thomas' trademark stream of vitriol. It didn't come. Very quietly, Thomas said, "I see."

"Thomas," he said, a note of pleading in his voice. "It's not my choice. If I don't do this, I'll have to give Woolley my secret identity—he won't give me my pension without my Social Insurance Number."

"Or you could get a job," Thomas said, the familiar invective snarl creeping back.

"I just told you, I can't give out my SIN!"

"So have your secret identity get a job. Wash dishes!"

"If I took a job," Hershie said, palms sweating, "I'd have to give up flying patrols—I'd have to stop fighting crime."

"*Fighting crime?*" Thomas' voice was remorseless. "What *crime?* The bugouts are taking care of crime—they're making plans to shut down the police! Supe, you've been obsoleted."

"I know," Hershie said, self-pitying. "I know. That's why I got involved with you in the first place—I need to have a *purpose*. I'm the Super Man!"

"So your purpose is speaking to military shows? Telling the world that it still needs its arsenals, even if the bugouts have made war obsolete? Great purpose, Supe. Very noble."

He choked on a hopeless sob. "So what can I do, Thomas? I don't want to sell out, but I've got to *eat*."

"Squeeze coal into diamonds?" he said. It was teasing, but not nasty teasing. Hershie felt his tension slip: Thomas didn't hate him.

"Do you have any idea how big a piece of coal you have to start with to get even a one-carat stone? Trust me—someone would notice if entire coalfaces started disappearing."

"Look, Supe, this is surmountable. You don't have to sell out. You said it yourself, you're the Super Man—you have responsibilities. You have duties. You can't just sell out. Let's sleep on it, huh?"

Hershie was so very, very tired. It was always hardest on him when the Earth's yellow sun was hidden; the moon was a paltry substitute for its rejuvenating rays. "Let's do that," he said. "Thanks, Thomas."

DEFENSEFEST 33 OPENED ITS DOORS ON ONE OF THOSE INCREDIBLY BRIGHT MARCH days when the snow on the ground throws back lumens sufficient to shrink your pupils to microdots. Despite the day's brightness, a bitterly cold wind scoured Front Street and the Metro Convention Centre.

From a distance, Hershie watched demonstration muster out front of the Eaton Centre, a few kilometers north, and march down to Front Street, along their permit-proscribed route. The turnout was good, especially given the weather: about 5,000 showed up with woolly scarves and placards that the wind kept threatening to tear loose from their grasp.

The veterans marched out front, under a banner, in full uniform. Next came the Quakers, who were of the same vintage as the veterans, but dressed like elderly English professors. Next came three different Communist factions, who circulated back and forth, trying to sell each other magazines. Finally, there came the rabble: Thomas' group of harlequin-dressed anarchists; high-school students with packsacks who industriously combed their browbeaten classmates who'd elected to stay at their desks; "civilians" who'd seen a notice and come out, and tried gamely to keep up with the chanting.

The chanting got louder as they neared the security cordon around the Convention Centre. The different groups all mingled as they massed on the opposite side of the barricades. The Quakers and the vets sang "Give Peace a Chance," while Thomas and his cohort prowled around, distributing materiel to various trusted individuals.

The students hollered abuse at the attendees who were trickling into the Convention Centre in expensive overcoats, florid with expense-account breakfasts and immaculately groomed.

Hershie's appearance silenced the crowd. He screamed in over the lake, banked vertically up the side of the CN Tower, and plummeted downward. The demonstrators set up a loud cheer as he skimmed the crowd, then fell silent and aghast as he touched down on the *opposite* side of the barricade, with the convention-goers. A cop in riot-gear held the door for him and he stepped inside. A groan went up from the protestors, and swelled into a wordless, furious howl.

HERSHIE AVOIDED THE SHOW'S FLOOR AND HEADED FOR THE GREEN ROOM.

En route, he was stopped by a Somali general who'd been acquitted by a War Crimes tribunal, but only barely. The man greeted him like an old comrade and got his aide to snap a photo of the two of them shaking hands.

The green room was crowded with coffee-slurping presenters who pecked furiously at their comms, revising their slides. Hershie drew curious stares when he entered, but by the time he'd gotten his Danish and coffee, everyone around him was once again bent over their work, a field of balding cabbages anointed with high-tech hair-care products.

Hershie's palms were slick, his alien hearts throbbing in counterpoint. His cowlick wilted in the aggressive heat shimmering out of the vent behind his

sofa. He tried to keep himself calm, but by the time a gofer commed him and squirted directions to the main ballroom, he was a wreck.

HERSHIE COMMED INTO THE FEED FROM THE DEMONSTRATION IN TIME TO SEE THE Quakers sit, en masse, along the barricade, hands intertwined, asses soaking in the slush at the curbside. The cops watched them impassively, and while they were distracted, Thomas gave a signal to his crew, who hastily unreeled a stories-high smartscreen, the gossamer fabric snapping taut in the wind as it unfurled over the Convention Centre's facade.

The cops were suddenly alert, moving, but Thomas was careful to keep the screen on his side of the barricade. Tina led a team of high-school students who spread out a solar collector the size and consistency of a parachute. It glinted in the harsh sun.

Szandor hastily cabled a projector/loudhailer apparatus to the collector. Szandor's dog nipped at his heels as he steadied and focused the apparatus on the screen, and Szandor plugged his comm into it and powered it up.

There was a staticky pop as the speakers came to life, loud enough to be heard over the street noise. The powerful projector beamed its image onto the screen, bright even in the midday glare.

There were hoots from the crowd as they recognized the feed: a live broadcast of the keynote addresses in the Centre. The Patron Ik'Spir Pat's hoverchair prominent. The camera lingered on the Patron's eyes, the only part of him visible from within the chair's masking infrastructure. They were startling, silvery orbs, heavy-lidded and expressionless.

The camera swung to Hershie. Szandor spat dramatically and led a chorus of hisses.

Hershie hastily closed his comm and cleared his throat, adjusted his mic, and addressed the crowd.

"UH..." HE SAID. HIS GUTS SOMERSAULTED. TIME TO GO BIG OR GO HOME.

"Hi." That was better. "Thanks. I'm the Super Man. For years, I worked alongside UN Peacekeeping forces around the world. I hoped I was doing good work. Most of the time, I suppose I may have been."

He caught the eye of Brenda, the cheerful Texan who'd booked him in. She looked uneasy.

"There's one thing I'm certain of, though: it's that the preparation for war has never led to anything *but* war. With this show, you ladies and gentlemen are participating in a giant conspiracy to commit murder. Individually, you may not be evil, but collectively, you're the most amoral supervillain I've ever faced."

Brenda was talking frantically into her comm. His mike died. He simply expanded his mighty diaphragm and kept on speaking, his voice filling the ballroom.

"I urge you to put this behind you. We've entered into a new era in human history. The good Patron here offers the entire Universe; you scurry around,

arranging the deaths of people you've never met.

"It's a terribly, stupid, mindless pursuit. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

With that, Hershie stepped away from the podium and walked out of the ballroom.

THE CAMERA TRACKED HIM AS HE MADE HIS WAY BACK THROUGH THE CONVENTION Centre, out the doors. He leapt the barricade and settled in front of the screen. The demonstrators gave him a standing ovation, and Thomas gravely shook his hand. The handshake was repeated on the giant screen behind them, courtesy of the cameraman, who had gamely vaulted the barricade as well.

The crowd danced, hugged each other, laughed. Szandor's dog bit him on the ass, and he nearly dropped the projector.

He recovered in time to nearly drop it again, as the Patron Ik'Spir Pat's hoverchair glided out the Centre's doors and made a beeline for Hershie.

Hershie watched the car approach with nauseous dread. The Patron stopped a few centimeters from him, so they were almost eyeball-to-eyeball. The hoverchair's PA popped to life, and the Patron spoke, in the bugouts' thrilling contralto.

"Thank you for your contribution," the bugout said. "It was refreshing to have another perspective presented."

Hershie tried for a heroic nod. "I'm glad you weren't offended."

"On the contrary, it was stimulating. I shall have to speak with the conference's organizers; this format seems a good one for future engagements."

Hershie felt his expression slipping, sliding towards slack-jawed incredulity. He struggled to hold it, then lost it entirely when one of the Patron's silvery eyes drooped closed in an unmistakable wink.

"Hi, MAMA."

"Hershie, I just saw it on the television."

He cringed back from his comm as he shrank deeper into the corner of the Belquees that he'd moved to when his comm rang.

"Mama, it's all right. They've signed me for the full six months. I'll be fine—"

"Of course you'll be fine, bubbie. But would it kill you to brush your hair before you go on television in front of the whole world? Do you want everyone to think your mother raised a slob?"

Hershie smiled. "I will, Mama."

"I know you will, bubbie. You're a very good-looking man, you know. But no one wants to marry a man with messy hair."

"I know, Mama."

"Well, I won't keep you. Do you think you could come for dinner on Friday? I know you're busy, but your old mother won't be here forever."

He sighed his father's sigh. "I'll be there, Mama." •

Father's Dragon

James Van Pelt

"DADDY, DADDY, DADDY, I SHOT A DRAGON IN THE garden with the video camera!"

Thomas winced at the word, "dragon," and then, when he shifted his shoulders to get a better angle with the wrench, he clunked his cheekbone against the kitchen sink's U-joint. He thought, not the dragon again. The cabinet edge dug into his back while the cold, rough underside of the sink pinched his elbow against a copper tube. He couldn't see his seven-year-old. "The camera's not a toy, Dolby." Trapped by the plumbing, Thomas' voice sounded stupidly hollow to him.

"Mom said I could use it."

"Tell Mom I said it's not a toy."

"I'm filming your feet, Daddy,"

Thomas tried to pull himself out of the cabinet, but when he turned, his elbow forced the copper tube to bend, starting a fine mist from where it joined the faucet deep in the dark gap behind the sink. "Oh, damn."

"Louder, Daddy. I don't think I got that."

Holding his temper, Thomas said, "Hand me the pliers, son." With his free hand, Thomas bent the tube back, but the mist kept falling. The water sprayed straight into his eyes. He blinked rapidly then leaned his head to the side. His ear filled and the wet pressure on his eardrum pulsed. "The pliers in the tool box. Get me the pliers." He stretched, felt the nut that held the tube flush to the underside of the faucet and put his finger over the leak. A trickle ran down his arm and into his shirt. His other arm ached from holding the wrench in place; its handle felt huge and unwieldy, and he couldn't help thinking it was his father's

wrench, that he shouldn't have it. Thomas' most vivid memory of his father was of a huge man bending over him, hand raised, screaming, "Don't mess with the tools," and then the slap. Thomas's dad disappeared when Thomas was six. Now that he was a dad himself, he thought about his own father a lot. Even though the tools belonged to Thomas, he seldom took them out.

Thomas waited. Water pooled between his shoulder blades and crept along his backbone. "Dolby?" The back screen door slapped shut.

"Ah, hell." Pulling his hand out of the gap increased the spray.

The shut-off valve spun freely when he twisted it. Flicked with his finger, it whirred like a propeller. Water dripped onto the green tile his wife loved, but only reminded him of his kitchen when he was a child, the place of many arguments between his father and mom. Thomas had warned his wife that old country homes like this were maintenance nightmares, but she hadn't cared. He pushed a towel against the cabinet base to soak up the water.

Thomas picked up the tool box and headed for the cellar. In the living room, his wife lay under a fuzzy, blue and yellow afghan, a washcloth folded over her eyes. Thomas said, "I'm going to have to find the main water cut-off."

She nodded slowly.

He said, "Another headache?"

"Little one."

"What about our dinner?"

"I called the sitter."

Thomas slumped. "I was looking forward to getting out together. The two of us."

She lifted her hand, waved it languidly like a handkerchief towards him. "My head."

The tool box's handle was cutting off the circulation to his fingers; their tips tingled. He shifted it to the other hand. "Maybe we ought to see somebody. You got one of these the last time we were going out."

She sat up; the washcloth dropped off her eyes, leaving a red stripe across her face like a broad swath of Indian war paint. "If you really want to, we'll go."

"No, no. I'm just saying you get a lot of headaches."

She pressed the washcloth to her eyes and sank back to the pillow. Thomas started to speak but didn't. She was motionless, absolutely rigid, frozen.

He asked, "Did you tell Dolby he could play with the camera?"

"He said he wanted to film a dragon. I can't talk to him."

Thomas said, "That's a thousand-dollar piece of equipment," and it sounded to him like his father speaking.

She sighed from under the washcloth.

THOMAS SHINED THE FLASHLIGHT UP INTO THE FLOOR JOISTS. HE HAD ONLY BEEN into the cellar twice, first when the realtor showed them the water heater was new and second when he carried the love seat they didn't have room for down the rickety wooden steps. He thought the cellar was a creepy and ugly place.

In the cobwebs, dozens of pipes and wires went every direction. He tracked an insulated pipe from the water heater to a junction where one pipe veered towards the bathroom and another disappeared under the kitchen with several other pipes into a hole that was dripping steadily. He couldn't tell which pipe carried unheated water.

Dolby's behavior preyed on Thomas's thoughts, but more than that, his reaction to his son bothered him. Nothing he said ever seemed to penetrate, as if the boy purposefully ignored him when he spoke. And what worried Thomas was he believed he behaved that way when he was a child. He remembered Dad talking to him, but remembered little he said. Like Dolby, he had lived by his own agenda. After Dad had left, Thomas had a dragon of his own. He had to have one. No one ever listened to him, he had thought. Now Dolby was fascinated with them.

He played his light around. Except for the love seat, this end of the long, narrow cellar was almost empty. The old water heater, a huge, rusting tank with a grate for coals under it, stood next to the new heater, a gleaming white eighty-gallon Sears model that seemed out of place.

At the other end, against a rough stone wall with chunks of mortar missing, a ladder stood in a broad pool of water that covered a third of the cellar. He shined his light on the rippleless surface, wondering how deep it was and if there might be snakes or rats. He guessed there must be a way to drain the cellar. After a few minutes of opening and closing the many fuse boxes cluttered with knife switches and fuses as big around as shotgun shells, most that didn't seem to be connected to anything, their wires hanging loose, he found a button marked, "sump," and without much hope, pressed it. In the lowest corner of the uneven floor, a low gurgle showed the pump worked, and immediately water began sliding towards it. He set the ladder under the kitchen and climbed carefully.

Two pipes rattled loosely when he shook them. A rusty iron one he guessed was the gas, and a slightly newer pipe he hoped was the water line. He followed it with his light as it went through joist after joist until it ran down the wall and into a wooden hatch set into the floor next to the old water heater.

A leather strap served as a handle. He wrapped it around his hand and grunted as he pulled the water-logged door open. A moist, vegetable smell floated against his face when he lay on the floor to look into the hole. Green and black fungus coated all eight of the valves within. Fortunately, the new valve was on top of the old ones. Thomas reached down, spreading his legs for leverage, and he twisted it. The valve creaked, but didn't move. His fingers slipped.

He slid more of his chest over the hole, bracing himself with one hand against a wet pipe. He heard someone on the stairs.

"Daddy, I'm filming your feet." The camera's bright light filled the top quarter of the hole, but the contrast made Thomas's hand invisible. He couldn't tell what he was holding onto.

"Dolby, come shine the light for me."

"I can't. I just wanted another blank tape. I'm recording the dragon."

"Tapes are in the TV cabinet, but come hold the light first."

The light blinked out. Dolby's feet pounded across the kitchen. Thomas sighed and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light from his flashlight that was on the edge of the hole. He twisted again with no result. The valve was too slippery.

THOMAS RUMMAGED THROUGH THE DRAWERS IN THE KITCHEN LOOKING FOR A RAG. His wife mopped water off the tile.

"Why don't you turn the water off?" she said.

"The valve's stuck." He picked up a cloth place mat and held it up to her.

"That's our wedding present from Aunt Mary."

"I've never seen it before."

"I'm waiting for a special occasion."

He put it back in the drawer and opened another filled with plastic spoons and forks. He shut it.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"An old towel or something."

"I threw them out when we moved."

"What can I use?"

She dropped the mop—its handle bounced—dug impatiently into a laundry basket and tossed him one of his older shirts. "There." The shirt landed at his feet, a sleeve draped over his left foot.

"How's your head?" he asked.

"Wonderful. I can stand it. A flood in the kitchen doesn't help. I thought men were supposed to know about plumbing."

"My dad never taught me," he said.

"Fine, then, blame your dad."

"Sorry," he said, and felt awkward because "sorry" wasn't really the right response. He picked up the shirt. "It'll be dark soon. Don't you think Dolby should come in?"

She sat in a kitchen chair, massaged her eyebrows with her thumbs. "He says he's found a dragon. Have you been telling him stories again? If he wakes up screaming tonight..."

Thomas squeezed the shirt into a ball. "One dragon story months ago. If he ignores it, it will go away."

"The dragon or the nightmare?"

"Yeah," said Thomas.

"You call him."

Thomas put the shirt on the table and opened the back door screen. His wife rested her face in her hands. He saw just her nose and a slice of her lips.

The last edge of the sun setting behind him, Dolby stood on a stump in the back yard pointing the bulky camera at the roof. Thomas called him.

"I can't come now, Daddy. He's right above you."

Thomas resisted the urge to look up. "Don't make me tell you twice."

Dolby jumped down and stomped into the house, the camera slapping awkwardly against his legs. Thomas turned sideways to let him in.

"Did you see him?" said Dolby, his face red and angry, "Is it the same one?"

"No," said Thomas.

"Don't you want to see him?"

"What I want is for you to get ready for bed."

"I'm going to watch my tape."

"It's after your bed time. No TV after bedtime, son." Thomas let the door swing shut behind him. The screen pressed against his palms like coarse sandpaper.

"I want to watch this, though. I filmed it."

"No."

Dolby glared at him and then at his mother, her hands still over her face. "It's not fair!" He threw the heavy camera on the floor. Something delicate crunched inside; a lens rolled across the tile and under the refrigerator.

All of Thomas's muscles locked. For a second he could see himself stepping forward, bringing his hand around and slapping his son, a full body weight swing that would take his head off. So Thomas didn't move. He knew he couldn't move.

The boy, crying, ran out of the room. His feet drummed on the stairs, and then his bedroom door slammed shut.

Water hissed out of the leak under the sink; a new peninsula of wetness formed on the recently mopped floor.

Thomas exhaled and realized he'd been holding his breath, then said, "What are we going to do?"

"I'll pick it up."

"About Dolby. What are we going to do about him?"

His wife bent stiffly, as if her back hurt too, and lifted the camera by its strap from the floor. Broken parts shifted inside. "He's your son."

"Our son."

"I didn't tell him about dragons." She dropped the camera in the trash can.

"Maybe it can be fixed."

She snorted. "I'm going to bed."

"I'll turn the water off, and then be up."

She paused at the doorway, rested her hand on the door frame. "Don't bother." Her head leaned against her arm. "I'll be asleep."

IN THE CELLAR, THE FLASHLIGHT FLICKERED. THOMAS SLAPPED IT ANGRILY AGAINST his palm and the light brightened to a dull yellow. He shined it the length of the cellar, towards the sump where the floor glistened, but the pool was gone. The pump's motor whined. Black algae covered the stone floor. He wondered how long it had been since the pump had been turned on and how algae could grow without light. He discovered the float valve on the sump was missing. If he hadn't come downstairs, he figured, the bearing would have burned out by

morning. He pressed the button on the wall, and the motor's noise dropped into the silence of dripping. Water stained the rough stone walls. How often did the cellar need to be pumped?

At the trap door, he dropped onto his chest, reached into the hole and wrapped the shirt around the valve. It turned stiffly, and the constricted water shrieked at the end of the last rotation. Thomas rolled to a sitting position, suddenly exhausted.

Gradually, the flashlight dimmed, then winked out, and he lowered his head to his forearms.

He thought about his father who had never taught him anything, except maybe that you can always run away. He didn't know much about him. A few photographs and a box full of tools were all he had, and now Thomas had to raise a son. Thomas remembered one evening a week after Dad had left. He sat dry-eyed but desperately alone on his kitchen porch step. The horizon glowed faintly orange. The dragon came to him, flying out of the sunset, then landed in the yard and consoled him. For a year after, whenever he was most alone, the dragon came. When the hurt faded away, when Thomas found other friends, the dragon quit coming. Thomas hardly missed him. But now, he thought, he would rather have had a father. What does a father do? he thought. What does a father do when his son doesn't listen to him and his wife is so distant that when they are in the same bed late at night, the father is afraid to breathe because she may hear him? Thomas's father had taken the magic escape. He had ridden the dragon and never returned.

Thomas sat in the dark with his eyes closed until his back and thighs ached from the cold floor.

When he looked up, he saw the cellar was not unlit. The hot water heater's blue-flamed pilot washed a cool and steady light the length of the room. Shadows were deep, black and long. The wet floor glistened like a still ocean under the moon, and from floor to ceiling, tiny mirrors of quartz or mica in the stones reflected stars of pure blue. He studied their glittery light for a long time until he realized he felt better. He imagined he could form constellations from the reflected points, name them anything he wanted, after his dad, his wife, his son, himself.

His back cracked when he stood, and all the stars changed. His own shadow blocked out half the room. He picked up his tools and climbed the stairs.

Under the sink, the steady hiss of escaping water was silenced. Thomas mopped the floor again, squeezing the mop dry after each pass across the tile, filling a bucket half way. When he was done, he stored the mop and bucket, wrang out the towel he'd placed under the sink, hung it to dry, and, after making sure the kitchen was in order, opened the screen door and walked into his back yard.

His neighbor's corn field on the other side of the fence rustled like a thousand sheets of paper rubbing against each other, and the moon glowed in the tassels. Thomas faced his home; light from the kitchen streamed through the door and

windows. His bedroom window on the second floor was dark. Dolby's was lit. On the roof the dragon lay, straddling the apex. As long as the house, its tail looped around and under its front paw.

Graceful as a cat, the dragon came down and stretched itself at Thomas's feet. He could hear its breathing, low and rumbling, and when the dragon turned his head toward him, its eye was big as a manhole cover. A clear membrane flicked over the eye from below, changing it from green to milky grey for an instant and then back. Then the dragon turned its head away and lowered its shoulder. Thomas saw the flat place behind its head and in front of the wings. A place where a man could mount and hold on.

Thomas stepped forward and stroked the dragon's neck. The skin was warm and the scales finely textured like silk. Thomas said, "I know why you came back, but I can't go with you. That was my father's choice."

Under the moon, in the night, in Thomas's back yard, the dragon raised his head and looked down at him. Thomas said, "I have to fix the plumbing." The dragon's breath growled. Thomas added, "I have work to do."

Thomas walked inside and started to shut the door. The dragon's eyes followed him. Thomas lifted a hand to wave. "I'm sorry," he said.

In the kitchen, he waited until he heard noises like gusts of wind, the huge wings flapping. He listened until he couldn't hear them anymore and then he headed up the stairs.

At the top, he paused. The house was quite. No dripping. The pressure was off. Thomas knocked on his son's door. Dolby first, then his wife.

"Son, we need to talk." •

In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by SUSAN MAYSE, NATALKA ROSHAK, KAREN TRAVISS, DAVE KIRTLEY, IAN CREASEY, JULIA HELEN WATTS, PAUL E. MARTENS, CARL SIEBER, CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY, JAMES VAN PELT, KATE RIEDEL, HARRY JAMES CONNELLY, HOLLY PHILLIPS, RANDY D. ASHBURN, JAMES STEPHEN FORREST, BARTH ANDERSON, JAINE FENN, S.A. BOLICH, and many more!

Red Planet Blues

Steve Mohn

EXHIBIT ONE: IT'S HARD TO KNOW FROM WATCHING *Mission to Mars*, but Brian De Palma has made a film before. You can look it up. Nor is he new to SF. So this unqualified disaster (even to Gary Sinese failing to keep a straight face in his scenes) *should* turn on every conceivable thing going wrong. The first mission goes offline, the second tries to find them but micrometeoroids cause a fuel leak (and what is that blue stuff, kerosene?), which causes an explosion that destroys their ship. After a stunt in Low Mars Orbit that looks like three-on-a-horse, one of them suicides to save the others by popping his helmet in vacuum—

Hit PAUSE: the implication is that Tim Robbins, the lucky actor who leaves early, dies quickly and painlessly of freezer burn. But you would not freeze just like that. Space is the best insulator: there is nothing to conduct heat away. Nor would you explode like people kept doing in *Outland* (1981). The sudden loss of air pressure would lower the boiling point of water to body temperature, but only in Mr. Robbins's face: the rest of him is covered by his suit. He would boil dry from the outside-in, while his lungs fill his mouth with bloody sponge.

Nothing painless about it, but it's not fast. Hit PAUSE:

The surviving astronauts land to find one of the original crew living in a habitat and soft greenhouse from Robert Zubrin's Mars-Direct scenario. And that "Face on Mars" that the *Viking 1* orbiter found, which some took for evidence of civilization? As early as April 1998, two years before *Mission*, the Mars Global Surveyor was mapping the Cydonia region of the northern plains, including a butte that, depending on cloud cover, dust cover and the angle of the light, might be identified as alien by someone in the right mood. But in *Mission*, the Face is a monument to a vanished race. After wasting as much screen time as possible outside it, De Palma takes his astronauts in. Not sure what it should look like in there, he does it all in white. What happens then is an info dump, as imagined by Whitley Strieber had he been a black-velvet painter of sad-eyed puppies.

The film is shot in long dreamy takes, sometimes slow motion, the usual visual trope for weightlessness. De Palma has used fluid camera shots before: the circular tracking shots at the prom in *Carrie* (1976) and in the airport at the end of *Obsession* (1976). He's famous for slow-motion sequences, like the escape in *The Fury* (1978). But *Mission's* unexciting shots meander around oddly unconvincing sets, watching stiff actors do nothing. Then, having deprived them of story and character, De Palma loses environment, restricting them to studio close-ups that will later get backgrounds that don't look real, just red. Mars is not red anyway, certainly not Red #2.

AND SO, EXHIBIT TWO:

I watched *Red Planet* like someone at a race track, rocking as if urging my horse to win. Mars was the right color, that rusty shade of orange. Even the suits didn't look bad and suits almost always look bad.

But a movie is first of all written. *Red Planet's* premise is that the blue one will soon be uninhabitable—though not due to global warming; from space, the Florida peninsula shows an unaltered coastline. Six anglo-saxons, of which one is female, leave on a huge double-wheeled ship to learn why oxygen produced by algae previously sent—

Hit PAUSE: to terraform Mars, nuclear charges melted the carbon dioxide polar caps; never mind that these evaporate seasonally anyway, leaving residual water-ice. Seed algae is rocketed in for a CO₂ feast, whose flatulence will be oxygen. Never mind that algae like water and that Mars has no liquid water; never mind that the arean atmosphere has only trace oxygen and nitrogen, and no ozone, so no protection from UV, which is absolutely lethal to plants. These bio-engineered algae make oxygen anyway; they may even make paper dolls when they're bored. But sensors on the ground indicate that all their vast O₂ production has—disappeared!

FAST-FORWARD through the voyage, during which the characters learn each others names and almost have conversations. One even admits he doesn't know why he's there. Then a solar flare bombards the ship with gamma rays—

Hit PAUSE: solar flares don't produce gamma rays; and the charged particles

emitted by flares move slower than the light of the flare, so people have time to take cover; also, while ionizing radiation damages organic matter, inert material can take huge doses without much effect. So—

FAST-FORWARD through the almost total physical destruction of the vessel, resulting in the usual loss of power and most of the crew leaving the ship as if the possibility had never been foreseen. The female commander remains behind, frustrated by her inability to act. Almost accidentally, the men hit Mars, and find the habitat they had been counting on demolished.

But there *is* oxygen. Those ground sensors failed. The actors doff helmets. To beat the evening chill of -140°C , they burn a fuel dump that might have been put to another purpose. Their suits could not have kept them warm; it turns out they don't even recycle water: these guys just piss that away. And there's no alga anywhere. Nematodes ate it. These unsegmented cylindrical *worms* on Earth are katydids here on Mars, but instantly recognizable as nematodes because someone opened a biology book and saw that word and wrote it down. They have eaten all the alga. That's why there is (sorry) is not oxygen... on...

Let's ask the on-board computer.

During an ice storm that threatens the men on the surface, "Lucille" says the atmospheric pressure of the storm is 820 millibars, which is high for Mars: on average it's more like 7.5. On Earth at sea level it's 1013. But Lucille didn't know there was oxygen down there. Just don't ask the robot—anything. Its purpose is to malfunction so it can kill people when locked in "military mode"—and why would it *have* a military mode?

But it's a good thing there is oxygen on Mars. The action sequences require combustion. The whole point of the script is to provide enough O_2 so that we can have conflagrations and noise. This goes back to that liquid rocket fuel leaking from the ship in *Mission to Mars*, freezing solid instead of sublimating to vapor, because it has to explode, right?

AND SO THEN:

It may be that the magnet at the heart of SF that pulls us in has its power in the validity of what is being suggested, so that all this stuff that is tossed at us, this cinema and FX, is the opposite of majesty, the opposite of what you feel in wonder when you look at a night sky (or even a blue sky, having already some notion of what you are looking at) and get that shrink-wrap tingle that says if you try hard you really *can* get a sense, or sensation, of how great it is, how glorious, how uncompromising; how it doesn't care what you think of it, it's just going to go on and on for billions of years, doing what it does at the unimaginable scales at which it functions. Which is not the level of these crap shoots with nipple shots and comps with cute names and space ships with six people on them and miles of tubing for them to wander in while failing to establish their characters beyond the thinnest human attributes.

These should have been good movies. They had the elements—and the hard thing to take is that I am sure none of the people involved understood that or

cared. Not that they didn't read Arthur C. Clarke or consult their *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* entry for "space opera" to learn that, really, no one does this any more. They didn't even know that they might have thought for two minutes how, say, the old west, with its prairies and indigenous peoples, icy winters and burning summers, determined that life could be lived there in certain ways and not in others. And that *that* was how the west was not so much won as endured, and how thereby hung the tale, even made the tale what it had to be. But none of them thought to do more than try for the usual pot of money by making guys in the dark wish they were one of those guys up there, about to get into that babe or kill like that or survive like that, or come close to dying but live—because it's a movie, whose clearly expendable people will leave before the credits roll, while the leads will survive, their survival written into the screenplay as it is written into their contracts, along with the number of close-ups they will get.

I guess there's a limit, after all. A limit on the imagination, a limit to what the average Joe can let himself imagine when the whole culture is saying that it has to take a leak, and that *that* is the extent of its ambition. I'm not sure anyone watching these movies with me cared about them. They all jumped up to leave as soon as the credits rolled. I knew I was the one leaving just to get away from the damn things, out of range of their cinematic halitosis. But I don't think that matters. I don't think most people who go to the movies actually see them. At some level they "experience" visual sensory data that lets them tell other people: "Saw that." Or they function on a level so above mine that they are as the Krel of *Forbidden Planet* to my bumbling Caliban.

But either I'm a fool (there is plenty of evidence for this) or some day a new generation of viewers, who are also readers and fully comp-literate, will rise up in disgust with this stuff and banish it to the junk yards where only guys like George Lucas *can* find work. Who will want something else, something that will speak to them as educated people unashamed of being educated; who will *see* something that someone has managed to get made and put into general release; who will say, loudly enough to be heard: "*This* is how it is should be—do it *this* way, or don't do it." Since these things tend to be generational and I've done half my stash, I may never see it. But if it doesn't come to pass, then the future is over and we were it. •

Mediation

Catherine MacLeod

JARED OPENED THE OFFICE DOOR. “NEXT.”

The couple walked in without looking at each other. Their paperwork was straightforward; they needed help with the division of assets. There were no children, third parties, or business mergers. They’d agreed on mediation to the death.

Jared nodded. “This way, please.” He settled them in the virtual reality booth.

“Comfortable? Good.” He stepped outside and cued his view screen. “Mediation will begin in thirty seconds.”

The woman buried her husband alive, shoveling mud with horrific glee. He stalked her through an old house, shoving her down the stairs. She staggered upright and planted a knife in his ribs.

Jared began to fill out the necessary forms. At this rate their hearts might last another hour. The survivor would take everything and call it alimony.

He was sure that at one time divorce had been simpler. •

Louis de Niverville

when fantasy is reality

Gordon Snyder

STANDING IN DE NIVERVILLE'S STUDIO, I CATCH MYSELF stealing glances at this man whose fantasy is his reality.

A sickly childhood spent in a hospital bed meant the artist child had to fabricate his memories from an early age. De Niverville cut figures from comics and imposed them into situations using fragments of family visits and visions of his idea of growing-up as a “normal child” to create his childhood. Dolls and families, babies and familiar objects lurch out at us from the paintings and collages screaming nightmare instead of family picnic, and horror movie rather than dolls and a dog. Pets lounge and lick themselves somewhere between the fantastic and the surreal and yet somehow I know—to Louis—this is reality.

De Niverville has always been interested in Folk Art and the work of Naïve painters such as Rousseau. His own work echoes the three main themes of Canadian Folk Art: reflection, commitment and fantasy. As in folk art, de Niverville's work gives us a look into his secret thoughts and dreams. Many ideas with both personal and universal meanings spring from his use of multiple symbols. This creates images that could be positioned in the realm of art history somewhere between folk art and surrealism.

Louis' work been the subject of many articles and reviews over the years, my favorite of which is “Artist's nightmares extraordinarily beautiful,” written by Sol Littman and published in the *Toronto Star* in 1974. •



"Nostalgia" 48 x 36 acrylic on linen

©2001 Louis de Niverville



"At the Gates" 36 x 40 acrylic on canvas

©2001 Louis de Niverville



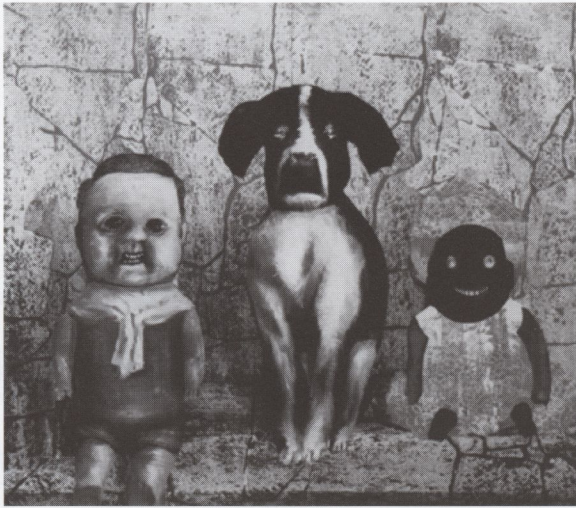
"Van Dyck's Other Baby" 30 x 40 acrylic on canvas

©2001 Louis de Niverville



"The Comfort of Mrs. Chan" 36 x 40 mixed media

©2001 Louis de Niverville



"Fido's Dilemma" 36 x 40 mixed media

©2001 Louis de Niverville



"The Reluctant Fido" 36 x 40 mixed media

©2001 Louis de Niverville

Rings Like the Blast of Light

Vivian Zenari

2198-12-14

Under normal circumstances I sleep four hours a day and still try to work twenty-four. Hospitalization engenders the enforced idleness, and hence the opportunities for meditation, which I have normally lacked in my life.

As more months pass and my pregnancy waxes, I tend increasingly toward strange thoughts. I have begun to think about the effects of different colors of starlight on people I know. Anne, my new prenatal healthcare attendant, prospers under our yellow star. Blue eyes, white skin, amber hair like the gorgeous light from Saturn. Olivar, with his black hair and bronze skin, would appear even more striking in red starlight than in the yellow starlight of the Sun. With his olive skintone, Chu-chang would find new glory under green light, as I would. Under the additive principle of color mixing Chu-chang's and Olivar's lights make yellow light. If they produced a light-child it would look like Anne.

Today was Anne's first day. She asked me how I was doing. I said, fine, considering that I might be losing my mind. She said she did not know what I meant. I said, that's why I'm keeping a diary. She told me she did not know I was keeping a diary.

Either she remains ignorant of my full circumstances, then, or she is pretend-

ing not to know. Well, Anne, not only do I keep a diary, you are now in it. An unsuspecting player in this game.

No, it is not a game. I approved of it. Maybe it would have been my idea, if I was in Olivar and Chu-chang's place. I used to be in their place. Once a colleague, now a patient. Funny how the tables turn. No, not funny. Fateful. Or fateless, at least from my standpoint. I am the one who became pregnant. Slept with a stranger. Someone I picked up in a bar. Except I picked this particular man. Yakob. Not actually a man, it turned out.

While Anne monitored the baby in my womb, her whitebread smile did not falter. When she was done she bustled out like a contented grandmother. She has a good job here—she must be pleased with herself. Anne grew up on Mars Station Eight, and she was selected for the healthcare program while travelling here on Mars-Titan Barge 6. She found a position as soon as she arrived, right in the thick of extraterrestrial prenatal services. People have started to have families on Station Thetis. Six other women are pregnant. Their babies will be a novelty because they will be among the first born in Titan's orbit. Mine of course constitutes more than the usual novelty. But I have always been an overachiever.

Anne is much different than Haile. Chu-chang must have revised the psychological profile for the healthcare attendant best suited to look after me. To be frank, I had not thought Haile's profile would have suited anything. His stoicism, on the surface, may have seemed ideal. Assigning Haile to me was Chu-chang's call, and I usually trust him. But profiles remain provisional upon actual application. In the end Haile could not take it. Or me. Something. So he was moved out of the unit, and Anne has taken his place.

2198-12-15

Today Anne asked why I keep the diary. This means she has not asked Olivar or Chu-chang, or she has but wants to hear my perspective. I said, my pregnancy has affected my psychology as well as physiology. We thought it might be fruitful for future research if I kept a log. I am supposed to let my thoughts out, unchecked, for science. Allow things to flow out of me. I can review the files for my entries whenever I want, and the diary will be studied only after I give birth. Anne asked if keeping the diary ever bothers me, and I said that for a while it felt odd speaking my thoughts aloud. But it has become addictive, like yelling into a canyon and hearing the echo—the sound like the deep boom of water in your ears when you are submerged—and you desire the effect of the echo so much you yell again.

Anne seems ambitious. But I was, too, when I started on the road to interplanetary medicine. I was young once. I wanted to travel the world, save the world and leave the world all at the same time. I must still be ambitious, to go through with it. Though by the time this happened I had grown tired of the long nights in the lab, travelling from station to station, dealing with this miner and that geologist, all bravado thrill-seekers at heart who cannot bear the idea that they are sick, that they need to see a doctor. They think they can chew their legs

off to get out of their traps. Like hell. You chew your leg off and you bleed to death.

Maybe having a baby is like chewing my leg off. Hah.

2198-12-16

I received a video transmission from my brother Domenico from Earth. Mamma sent along a low-tech prayer card of Saint Joseph— still of Saint Joseph followed by the text of a prayer. She did not send a personal message. Considering what I have been getting from her lately, I should consider myself fortunate. In the transmission Domenico said Mamma prays for me at the chapel in the old-age home every night. Since he is New Order Catholic, Domenico does not approve of candle lighting and incense burning. But he said that he also prays for me.

When I hear from my family, I wish I could reproduce the state of mind I experience when I have my blackouts. I cannot recreate the sensations on demand, however.

2198-12-17

Chu-chang and Olivar came to see me. They said someone from El Dorado Station at Jupiter claims to have encountered a non-human life form. The Interplanetary Peace Force has been receiving reports like this for decades now, more or less of the UFO variety. Now that the authorities know my situation, people are trying to take these reports more seriously. I suspect this report, like the others, will lead to nothing more than an odd-looking, slightly deranged miner. Human, all too human.

The last time Olivar and Chu-chang came to see me together was when I passed my tenth month of pregnancy, and they told me they did not know when I was going to give birth. We do not know when this baby will be finished cooking, because we do not have the recipe. We agreed then that for the time being we would not consider inducing.

Today Olivar asked if I have been getting any exercise. For properly socialized people, that statement would provide a perfect jumping-off point for an invitation to go to the Saturn courtyard, to take me so I would get some exercise. But he has no skill in these things. He merely wants to know so he can write in his report, "No exercise this week." He ought to remember that the courtyard is one of my favorite places. We used to go there together when he was stationed here on Thetis with me. It was from those visits that I decided that he was not a yellow star person. The light through the windows and the skylights in the courtyard showers down like pale honey. Yet this wonderful radiance does not flatter him.

Olivar only comes twice a month. He says he finds it difficult to justify travel all the way from Station Oceania above the southern hemisphere, which is his territory now, when he has so much work to do. Chu-chang turns up almost every day, despite his schedule. He has taken my responsibilities for infectious

disease and he must deal with that as well as trauma. No new doctors arrived on MTB Six, just healthcare attendants like Anne and more geologists and miners. A kind of tubercular disease has swept through the miner compounds, and he has only just been able to develop genetic therapies to stop it. I gave him advice, but I cannot work because I feel tired all the time. And I still experience blackouts.

I had another today. The black cowl drew over my body, beginning at my feet, and floated up over my head. One second later I surfaced. Anne happened to be in my room, and when I told her she said she had not noticed anything strange at all about me, neither from the monitors nor through my appearance or behavior.

Olivar suggests my blackouts derive from stress. I do not believe this. The blackouts do not produce unpleasant emotions. I simply seem to drop out of the picture, and everything is taken care of for me. It feels—comforting.

2198-12-18

Anne said the tests I had yesterday came up negative. Rather I should say negatively regular. My white blood count was as high as heaven, but we have become accustomed to that result. We worry when it drops a little, in fact.

Otherwise, all I did today was read the beautiful old printed book of *The Divine Comedy* Domenico sent to me on MTB Six. Yes, Dante's Beatrice and my Anne together ascended the heavenly spheres to reach me.

I wish I could see Domenico face to face. Ten years have passed since I left Earth. Direct communications between Earth and Titan are delayed by more than an hour. Real conversations lie outside the realm of possibility. We give monologues instead. In this sense we have regressed two thousand years. In those days, instant long-distance communication was a fantasy. Time has become worth something again out here.

2198-12-19

Chu-chang asked me about the darkness I experienced a couple of days ago. I flicked on my dispassionate scientist switch. I said it could be a sort of depression. The feeling is similar but admittedly not congruent. This feels more—physical.

I wonder what kind of starlight will suit my baby. I do not know what star its father was born under. From what little I knew of him, his appearance and the bare outlines of his personality, he could have belonged anywhere, beautifully. He was a man but really he was not.

2198-12-20

Well. I should describe what happened today, for the record. That is the point of all this. Anne took me to the Saturn courtyard. She talked me into it by saying I could use an autochair. I now find walking a chore, since my huge abdomen protrudes awkwardly, and my feet are swollen. Anne said I could think of it as a field trip rather than as an exercise session. The chair floated me along the

hallway to the courtyard and Anne walked beside me.

The sight of Saturn and its rings used to fill me with such delight. The courtyard's walls and ceiling are transparent, and from Thetis's orbit one half of Saturn looms past the edge of Titan's horizon. You can almost convince yourself you are directly orbiting Titan, like a tiny sub-satellite, staring up into space with no barrier between you and the great planet. The light floods down on the courtyard as though Saturn was not a planet but a star. Whenever I used to look at Saturn, it seemed to be a great big piece of art set up there only for me. But I did not feel peaceful today. I felt as though I no longer belonged under that radiance. I could not look up: the light blinded me. I became agitated—I could classify it as a panic attack. Anne noticed and took me away.

She could not know what a change has come over me, if I did not want to stay in the courtyard. As a result, I thought I should mention this for the diary.

2198-12-21

Anne asked if I feel bored at times. After all, I have lived in this unit for eleven months. Imagine: pregnant for twelve months! She said she once kept a diary, but one day when she was seventeen she lost interest. Suddenly it did not seem worth the trouble: what she did every day was not significant enough to document. I asked her if this alteration occurred about the time she decided to be a healthcare attendant. She said she did not know. I could see that line of discussion distressed her. It is the truth, however. Teenagers stop keeping a diary when they start looking outside themselves. Keeping a diary is a form of mental health self-help. You decide you want to cure someone else, be someone else's savior, because you do not consider yourself the center of the universe anymore.

2198-12-22

This morning Anne asked me when I knew the baby's father was not human. I told her I did not know until Chu-chang confirmed my pregnancy and said he wanted to do another test. My white blood count was elevated, as though something had triggered my immune system. He did another test. The placenta contained a soup of hormones that partially neutralized my immune system, as though the fetus expected my immune system would attack it. This baby is a professional parasite. It prevents my body from shoving it out like a foreign egg from the nest.

Anne seemed satisfied with my answer. But did she not know all of this already? I must admit I wondered if someone had told her to ask this question. Sometimes I suspect she functions as a drone, instructed to do her work and ask only the questions people give her permission to ask. She is a far cry from Haile.

2198-12-23

I upset Anne today. I mentioned I once considered ending the pregnancy. Even now I could choose to abort the baby. She said to me, but it's almost over,

it's been so long, and now you want to do this? I reassured her that I no longer considered the option. She said, look, I'll never be able to have children this way. I don't have fallopian tubes or ovaries or any of that. I asked, what about in vitro and extrauterine gestation? She said, of course. But this way, the normal way, it seems to just happen. You don't even know it's happened, she said, until weeks later. It's magical. Miraculous.

Lucky me, having this miracle, I said. She asked, don't you want it? And I said, yes, and then again, no. It's happened, and now I'm letting it go on. For science. She said, what if you'd known that Jakob wasn't human and that you would get pregnant if you had sex with him? Would you have done it?

Good question. But I do not have an answer.

2198-12-24

No one has called on me for a while. Not Chu-chang. Not Olivar. Apparently I am a pariah now. My belly bursting out, I am starting to look like a freak. Acting like a freak. And why not? Something strange lives inside me and it is going to come out of me and be its own self. I have no idea what it will be. I have no idea who its father is. From the outside the baby looks human but it cannot be.

2198-12-25

I received a transmission from Domenico. It is a Christmas transmission. I do not celebrate Christmas, yet I retain some nostalgia for it, the nostalgia of childhood. Going to zia Susanna's for Christmas Eve supper, then to Midnight Mass, then back to zia Susanna's for another meal and opening presents. I liked getting presents. And Papà would refrain from drinking on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Domenico told me Mamma is very close to dying. That is why she sent the prayer card. I am glad he told me about Mamma. He could have held back because Christmas is supposed to be a happy day, a celebration.

The last real exchange I had with Mamma was when I sent a transmission where I said, jokingly I thought, that a hundred years ago a woman was post-menopausal at sixty, and now here I was, this sixty-year old, having a baby. An hour later I received a transmission from her. She said, I never told you to wait that long. You should have stayed here, she said, married that doctor in Milan. Nothing I do is ever any good for her. She did not say it, but the tone said, don't blame me for this. In my video rebuttal I responded, you didn't even like Leopoldo. She said, he was better than the others. I said, you see, I had you as a role model. I've adopted your standard. I just won't marry a man until I find the man who's as nasty as dear old dad.

She let loose. All the things she wanted to say. The not being married part. The being promiscuous part.

Mamma is old-school Catholic. No birth control. Which I was not using at the time, since I had no need to, not being sexually active, not being a spring

chicken exactly. She said, that's typical, you deciding to act like a Catholic about *that*.

No abortions, she would have said, if I had suggested it. Though I think she wishes I had at least suggested it.

When Mamma dies Domenico and I will be the only ones left in our family. The fate of our bloodline rests in this little package under my skin.

2198-12-26

I said to Anne, how much do you know about this baby? She said, a lot, but not everything. She said she knows my story about meeting the man named Yakob in the bar and having sex with him, and then getting pregnant. I said, what do you mean by that, *story*? Do you think I made this all up, about this guy? Did I imagine getting pregnant, too? She said, no, no, and I said, how do they explain the long-term gestation, the immunological reaction, why do they make me keep this diary? Have they assigned you as my personal Saint Joan? Are they hoping your moral rectitude will rub off on me? Are they trying to put me on the path of righteousness?

I was screaming at that point. She ran out of my unit. The other attendants came, held me down, injected me, put me to sleep.

I wonder if she will come back. Haile's last day ended like this. It was much worse, though. I yelled at him, but unlike Anne, he yelled back. Something like—just a moment, let me read what he said from my diary. He said—he said, yeah, you *are* going nuts. Dr. Olivar said so to me. I mean, how can you think this guy was an alien, for fuck's sake? And you just go on and on about this guy, and he was just a one-night stand! I said, oh, here we go, another attendant with delusions of grandeur. A guy takes a night course in psychology and suddenly he thinks he's Freud. He said, hey, I'm not the one keeping a "diary." I'm not the one under "special observation." Face it, you're a real case. You are fucking nuts!

So do you all still think I am "nuts"? Fine. Perhaps I am. Maybe I invented that man, or I hallucinated him. But at least I am having a baby. A child of my own to care for. I hope you like your pathetic little jobs because you have nothing else.

2198-12-27

OLIVAR: ...because the readings aren't changing anymore. It looks like things are normalizing.

D'AMATO: Normalizing for who?

OLIVAR: Well, uh—

D'AMATO: Do you know what it feels like, José, to be secretly recorded?

OLIVAR: You aren't being secretly recorded.

D'AMATO: I listened to the entries from a few days ago and I don't remember saying some of the things I hear in them.

OLIVAR: Natalina, we don't edit the transcripts. Don't accuse us of that again.

D'AMATO: Who is us?

- OLIVAR: Myself and Chu-chang.
- D'AMATO: Don't tell me only you and Chu-chang listen to my diary.
- OLIVAR: Natalina, you know that you are the only one who can review your diary.
- D'AMATO: Right, of course, right.
- OLIVAR: I'm sorry, Natalina, if I'm bothering you. I can leave now, if you want me to.
- D'AMATO: Yes, yes, maybe you should. These crazy alien baby hormones are making me say things I don't mean.
- OLIVAR: I'm sorry.
- D'AMATO: No. I'm sorry. I'm tired. I'm doing my best.
- OLIVAR: More than the best, Natalina, considering what's going on.
- D'AMATO: Considering what? My pregnancy?
- OLIVAR: Yes.
- D'AMATO: That's all?
- OLIVAR: Natalina—
- D'AMATO: José, I wanted something else but I got this, instead. I didn't know what I wanted then, José.
- OLIVAR: What do you mean?
- D'AMATO: What I did with that man.
- OLIVAR: I don't judge you. No one does.
- D'AMATO: I should have acted differently with you, tried harder.
- OLIVAR: Natalina—
- D'AMATO: Yakob seemed younger than I was. As young as you are.
- OLIVAR: Natalina, I can't, I can't—
- D'AMATO: Can't what?
- OLIVAR: I'm sorry, I have to go.
- D'AMATO: So, did this performance impress you? Did it provide you with enough material for a publication in *Extraterrestrial Medicine*? Or a four-week tour of the talk-show circuit? How about you, Olivar? Did you like hearing what you say in the heat of the moment? To know what someone might do at the desperate edge of human emotion? Now maybe you have some idea.

2198-12-28

I have nothing to say. I am not talking today.

2198-12-29

Likely you are trying to confuse me by leaving that diary entry in. But I remember I said something else, something like, my legs are tired, I need to stretch. This does not appear in the diary entry. I remember thinking those words, and I would have spoken them. Also, I think the wrong names have been assigned to the lines of dialogue. For example, I was the one who said, I can leave now, if you want me to, and what he actually said next has been deleted. Then

he said, it should have been different, then I remember we kissed, like we used to, and he said, Natalina, I can't, I can't. Then he left, I called after him, don't abandon me, don't go. None of this is in the diary.

2198-12-30

Anne came today. She said Olivar took me off her duty list for a couple of days. So I could cool off, I suppose. She gave me a bath, put some perfumed powder on me. I need to get out. I'm tired. I need to get out. I'm tired. I need to get out.

2198-12-31

My water broke. It's starting. Doctors from other stations have come. Mel Roberts. Marika Jasper. Bal Gendalu. Olivar will not be here. I suspect he fears that people will think he has fathered this baby if he attends the birth. That is why he is absent.

2199-01-01

I am in labor. The bastards still want me to make a diary entry. They left the room so I can have my privacy. Hell, why not make a diary while giving birth? Maybe I will start a new fashion. Everyone will want to make diaries when giving birth so years later they can use the recordings to put a guilt-trip on their children, say, look what I went through for you, and now all you do is, etcetera, etcetera.

And soon everyone will want to have alien babies. They will be calling me up, trying to find the address of that guy I screwed. And I will have to tell them, hey, he just looked like a man, someone you would find at a bar. And the best thing is, he was ordinary. No, better than ordinary. A nobody. Nobody weight and nobody height and nobody conversation. Sports and beer and the latest on the latest talk show.

The day before I met Yakob, the health center threw a party for my sixtieth birthday. José did not come. We had fought the day before. He had said, I'm transferring to Oceania. I can't take you anymore, in these close quarters there's too much of you. But what else did I have but me? What could I do against that kind of argument? I am all I ever had.

The day after my birthday it was back to normal for everyone else, but I had to live with the banal remainder of myself. I decided, let's have another party, a one-person party. I go to the bar. Drink. Meet Yakob. I had never seen him before, which was not unusual, especially if he was only temporarily assigned to Thetis. Then it's the morning after the night before. I wake up half-believing he will still be there, but he is gone. I must have had such a—need. This happens to so many people so many times, on Earth and now on the other planets, and it is happening to me. I wonder if they will leave in my screams. I need to get out. I do not want it to end but it is, it is so strange, pressure everywhere, I need to get out.

2199-01-02

I tell them, put me under again, but they want me to talk. I do not want to see her. If I see her I will go mad. Because now I have four eyes. I see outside my body, and I see outside the baby's body. I see my hands lying on the bedsheets, and I see her shadowy fists flung out in front of her as she lies in her bed. I have four hands. I have four eyes.

2199-01-03

They have sedated the baby. Now I can stop being her. For that is what has happened. I am her. I have been her and me for the past year.

I do not want to talk anymore.

2199-01-04

Olivar brought me to her. I asked to see her. Since they have placed her in an intensive care cell, I cannot touch her. Through the clear walls of her cell my eyes drink her in. Her skin is pink, and thick black hair covers her head. They have drugged her to unconsciousness so I can be alone in my consciousness. She has been sedated for two days now. Cuckoo baby, I whispered to her, you have taken over me. José started to cry. I have named her Cristina, after my mother.

2199-01-05

Anne checked on me for the first time that I know of since I had the baby, as I have been sedated for much of this. She said, Dr. D'Amato, I don't know what to say. I said, anything you say will be completely original, because this has never happened to anyone before. She said, I wonder if I could say something if I had my own child. I said, maybe you would. She said, maybe it isn't so different, maybe every mother feels the same way. I asked what she meant. She said, to have something that is you, but not you. I said, Anne, you are brilliant. A genius.

2199-01-06

I have decided. Chu-chang asked me to reconsider, tears in his eyes almost, but José understands. So, of course, does Anne. I will open up Cristina's eyes tomorrow, and let her see. I will give her life back, just as I gave it to her a few days ago.

2199-01-07

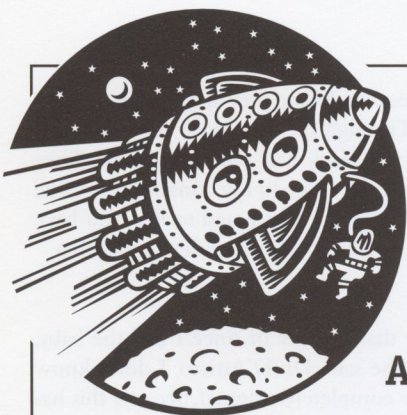
As Anne lays Cristina down for a nap, I see the bars of the crib through my gray-shrouded newborn eyes. Yet at the same time I gaze up at the ceiling in the courtyard and look at the rings of Saturn. I feel drowsy. I feel exhilarated.

José was present when Cristina awoke from her artificial death. I shared with him the experience of double vision, double thought. Hungry at the same time as awake, asleep at the same time as aware of him, holding her/me. José wants to live in Station Thetis with us. I asked, with two of us, is there now less of us? He seemed ashamed. Nothing would please me more if he stayed here, as long as he

understands that now he will always be second to us—Cristina and I.

As for Jakob, I do not know if I care if he is ever found. Nothing about Cristina reminds me of him.

In the Saturn courtyard the light falls on me like warm streams of liquid gold, and the immense bands around the planet hang above my head in the blue-black of space. One day Cristina will be able to share my vision. Only now do I understand what attracts me to this place. Space is like the night of the womb, and Saturn's rings like the blast of light at birth. •



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paulo da costa

el dia del diablo,
djun-djuns and spoons
open the lid to the night

under warmer skies
and older villages
tradition springs as far
as burning betrayed beds
and beads of bad luck

here we are a larger country
and stars escape the bonfire
with acquiescent gestures

i walk inside, join the chorus
of bodies tossing diamonds
of sweat on the floor,
this is how rich we are

on my ticket, i finally
scribble meek words
intrinsic to the culture
i forget what now
we don't want private sins
under public scrutiny
we wish to forget seduction,
shame, plague of lies

i imagine a pretty
weeny petty winy list
vanishing in smoke
never to be seen
my karma steam cleaned

outside, coals smolder
under a mantle of snow,
this is the unpredictable
future up north

my list spirals down,
a crumb on snow, i
remember nothing truly vanishes
riding on a bruised cloud
smoke returns as cold as hail

in the mornings my face washed
with sprinkles of the past
for even water has memory •

Last One

Holly Phillips

THE HOB WOKE SASHA AT THE EDGE OF NIGHT WITH a brush of whiskers on her face. Caught as usual in bloody dreams, she pushed it violently away and sat up, adrenaline slicing her nerves. She'd left the light on all day so she wouldn't wake into darkness, but even so, the attic room was dense with shadow under the cobwebbed rafters, the slant walls and floor of rough-cut boards dingy in the forty-watt glow. The hob slunk away, sulking, its cat shape blacker than the shadows under the table. That and the trundle bed were the only furniture in the room.

Hunt tonight, said the hob, its voice a fire whisper in her head.

"Last one," Sasha replied. Her voice was hoarse, her dry mouth cottony. "Right, hob? Last one tonight."

The hob smirked in her mind, but did not disagree. Sasha scrubbed sweat off her face with a sheet-corner and stretched, slow and careful. The new scars on her shoulder pulled, making her hiss: a good reminder. The last hunt had nearly killed her—would have, if the hob hadn't played decoy and saved her ass.

Reading her thoughts, it crept out into to the light, hugging the floor. *Saved*

you, yes, it said, and licked its muzzle, scarlet tongue shocking in the pointy cat face.

“Get out of my head,” she said wearily. There was no point but she said it anyway, as she did every night.

It drew back into shadow, saying nothing. Its yellow eyes clung to her as she got up and walked naked to the sink in the corner by the door. The October wind bludgeoned the roof, webbing the room with cold. Icy, after she’d sponged off the nightmare sweat. She stared into the fly-specked mirror a moment, shivering, and saw what she usually saw: old scars, new scars, and haunted, exhausted eyes. Once she’d seen someone else, someone clever, wise-cracking, young, but it had been a long time since she’d caught a glimpse of that person in this thin and shadowed face. She turned her back on the mirror, dried with a rag of towel dingy as the sheets, and dressed. Jeans, sweater, jacket, boots, all black: nighttime clothes that wouldn’t show the blood.

The knife was on the table where she’d left it among the litter of chip bags, crumpled cans and crusted bandages. A worn wood handle, black with stains and smooth to the hand; a curved blade of brown iron, notched in two places but otherwise bitterly sharp. There were no magic runes, it did not tingle to the touch. This was not a blade from story, but a tool.

Take it.

Her mother, a year ago, before the cops had dragged her away. *Take it*, she had said, her agony in her eyes, but she’d never told her what the knife was for. Sasha hadn’t learned that until the hob came. The hob, which had taught her. Taunted, coerced, seduced her into using the blade.

The hob laughed at this thought, a sizzle like water on a hot pan, and rubbed against the back of her thighs. It was a dog now, a sleek midnight Doberman, burning hot even through her jeans. *Seduced*, it said, and slipped images into her mind.

“Git!” she shouted, and kicked at it with her steel-toed boot. It cowered against the floor, still laughing. She slid the knife into its home-made sheath on her belt and left, the hob at her heels. She flicked off the light, but she didn’t bother to lock the door behind them as she went.

THE WIND STILL GUSTED, BITTER AND DAMP FROM THE AFTERNOON’S RAIN. STREET lights laid fish scales of light over the slick pavements, brake lights and neon signs adding traces of blood as Sasha and the Doberman hob neared downtown. The hunts always started here, in the heart of the city, whichever city they happened to be in. The possessed seemed to like the crowds.

So many people out tonight despite the weather, it had to be a weekend. Sasha had long since lost track of the days. Uptown, first, to walk past the gold-lit restaurants where waiters in white offered wine wrapped in linen, and candles burned between the men in suits and their ornamented women. Past the hotels, where the doormen frowned at the sight of black-clad Sasha with her scars and her demon dog, tugging their white gloves as if preparing to toss them both into

the street. Sasha ignored them, her mild face masking the provocation of the hob. It didn't much care who else got hurt, so long as the night's killing included their proper quarry. *Sssss*, it said at the doormen, the suits, the women with gold at their throats. No one heard but Sasha.

Across a broad avenue and uptown became downtown proper, crowds of tall kids, tough kids, hungry kids, who looked at Sasha and the hob with admiration and envy in their eyes. She knew that what they saw was armor proof against all their hurts and nightmare fears; she did not trouble to think of a way to tell them otherwise. Hungry girls who weren't quite hungry enough to be whores chirruped at the hob and held out their hands. It went to them, let them warm their cold fingers on its burning hide while it slipped cruel thoughts about tender skin and blood into Sasha's mind. She ignored it, stood on the corner among the braggarts and the desperate, watching, listening, scenting the exhaust-and-autumn air. No sign yet, but there was a tension on the wind that spoke to her. The possessed was out tonight. She only had to be a little patient.

A newspaper dispenser on the corner showed a headline, "Serial Killer Still At Large" in bold red type. The box beside it said in sober black, "Council Debates New Budget." Murders were only real news when they were fresh. Sasha decided against buying a paper, gave the change instead to one of the hungry girls, one with Asian eyes bruised from crying. Then whistled to the hob and walked again.

Those grieving eyes haunted her, though. Once upon a time a girl as young as that, as deeply wounded, had lived in a big old house with a green lawn and a chestnut tree outside. The girl's grandmother had beautiful silver hair, and a beautiful silver pot for the tea she drank every afternoon at three. She had a room full of books with leather covers, an antique chesterfield with red velvet cushions and a Moroccan rug that was two hundred years old. She also had a daughter in an insane asylum, and a grand-daughter who wasn't allowed to read the books, sit on the chesterfield, or lie on the rug and cry.

The girl cried anyway, in her bedroom, in the bathrooms at school. She missed her mother and was ashamed, because the mother was dangerously insane. And then one day her mother, tormented by demons, slit her veins with a sharpened mattress spring, and the girl ceased to cry. Instead she ran away, and became one of hundreds on the streets of a city, hungry and cold and wanting nothing more than a leather jacket like a coat of armor, and a thin white face like a mask seamed with scars. Until the hob had come, and she learned to be careful what she wished for.

Sasha shrugged the memories off. She might have felt pity, once, for that girl, for all the girls, but she was hunting now, searching the hum and whine of the city for the taint of her prey. The demon-possessed, stealing life to play in this dangerous, delicious world. The hob's mind licked through hers, envious and hating. She shuddered, but her pulse throbbed a little faster all the same. The terror of those first hunts, the horror of their aftermath, had lately become twisted into something else. A strong and wicked cord of excitement that bound

her still tighter to this night world, this hell from which she could not flee.

Will not, whispered the hob.

“Cannot,” Sasha replied aloud. A black man in gold chains and slippery blue stared at her, and she added silently, *Not as long as the bastards are still killing the innocent.*

Innocent, the hob said.

And laughed and laughed and laughed.

THE WRONG SIDE OF DOWNTOWN, NOW, OR MAYBE THE RIGHT SIDE FOR HER: THE demon taint on the wind was stronger here. But following it away from the crowds, all she found was an alleyway framed by the tattered remnants of yellow tape. OLICE DO NOT CROSS POLICE DO NO. Crime scene. The hob, a fat black rat, scampered up the alley, barely visible in the darkness. There was the square reeking bulk of a dumpster, a duller mass across the way that might have been disintegrating cardboard boxes.

“Well?” Sasha said, standing at the alley mouth. The rain started up again, thin spatters cutting sideways on the wind.

Yes, said the hob, and images of murder bled into her head. Those were familiar too. *Not very fresh*, it added, disappointed.

“I could have guessed as much,” she dryly replied, watching the torn yellow tape flutter against the graffiti-scrawled wall.

The hob hissed. It wasn’t fond of sarcasm.

“You don’t want to hang around here,” a voice said at Sasha’s back.

She turned. It was the black man who’d caught her eye a block or so ago. “I don’t?” she asked him, waiting for the hob to finish whatever it was doing.

“Nuh-uh. Girl got killed here last week. Third one this fall. Ted Bundy’s ghost, they figure, hanging out around the south side. Not such a safe neighborhood for pretty women these days.”

She stared at him, blank. “Is that a compliment?”

He wasn’t as old as she’d thought, not much older than she. A million years younger. He didn’t smile. “Fair warning.” Then he narrowed his eyes at her and tilted his head. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“No.” The hob reappeared, leaned its narrow Doberman’s head against her thigh, and she faintly smiled, feeling the tug of scars. “Are you?”

The man flinched back a step. “Hell, no,” he said, a little too loud. “Not as long as the freak only wants the girls.”

Sasha shrugged, still smiling. “So. Hope that’s all he’s into.”

“Yeah.” A couple more steps away seemed to restore his confidence. “Watch out for yourself.”

“You, too,” Sasha replied, and suddenly wished she might say more to this thoughtful being. It had been a long time—a long time—since anyone had given half a damn for her safety. But she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

A half-beat of silence, then he shrugged, stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and walked away, blue nylon shuffling no quieter than the rain.

The hob imagined brown skin and white bones breaking between its dog's teeth.

"No," she said, surprised by her impulse of anger. She should be used to this by now.

The hob imagined harder. The skin became white, and scarred.

Sasha snorted. "You wish."

Yes, came the thought, on a sudden scorch of lusting heat.

Sudden rage. Sasha spun and kicked. Dog's jaws met with a painful click. The hob crept back to her side and laid its devoted head on her foot.

"You make me sick," Sasha told it, restraining herself, and walked away. Deep in her mind, the question arose whether it was actually the hob that sickened her. She wasn't sure if it was the hob's voice, or her own.

AWAY FROM THE CRIME SCENE, THE DEMON TAINT LOST ITSELF IN THE SPITTING RAIN. The south side was second-hand stores tucked among pool halls, porn shops and bars, apartment buildings and collapsing houses with concrete yards and signs saying *Room For Rent*. A theater showing last month's movies released a tide of youth, rowdy boys ignoring the rain to roughhouse in front of the girls. They seemed appallingly young to Sasha. She crossed the street, leading the ever-hungry hob away from them. The hob hissed, scorning her, but she ignored it. The night was turning odd, unsettling her with these glancing moments of . . . what? Tenderness? Vulnerability?

Sentimentality, returned the hob.

Before she could reply, it stiffened, some new scent ruffling the sleek fur on its back. *There*, it said, turning its hunter's head to look after the retreating crowd of youth. A rhythm like a pounding heart. *There. There. There.*

"No!" she shouted at it, drawing looks. But then she caught the demon scent herself, a sour-hot metal tang that bit into her mind, sharp as a tooth under the pattering rain. The cheerful gang turned a corner and the scent/feeling/urge faded. One of them. One of those boys with springing legs and wispy goatees, one of those girls, shiny-haired and laughing—demon's mask, hiding a lust and a hunger for pain.

The hob looked back at her over a muscled shoulder, snarling. If she hadn't crossed the street. . . *Sentimentality*, it said again, furious.

Never mind, she thought at it. A familiar, comforting hatred rose in her veins, patching the gaps in her armor. *Follow it. Go!*

It went.

THE CLUSTER OF YOUTHS DIVIDED, THEN SPLIT AGAIN, COUPLES DEPARTING ON THEIR OWN affairs. Sasha and the hob stayed on the track of the core group of four, the demon hidden somewhere among them. It never failed to appall her, how easily the possessed blended in among humans, even humans who had known the body before the demon owned it. She found herself wondering with that strange cool detachment of the hunt how many possessed she had known before

the hob had shown her her calling, which had been her mother's before her. How many, before she had learned to kill the killers for her mother's sake.

When she could find them. The kids she followed turned into a late night diner, piling into a booth designed for fewer than they were, teasing the waitress who was their age. Sasha hesitated outside, watching through the foggy window. *Breakfast All Night* said a sign, magic marker letters bleeding in the damp. She should wait outside; there was no crowd within to hide her purpose. There was no crowd to hide the demon, either. Hob-rat climbed her leg with a scritch of claws and burrowed into her jacket pocket as she opened the door and went in.

Warm air dense with steam and the suffocating reek of hot grease. Sasha slid into the booth nearest the door, where she could see into the kids' booth across the room, and where the demon could not leave without passing her. Someone had left a tattered newspaper on the table. The waitress, a girl with waxy skin studded with steel, gave her a plastic menu smelling of vinegar and a coffee cup with a streak of carmine staining the rim, and asked if she should take the paper away. Sasha said no, rubbed at the lipstick stain with her thumb and sipped, the caffeine an immediate jazz in her veins. All the while watching the kids without seeming to.

They were in their teens, sixteen or so she guessed by the crackling of the boys' voices, the plumpness of the girls' wrists. Two boys and two girls; it was hard to tell if they were couples, loud, teasing one another, laughing. But looking past the laughter, Sasha realized that they were not the coddled children of the city but the outcast ones, eating on the scant charity of the guilty, living in second-hand clothes. One of them in a second-hand body.

"Didja wanna order?" the waitress asked. She looked a week's worth of tired behind her steel studs and rings.

Sasha ordered at random, sausage, bacon, eggs. Caffeine and the near presence of the demon killed her appetite, but she'd need the strength; she hadn't eaten in a while. And it was necessary camouflage. There wasn't anyone in the diner except for her and the kids, and the staff. The hob stirred in her pocket, hungry. *Sausage*, she thought at it, but it thought uglier things back, rat-hunger thoughts. Just as well she wasn't hungry to start with.

The boys across the way bent over the table as if in some conspiracy, watch-capped heads close together, the girls hovering at their shoulders. One of them, the small blond one, pulled her hand from its too-long sleeve and reached, and Sasha realized they'd been sharing out cigarettes—bummed, no doubt, as the money for their dinner had been. They all smoked, all but the dark haired girl, the one with dirty hands and shiny brown bangs to her eyebrows. She watched them, thick hair shading her eyes, the prettier of the two girls. The boys turned to her, as the blond girl did: she was their focus, quiet, distant in her corner seat.

Rat-hob in Sasha's pocket stirred. She could remember it so well: the absolute satisfaction of a pocket heavy with change, a cigarette, a warm diner to sit in before the cold bed in some abandoned warehouse crib. The fear of the dark streets, the comfort in the familiar things of brightness—warmth, chairs, food—

that were becoming more and more unobtainable. Perhaps not so different from how she lived now...

...except that now she had a purpose.

The tired waitress reappeared with a skilled armful of plates, the kids' dinner and then Sasha's. The eggs were congealed, the bacon greasy, the sausages small and pale, but she forced herself to eat. The hob grudgingly accepted its share, creeping out to sit on her thigh and consume its sausage, naked tail twitching on her knee. It froze an instant before the door slapped open and the two cops walked in.

They weren't in uniform, but not otherwise disguised: there was no doubting the arms conscious of the guns holstered underneath. Detectives, Sasha decided, seeing the gray in one man's mustache, the weary lines about the other's eyes. Her attention divided between the two men and the kids now quiet in their corner, she dabbed at a solidifying egg yolk and ruffled through the paper on her table.

...some possibility the killer might be the same one that had plagued Seattle, Washington, earlier in the year, a source close to the investigation said, declining to state what evidence might support this theory. Detective Inspector Singh, heading the investigation, also declined to comment on whether these deaths might be the latest in a continent-wide rash of murders of the homeless and dispossessed...

Sasha flipped the page, slid a glance across to the two cops in the corner booth. The one facing her, the one with the mustache, was watching. She looked away, feigning disinterest. Flipped another page. The kids were talking again, subdued. The waitress brought coffee to the cops, took their order. The hob scabbled down Sasha's leg and scuttled off under the line of booths.

Hob, she thought at it, furious, but it ignored her, testing the limits of her control. She shifted to the edge of the bench, bent down and saw its fat rat ass dragging its tail under the table one over from the cops, all too visible under the buzzing fluorescent glare. *Hob!* she thought again, but all she got was the flip of an insolent tail.

Someone watching. Feeling the pressure of eyes again, she straightened and shot the mustached cop a look, but he was talking to his partner, intent, oblivious. Sasha fooled with the paper some more, but the feeling persisted. She glanced at the kids' table and froze, food a sudden weight in her belly. The girl, the one with the shiny brown bangs, was watching her. Dark eyes shaded by hair, one plump, dirty hand holding a sausage to her mouth, eating with greasy lips and small white teeth. Watching

Demon, Sasha thought, looking blindly at the paper. Her heart beat like a fist against her ribs. Does it know, does it see me, does it know what I am? But when she dared another look, the brown-haired girl was watching the floor, appearing to listen to something the blond girl was saying to her. Sasha felt a touch of doubt.

Then the hob shouted in her head, *Yes!* and the brown haired girl let out a scream.

“Rat!” she yelled, and all her friends took up the cry, “Rat!”

“There! There!”

“Omigod, there it goes!”

“Kill it, kill it, there!”

Rat-hob fled up the room, dodging table-legs, spurts of its panic and glee shuddering down Sasha’s nerves. She leapt to her feet, halfway to panic herself. Flung the door open, stomped her booted feet, and the hob dashed through into the freedom of the night.

“You stupid shit!” she shouted after it.

“Is it gone?” asked the waitress. She looked pale, torn between horror and dismay. “Omigod, I swear, I didn’t know. I’ve never seen one in here before, I swear. Omigod. I better get my boss.”

The cops were on their feet, edgy and harassed. So were the boys, one of them doubled over with laughter. The blond girl was standing on the bench, still crying, “Is it gone? Is it gone?”

And the girl with the shiny bangs was sitting. Calm. Watching through her hair.

Yes! Sasha thought, with the same hot lick of triumph as the hob.

SHE HUNKERED DOWN IN THE SHELTER OF A STRIP BAR’S MARQUEE, WHERE SHE could watch the diner’s door. She’d left in the wake of the two detectives, who had been less than tempted by the harried manager’s promise of a free meal. Sasha was glad enough not to have to pay her bill, though the manager’s doleful eyes had roused in her a twinge of guilt. The street kids had not only taken the offer, they’d ordered another round.

The hob, self-satisfied and sleek with anticipation, lay across her shoulders in its cat body, black fur tipped with moisture. The rain and the wind had ended together, leaving a damp stillness that was thickening into fog. Cars hissed by dragging rags of mist, and pedestrians turned up their collars. Two women, bare legs and wicked heels proclaiming their profession, paused a moment under the marquee to light their cigarettes, shivering.

“Well,” said one, continuing a conversation, “I heard they think the killer’s a woman.”

“Yeah, right,” said her companion, snorting smoke. “Only person I ever knew wanted to see the color of some chick’s guts had a dick. And the chick was me.” She shuddered, pulling at the front of her short, fake-fur jacket. “Shit, it’s cold.”

“Give it a month,” said the other stoically.

“Screw that. I’ll be in Florida by then.”

A moment of silence over this dream. Then, “I been pissed enough at Crystal to open ’er up.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t Crystal, is it? It ain’t working girls at all, just some poor little bitches don’t know any kind of shit at home is better than the street.” She shivered again, cigarette glowing in her mouth. “Anyway, what I heard was done to them, that’s not pissed, that’s hate.”

"But who hates those poor—" She broke off with a nod at the street. "Pigs."
"Yeah," said her friend with a put-upon sigh. "Better move."

They walked off, dropping the butts behind them to hiss on the damp sidewalk. An unmarked car cruised by a second later, the driver's mustached face pale behind the spotted glass. The cops from the diner. The hob slipped off Sasha's shoulder to eat the cigarettes' glowing embers before they died.

Poor little bitches, she thought. Street kids, like the blond girl in the diner... *like the brown-haired girl*, was the reluctant thought that followed. It had been a while since she'd thought of the possessed as human beings. The people they'd been died long before she cut their throats, sending the demons back where they belonged with her mother's knife. But even after all this time, she could remember the first one she'd killed, the demon wearing the mask of a middle-aged man, soft with extra pounds, his jowls bristly under her hand. The first one, unprepared, uncoordinated, so new in its body it could scarcely fight back. She could remember how much like murder that had felt. But they hadn't been so helpless for long. She only had to stretch out her arm to feel the scars pull across her shoulder, where the last one's knife had gone in. This girl, now... this one, she was sure, was prepared. But she was also—so the hob had promised—the last.

As if the thought had conjured her, the brown-haired girl appeared, her friends around her, strolling off down the street. Sasha gave them half a block's lead, then climbed to her feet and sauntered after, the hob Doberman once more at her heels.

UPTOWN AGAIN, FOR THE KIDS TO CANVASS THE THEATER CROWD.

It was easy to settle into patience. There had been a time when Sasha would be sick with dread for the fight to come even before she'd marked her target, but these days even the hob knew better. No future, no past, no such thing as time—just the following, the waiting, the moment that came when it came. And it was a good night for it, the fog closing in to smother the streetlights. Sasha and black hob disappeared into darkness, and the quarry never looked back once.

Not even when she left her friends. They called after her, pleading she take care, but she walked off alone, headed for the trainyard, leaving traffic and neon lights behind.

Stuccoed apartments, print shops, muffler shops, trucking depots. Bright mercury halide lamps gave way to old orange sodium that corroded the cracked cement. The demon girl walked the middle of the sidewalk, hands in her pockets, and the mist crowded in behind her, stained with color as the shadows were. Doberman hob panted at Sasha's side, tasting the air with its scarlet tongue, focused now like a burning arrow in flight. Sasha felt its desire, but she also felt, the farther they left the late crowds behind them, the reflected intensity of the demon's awareness. *She—it—knows*, Sasha thought, mouth dry with a dread she'd almost forgotten. *It knows we're here*. The hob shivered at her side, black hide bleeding wisps of steam into the fog.

The demon was only half a block ahead now, as if it had deliberately slowed.

Spurred by her own growing fear, Sasha shouted at it, "Hey! Can you wait up a minute? Can we walk with you?"

The mist closed in around her voice, drowning it with the late night city quiet: a distant siren, the squeal of a braking freight train. The demon did not slow, did not speed up...did not look back. Just walked on, hair shining in the pool of sodium light underneath a streetlamp.

The trainyard ahead was black as a metal-tainted sea, the few security lights like sickly moons. When the demon came to the rusting wire fence, it set its toes in the wire gaps and climbed. Chain link clashed against steel posts, lost against the slow scream of train wheels. The demon dropped to the gravel on the other side and looked at Sasha through the mesh. Looked at her, faceless in the dark, then turned and vanished into the fog-dense blackness of the yard. Sasha walked slowly up to the fence and put her hands on the wire, the steel no colder than her skin. She had hunted demons who had recognized her before they died, who had fought and cut their marks on her skin. But this. This. Her breath was trapped in her throat.

Last one, the hob said, and flew, black owl with phosphorescent eyes. Sasha, body shaken by her heart, set toes and fingers into the mesh and climbed.

BLACK NIGHT, BLACK STEEL. THE TASTE OF CORROSION IN HER MOUTH, THE RUSH of blood in her ears, the feel of silken wood clenched against her palm. Knife drawn, she hunched in the lee of an empty grain car, bending to peer beneath. Just the paired glimmer of rails over invisible ground, the bulk of another still car beyond. That was all there was, all there had been for a painful stretch of time. The hob did not answer her silent calls, she dared not shout. No sign of the demon. Even the taint, the cut of heat across her mind, had gone cold, echoed by the rusting metal and decaying paint all around. She sank into a crouch, holding the handle of the knife between her palms.

And the hob cried, *Here!*

A flair like a savage beacon across the night, and she bolted, stumbling across gravel and weeds. She ran over polished rails and oily ties, around the caboose of one train, then on her belly, hard, to scramble under the container of another. And she was there. Lying prone, panting, cold moisture soaking through her jeans, she could see the demon girl. It stood beneath a security standard, bangs damp against its forehead.

The hob swept through the night above the cone of cold light, unseen, a ghost of heat in Sasha's mind.

"I know you're there," the demon said. Its voice trembled with excitement, or anger, or need.

Sasha lay still, drawing silent breaths, her right hand loose and ready now on the hilt of the knife. The hob's desire pulled her like a tether of fire towards the kill.

The demon slowly turned, studying the edges of the light. Sasha, her eyes at ground level, saw how the demon's shadow writhed underneath its feet.

"Come out," said the demon, still turning. "I know you're following me. Well,

here I am. If you still want me. Come and get me," its voice rising to a shout: "Come on!" A metal gleam from the hand by its thigh.

Sasha! howled the hob.

The demon had its back to her now. She braced her foot against the rail, launched herself from under the car. The demon spun, a swirl of grace, and raised the gun.

"I always knew you were there," it said, and shot.

A gun, Sasha thought stupidly as she dropped back to the ground. The bullet tore shards of fire and glass through her side, a pain that seemed, at first, too big for her body to contain. She had to stretch, even time seemed to stretch, to encompass it. *A gun*, she thought, falling, falling, falling through the vast night to her knees.

The demon, human face a mask blank as death, brought the gun to bear again, smoking barrel centered on her face.

And a black panther, blue eyes glowing over a white grin of fangs, leaped at the demon's back.

Time snapped back into shape. The demon spun, fired the gun. Orange flash and smack of sound. The hob fell, snarling, twisting around its wound to leap again. Its pain like blood drenching Sasha's mind, drowning hers. The demon fired again, and again, drilling the black hob body into the ground. Sasha climbed the thick night air, swam through agony and fog. Slipped her left arm around the demon's narrow shoulders. Raised her right hand.

Cut the demon's throat.

BLOOD, AND PAIN, AND THE WARM MEAT OF THE DEMON'S CORPSE STEAMING AGAINST the night. Sasha crawled, knife still clenched in her bloody fist, arms shaking almost too badly to bear her weight. Her own blood seeped from her side, the bullet wound cold now, ground glass and ice under her ribs as though the hole were an entrance for the night. It was hard to distinguish her pain from the hob's as it lay dying.

She had never seen its real shape. Could not see much now, beyond a velvety blackness, bright clenched talons, bared fangs like the panther's, eyes ice-white slits against the pain.

"Hob," she whispered, having no more breath than that.

Sasha. Whine of a dying ember in her mind.

"I never thought," she said, and stopped to breathe, "it might have a gun."

No, the hob said.

"Funny." She lay down beside it, wet gravel seeming warmer than the ice growing beneath her ribs.

A talon groped, gripped her bloody wrist above the knife. The touch burned. *Do not die.*

I thought that was what you wanted, she thought back, too tired to speak aloud. The light glowed dimmest crimson against her eyelids.

A brief sizzle of humor, quickly gone. *Not before the last.*

The last, she thought, and had to force a breath. The night was warm now, a soft rain brushing her cheek. The pain under her ribs gone to a crushing numb. *This one was the last. Wasn't it? Hob?*

The talons burned like red-hot wires around her wrist.

Wasn't it the last?

The hob lifted her arm, the knife still clenched in her hand, though she could scarcely feel her fingers.

Last one, it agreed, and thrust the knife deep into its own fading midnight substance.

The bullet had been nothing next to this. The hob's fire in all her veins, burning wire with poisoned barbs igniting her flesh, melting the ice. Sasha convulsed, straining for breath, deaf to her own screams. Blind to everything but the flood of pain through her body. The hob burned into the skin of her soul, indelible, inseparable, part of her for good. Molten wire that stitched together her wounded body, wounded soul. *Last one*, she heard again in her mind, this time in her own voice.

Driven by terror and pain, aching with loss—or gain—she staggered to her feet. A siren sounded, another scream against the city's night. She turned into the bleeding dark and ran. •

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Waking the Dead

Robert H. Beer

“YOU AWAKE, CARP? THERE’S ANOTHER ONE A HUNDRED meters east of you,” the sergeant’s voice came over his link.

Morris Carpentier, Corporal in the can opener brigade, looked east across the blasted ground, squinting in vain for the reflected glint that would indicate the bubble. He roughly swiped the glasses from his face and wiped them on the hem of his jacket. The doctor had said that his optic nerve degeneration was not amenable to surgery. One hundred meters was *way* outside his effective visual range, even with the glasses.

Frustrated, he began to tramp across the battlefield in what he hoped was the right direction. As he did every day, he repeated the names of all the people he had ever met that still wore glasses. There were six. He carefully stepped around the crushed armor of human casualties, but walked right over the decaying exoskeletons of dead Chitters. About half way there, he caught a silvery reflection off to his right, and adjusted his path in that direction.

It was a bubble, all right. Perfectly spherical, perfectly reflective. As Morris got closer, his weak vision was able to pick out his own reflection. Leaning closer, he looked at himself. Twenty-three years old, he had a full head of wavy black hair, long sideburns, and a neat goatee. And an ugly pair of glasses as thick as his little finger perched on his nose.

Staring at the surface of the stasis field reminded Morris he had a job to do. *What delights will this one hold?* he thought. He was no medic, just carried the dead bodies, and had been taught in an afternoon to work the device that dissolved the fields. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to push a few buttons. Morris held his comp close to the mirrored non-surface and pushed the calibrate

button. It hummed for a moment, then a line of red lights came on, one by one. Morris nodded as the last one lit, and froze the setting. Reluctantly, he slid the end of the comp forward until it contacted the mirror, and the silvery surface instantly disappeared.

It was a dead private, Morris could tell right away. He'd seen enough in the past few months to know. The right side of the soldier's helmet was fused into a glassy blob, and his limbs were tossed at impossible angles.

"He's dead," Morris told Sergeant Gonzalez over his link. "Take your time." Technically, Gonzalez as medic was supposed to be present when every bubble was opened, but she trusted him to at least throw a compress over a spurting wound. Morris sort of preferred the dead ones over the mortally wounded. More minor injuries were fine, things they could treat, but to watch someone die when their field dissolved was no fun.

This boy had been finished when some comrade activated his stasis field, probably figuring he might not be dead. Many of the bubbles they opened contained only bodies. If you activated a friend's field after a wound, you could convince yourself your friend was still alive, still had a chance, and go on knowing you'd done what you could.

Gonzalez wandered over, still dictating a death report on the last bubble they'd opened. Just as her solid frame came into focus, she paused to crush the head of a dead Chitter under her mud-encrusted issue boot. It was no great feat of strength, since their bodies began to decay the instant death occurred, leaving only the remains of their exoskeleton behind. Still, it made a satisfying crunch.

She saw Morris watching and shrugged. "We all do what we can," she said. He could see her lips moving beneath her breather, but the words came over his inner ear link. Like him, Gonzalez was a rejected volunteer for the war effort. Morris' vision had excluded him from active service. Gonzalez' disability wasn't obvious, and she never talked about it, but it was Morris' understanding that it was mental. Rumors were that she was just a little too eager for battle. Morris found it hard to imagine the army turning down someone eager to kill.

"Are we okay to head back in now?" Morris asked. They'd popped a couple dozen bubbles today, and Morris was feeling it in his knees and back. And in his head. *Christ*, he'd rather be blowing away filthy Chitters than this. Any monkey could be trained to do this job.

"One more, okay," Gonzalez responded. Morris liked her well enough, but every once in a while she had to assert her authority. Morris understood completely. He really would have made a good soldier. She pointed. "There. You go ahead."

Morris started out in the direction she'd indicated, sighing. It wasn't like the kids in the bubbles were going anywhere. It sure as hell didn't matter to them whether he opened them today or tomorrow.

After a few minutes, he spotted the bubble and confirmed the code. As it dissolved, he readied himself for another dead body—they'd had nearly twenty of them today alone. Instead, he stared into the milky eyes of a very much alive

Chitter, laying on the ground with a human stasis field generator clutched in one seven-fingered hand.

"Oh hell! Gonzalez, get over here!" Morris yelled, backing off a few steps and fumbling for his hand laser, which he had never before drawn.

Gonzalez' voice snapped in his ear. "Carpentier! What is it? A survivor?"

Morris eyed the alien. It wasn't doing anything threatening, just lying there, those cloudy unblinking eyes staring at him. Morris finally got his weapon out, and he pointed it roughly at the center of the Chitter's chest. He took a few deep breaths and relaxed a bit.

"In a way," he told Gonzalez. "But not a human one." He looked at the alien. It had the identifying tattoos of its regiment on the carapace, but no sign of any weapons or equipment. It needed no breather in the mildly caustic air. It held up one open hand and said, in raspy English, "No...fight."

Gonzalez came sliding up beside him, her laser held rock-steady.

"I think it's a deserter," Morris said.

FINALLY, IT WAS AN ENEMY. MORRIS HAD GIVEN UP ON EVER SEEING ACTION against the Chitters. If the army doesn't want you, who does? But here, at last, was a real, live enemy—one of a race that had dogged humanity's colonization effort for ten years. Morris tightened his grip on his pistol, aiming where he'd heard they were most vulnerable, in the folds that passed for a neck.

He started to squeeze the trigger, but his arm was knocked aside. His beam scorched the dirt half-a-meter to the left of the prone alien.

"It's a noncombatant, idiot!" Gonzalez shouted into his face. He could actually hear her in the thin atmosphere. "You can't just execute it." She pointed significantly to the mini-camera mounted on her right shoulder.

Adrenalin still poured through Morris' veins. "Yeah? How'd it get the field generator, then? It must have killed one of our boys to get it."

"It could have taken it off a dead body. You don't know." Gonzalez looked like she figured she was saving him from himself, and maybe she was. More gently, she said, "Now it is time for supper, Carp." She nodded at the alien. "Restrain it, and bring it back to camp."

Restrain it? With what? Morris and the alien stared at each other while the Sergeant walked away, her hand still resting lightly on the butt of her weapon. Morris thought for a moment, then took out a role of surgical tape and used the whole thing to bind together the Chitter's forelimbs. He had to help it to its feet when it couldn't rise with the limbs bound. He'd heard that the Chitters would sometimes bite, so he kept well out of the way of its chitinous beak. The Chitter offered no resistance, and ambled bowlegged after Gonzalez, Morris guarding the rear.

He knew that the Chitters could move at a good speed, some said faster than a human, but watching it list back and forth as it walked, Morris found it hard to imagine. It was a few centimeters taller than Morris, and had a hard ridge down the back of its bony greenish-brown exoskeleton, which was inscribed

with various symbols and lines of several colors. They seemed to have a pattern just beyond Morris' ability to decipher.

Morris was suddenly filled with rage, and poked the Chitter roughly in the back. "What are you? Some kind of walking billboard?" he demanded. "Eat at Joe's, is that it?"

Gonzalez sent a stern, "Lay off," through their link. "You sound like an idiot, screaming through your mask. Wait until we're inside."

Morris grumbled, but held himself in check until they entered the camp they shared with three other teams—one other like themselves, and two surgical teams. There were no regular military personnel, but the camp could be evacuated in short order. The regular military didn't care much for the can openers—they were not battle troops—and the injured were of little use either.

Morris felt the slight positive pressure change in his ears when they entered the main tent. Only one of the surgeons was there, drinking coffee from a paper cup. His eyes widened at the sight of the alien, but he said nothing. Morris tossed his breather into the disinfectant bath and shoved the Chitter toward a plastic chair, where it perched uncomfortably.

"You speak English?" Gonzalez asked the Chitter, who was gazing about the translucent tent, its leathery neck pouches stretching as its head swivelled two hundred and seventy degrees. It turned its attention to Gonzalez while Morris stared at it, wishing he could burn holes in it with his eyes. The enemy, for God's sake, and Gonzalez wouldn't let him use the only chance he might have in the whole war to kill one of the bastards.

"Speak human . . . some," it rasped, like a thousand crickets. "No fight." Again it raised an open hand. Was that some kind of universal symbol, or did they teach them human gestures, Morris wondered.

Gonzalez grunted. "Yeah, you said that before."

"You some kind of coward?" Morris demanded, despite his Sergeant's look of disapproval. "Or, do you have a *philosophical*-type problem with the war?" Did the Chitters understand sarcasm?

The Chitter swivelled its head and looked at Morris without moving its body at all. "Humans not . . . enemy. Not me," it said.

"You saying you *like* humans?" Gonzalez asked, incredulous.

"Not know humans," said the Chitter. "Not like. Not hate." There was a pause. "Not fight."

Gonzalez was silent, and Morris shook his head. In a way, it made sense—how do you hate someone you don't know? But every soldier in a war can't have personal knowledge of the other side. If nobody fought unless they'd met the enemy personally, you wouldn't have much of a war. Someone had to make those decisions for the soldiers.

The sergeant stood and walked over to a nearby communications console. The surgeon, sensing a break in the action, took off at a dead run, no doubt to spread the news. Gonzalez spoke quietly to district control, was apparently interrupted, and started all over. After a minute, she called Morris to bring the prisoner over.

Control wanted her to describe the detailed markings on the Chitter's carapace. They asked a few specific questions, then Morris took it back to sit. Gonzalez's voice rose, then she broke the connection and walked back over.

"They don't want it," she said.

"What? It's a live prisoner. It could have information."

"Might, but they don't think it likely," Gonzalez replied. "This kid's pretty low-ranking, apparently, and the Chitters share information down the chain of command even less than we do. Oh, they'll come for it, but not for a few days, at least. So, rig up some guest quarters."

"Rig up" was definitely the right term. The camp consisted mostly of pressurized plastic tents—easy to dismantle and move, but not good for confinement of a prisoner. In the end, the only place Morris could secure was the shelter they used in case of bombing or fallout. At least that was solid, and could be locked. He turned off the air purifier after locking the Chitter in. It was ironic. They actually were better suited to this world than the humans fighting them for it. They could breathe the air and eat the local plant life, while humans needed filter masks, and died horrible deaths from poisoning. But there were precious few habitable planets in this sector, even marginal ones, so they fought. Here, and in a lot of other places that Morris had only heard the names of.

Morris had a restless night, dreaming of the Chitter scratching in the dark, far from home. Sometimes, it was Morris himself locked in the bunker.

"WHEN EXACTLY ARE THEY COMING FOR OUR GUEST?" MORRIS ASKED THREE DAYS later at breakfast. He hadn't seen much of the Chitter the past two days, other than taking it meals, because they had been busy opening cans; saving a few, more often sending bodies home to mothers and fathers. But though the Chitter was never far from Morris' thoughts, he found that he couldn't maintain the hard edge of his anger.

Just because a lion ate your brother, did that mean that you'd feel hate every time you saw one in a cage? Forever? Morris wasn't so sure.

"I don't know. There's some pretty heavy fighting southeast of here," Gonzalez said wistfully. She *was* a volunteer, after all. "What you gonna do with your day off?" she asked.

Morris scarfed the rest of his Tang, and threw the cup into the pulper. "I don't know. Read a bit, maybe write a letter."

"Don't forget to feed your pet," Gonzalez said with a smile.

"How exactly did that become my job?" Morris complained, but he loaded up a tray with rolls, overripe fruit, and milk. The Chitter thankfully seemed to be able to eat pretty much anything. And if it minded being locked in the shelter, it hadn't said anything. Sometimes Morris got the feeling it wanted to say something, but maybe it didn't trust its English.

The Chitter was in its usual place, resting against the curved wall of the bunker in a position that would have broken Morris' back. It had been in the bunker long enough. "Come on," Morris said gruffly. "Time you had some

exercise." He waved the Chitter outside. In three days, it had wordlessly taken the food from Morris, and had not made a threatening move.

The Chitter's tiny round eyes blinked rapidly as they passed out into the sunlight. Its second eyelids opaqued as Morris watched, giving the alien the illusion of having no pupils. It swivelled its head toward Morris and said slowly, "Good...out."

"I'm sure it is," Morris said. "Come on." *Don't act like a human*, Morris thought. *You're the alien*. He led the way around the main tent and out into the area used by the staff as an exercise yard. At every camp, they set up an exercise area, as if the eight of them would play soccer, or baseball. With the breathers, it never seemed worth it. Only fighting was worth the trouble. Morris perched on a rock and watched the Chitter shuffle back and forth, stretching its muscles. He didn't let it go far, with his vision, but it seemed to enjoy the break. No one was around, and Morris found the silence eerie, just the shuffling of the Chitter's feet in the dirt, and the magnified sound of his own breathing.

"Ah, do you miss your platoon-mates?" Morris said, without really meaning to. It just slipped out; the last thing he wanted was to start a conversation. It was just the damn quiet—

The Chitter stopped shuffling—which was some relief—and stared at Morris—which wasn't. "What is...platoon-mate?" it said at length.

"It doesn't matter," Morris said quickly, but when the creature continued staring, he said, "Your friends, the people you fought beside."

"I did not fight beside...friends," the Chitter said, and went back to shuffling.

"But you fought, didn't you?" Morris insisted. He got up and stood in front of the alien, blocking its path. "You killed humans."

The Chitter faced Morris, its milky eyes staring past him. "Killed...one. Female, I think. Hard to tell with humans."

"And did you enjoy it? Killing the enemy?"

"Killed...or leader kill me. Felt shame, after. No more." The alien turned and walked the other way, leaving Morris to look at the designs burned into its chitinous back. They were like a Rorschach inkblot, and Morris didn't like what he read there.

TIME DRAGGED ON, AND THE REGS DIDN'T COME FOR THE PRISONER. A WEEK... THEN two. Morris suggested moving it out of the bunker and into a tent, but Gonzalez and—surprisingly—the Chitter vetoed it. The alien claimed to be more comfortable there. Morris took it for a walk every evening and, when Gonzalez commented, he told her, "I'm not a damn jailer. You made me look after this thing, and I don't think it should be locked underground all the time."

But at the same time, he resented having to coddle the damn thing—it *was* still the enemy, whether it would fight or not. Its kind had killed tens of thousands of humans since the conflict had begun. He wasn't supposed to forget that, was he? What he couldn't express physically, he took out verbally on the Chitter.

The alien's English improved a bit, which was good, as Morris was incapable of learning any of the Chitters' language. Many of the words involved the rubbing of arm or leg patches on the edges of its carapace, along with the vocalizations. He spent a lot of time contemplating the designs burned into the alien's carapace. They were intricate, involving lines of four distinct colors, and covered much of its back and sides. The Chitter refused to explain them, but Morris was starting to suspect that it simply couldn't in human words. It would only say, "Connections. Humans not understand." It sounded so arrogant that Morris saw red every time he heard it.

"If you guys are so damned connected," Morris demanded one day, "why are you here and not back fighting with your mates?" The Chitter just stared at Morris, unmoving, until Morris had to look away from that milky scrutiny.

Morris resented the thing for its simple *alien-ness*, but he was starting to wonder at his own motives. Here was a creature just as programmed to hate humans as Morris was to hate Chitters, but it was willing to give itself up rather than fight humans. It could easily have been killed if the other Chitters had gleaned its purpose. It made his own hatred seem, well, *small*, somehow. And that made Morris mad. The incessant teasing he received from the other humans didn't help, either.

Why didn't the Army come and take the damn thing?

TWO MORE DAYS OF OPENING BUBBLES FULL OF DEAD BOYS AND GIRLS HAD MADE Morris even less sympathetic to the Chitter than usual. He took the thing its dinner, then prodded it outside. "Christ!" he complained as he followed it out onto the field. "Can't you walk normally? You're making me seasick just watching you."

Gonzalez passed him heading the other way and leered. *To hell with you too*, he thought. Everyone seemed to think he was sympathizing with the alien, when in fact he hated the damn thing more, if that was possible.

He watched the thing shuffle back and forth for a while. Then it asked, "How long I be here?"

"How the hell should I know?" Morris snapped. "It's been way too long already. Maybe we should consult your precious lines?" He waved a hand at the alien's decorated back and sides. "Aren't they the source of all knowledge?"

"You should not... find fun in what you don't know," the alien replied.

Morris fingered the junk in his pocket—keys, his identocard, a marker. "I forgot. I'm just a stupid human."

The Chitter had stopped moving entirely, and had turned away from Morris—another irritating habit the thing had. "One line for each parent, one for child, one for self. All woven. You do not understand."

Morris pulled out the blue marking pen. "Maybe we ought to change your precious history," he said, and drew a slash across the Chitter's side. "Here, we'll just make a few alterations." He quickly drew a few more loops and squiggles, then backed off a few meters to admire his work. See how the arrogant creature—

The alien's head swivelled around almost one hundred and eighty degrees, and it stared at the new lines on its back. Then its head turned back to face Morris.

Its eyes had lost their milkiness, and the pupils were huge and cavernous. "Alien!" it shouted, and charged at Morris, arms grasping.

Morris bent his knees and braced for the onslaught. At last they'd have it out, he thought. Here and now. The alien crashed into Morris and he rolled with the hit, throwing it clear behind him. Maybe this would teach the thing some respect. Morris rolled quickly to his feet and waited for it to charge again. This time, though, it came more slowly, and used its reach to advantage, batting Morris' arms out of the way and shoving him backwards. He fell heavily into the dirt and just lay there, dazed.

The Chitter stared at Morris for a moment, then stepped forward with one seven-fingered hand outstretched. Morris tensed, then realized that the creature wanted to help him up. The fight, it seemed, was over.

Just as the Chitter reached Morris, he heard the sizzle of sidearm fire, and the alien crumpled to the dirt, smoking. Gonzalez walked up jauntily and poked the corpse with her boot.

"Good thing I came out to watch you tonight," she said. "Looked like that thing was going to finish you off. Hah! I guess you don't need to babysit any more."

Morris couldn't take his eyes off the dead alien, which was already beginning to decompose inside the exoskeleton. "Why... why the hell'd you do that?"

Gonzalez sniffed. "What do you mean? When it was a noncombatant, we couldn't do anything to it. As soon as it tried to attack you, it was the enemy again. A prime target. It's all recorded," she said, patting the camera on her shoulder. "Thought I'd never get a chance to fry one of these things." Morris waited while Gonzalez sauntered back toward the mess tent. The Chitter's alien biochemistry seemed to dissolve its tissue almost as soon as death occurred, and within a few minutes there was little remaining but the carapace.

Morris didn't have a helmet like the battle troops used, and at any time during the fight the Chitter could have disabled him simply by knocking off his breather mask. Just as Morris could have simply shot the thing with his sidearm.

He stood and stared at the remains for a long time, then bent down and carefully wiped the pen marks away, leaving the etchings as they were meant to be. Then he turned and slowly walked back to his tent. •

New Country

David Livingstone Clink

1

Secrets are like
hurtful bruises—they
are prismatic things that heal slowly—
Nature's way of telling us we are
in
Autumn, on a
tenement playground
where commandments
are broken
into pebbles and needles and shards of glass
no kid can walk away from.

2

Frigid
air covers sheets of snow to be folded and put away
in the dead of winter.

Treacherous ice
holds onto branches,
holds onto the eavestrough—
icicles gleam on a frozen ice fisherman no
longer
looking for a place to cut through.

3

Gardens come
alive and flourish,
regenerating us,
tempting us
(hungering for life) to come
back from the dead.

Reason becomes secondary.

Old people, nearer to the earth than they imagine, dance
on the wet spring grass—
keeping on the grass, despite the cemetery signs, and
seeing the first birds' eggs eaten before they become birds.

4

Applying sunburn,
lying on the deck in the afternoon heat
and half-dead from relaxing—
noticing the neighbors beating the dog days of summer.

Journeying through shimmering back roads
arriving at a faded postcard vista,
cookouts lure me as if I were a
kid who followed breadcrumbs to a cottage where
someone waits in darkness, just behind the door
on a holiday weekend breeze 200 miles
north of the city. •

Flushed with Success

Janine Cross

"WE ARE UNEXPECTEDLY EXPECTING A LITTLE SURPRISE soon." Taryn Brock read the words with utter disbelief. He must mean something other than *that*, she thought, so she charged into the next sentence.

"I don't know quite how to deal with becoming a daddy yet, but I'm asking you again to please sign the divorce papers."

My God, she thought, he does mean *that*. My husband has impregnated another woman.

A discreet cough startled her; she hastily shoved the letter into a pocket, faced the wall screen behind her, and tried to gather sufficient wits to deal with Ambassador Tilby from the United Nation's General Assembly.

An enormous, pale nose quivered at her from the wall screen. "Are you unwell, Doctor Brock?" it said.

"I'm...I'm okay, Ambassador Tilby."

The alien technicians controlling the transmission fine-tuned the image on the screen and the Ambassador's titanic nose shrank to normal proportions; Taryn thought of collapsing bread dough.

"I trust you received the missive I just sent through?" the Ambassador said.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Good; your husband went to great lengths to see that I send it to you. A marvel, this interplanetary communications device the aliens...er, Sorenos left us."

"Yes it is, sir. You should see how they apply their technology over here, on

their home planet.”

“Quite. Now look, doctor. The Assembly reviewed your summary last week and we’re rather disappointed the Sorenos are still mindlessly bludgeoning each other to death.”

Taryn had to think hard for several moments before she understood what Tilby was talking about. The summary she had sent last week had described Soreno reproduction, specifically, how copulation ended with the death of the mating male. It would seem the Assembly had interpreted Soreno mating habits as mindless bludgeoning.

“Ambassador Tilby—”

“I’m sending you a detailed report on cognitive mood therapy and behaviour modification drugs; we suggest you use both on the Sorenos. This carnage simply must be stopped. Perhaps a small demonstration by your team might influence them.”

“A demonstration of *what?*”

Tilby frowned. “The Power of Positive Thinking. You Canadians are supposed to be good at that sort of thing. Look here, have the Sorenos heard of Shakti Gawain?”

She gaped at him.

“I want you to read this report,” the Ambassador said, and Taryn glanced at the receiving tray on the wall screen. An oily sheet oozed out.

“It details a Californian method, something called Tantra. It’s right up the Sorenos’ alley, doctor, something about the feminine divine manifested through the act of, ah—” Tilby coughed delicately. “—love-making. But in Tantra one does not commit suicide upon conclusion of intercourse.”

Taryn picked up the warm, solidifying sheet from the tray as if it were a poisonous snake. She sucked in a deep breath. She had to tell him. It was now or never. “Paramount Cenmo is scheduled for death rites in 24 Earth hours.”

“I...I beg your pardon?”

“Our presence here has made him famous; he’s flushed. We’re attempting to cancel his funeral service, but it’s apparent he’s reaching his peak.”

“Well this is no good, absolutely no good at all,” the Ambassador huffed. “How old is the chap, thirty-five? Forty? He has a full life ahead of him!”

“Not according to Soreno standards.”

“Well damn it, doctor, *do* something about it.”

Taryn’s fingers dug into the soft, oily edges of the report. They had not read her summary, not a sentence. Veneration from peers altered Soreno biochemistry and activated the reproductive cycle, causing a tell-tale flush throughout the skin. But a Soreno could only peak—reach fertility and have the urge to mate—once in his life, when the person he most admired lavished praise upon him during public death rites. Paramount Cenmo most admired Taryn.

She told Tilby as much.

“Well you musn’t go,” he snapped. “You must boycott the damn service. Good God, if we lose Cenmo, we’ve basically lost the battle. He’s the only Soreno who

doesn't speak complete gibberish, the only one who thinks *logically*."

"Ambassador—"

"If we loose Cenmo, we lose all hope of changing their ghastly habits. The entire population will disappear from genocide. We can't have that, doctor, do you understand? The technology we'd lose..."

Ah. So that was at the core of Tilby's concerns. He was up for re-election, had probably promised his electorate the Sorenos' secret to transgalactic travel. Now he feared the aliens would kill each other off before he could do so. What he didn't seem to understand was that the Sorenos were a thriving species; their method of reproduction, however alien, had evolved during many thousands of years of natural selection. They were not about to disappear at the cusp of Tilby's re-election.

"What are the NASA boys doing about it?" he snapped.

"They're trying to communicate with another Paramount. With the usual misinterpretations." A muscle twitched in Taryn's jaw. "Last week a Soreno broke both legs of a NASA engineer, in an attempt to answer his questions. Paramount Cenmo and I have resolved the situation."

"And what happens when Cenmo's dead? There won't *be* anyone to help you resolve these situations. The next thing you know, those aliens will be bombing London because of a misunderstanding. You chaps up there will be asking them about agriculture or personal hygiene, and the next thing we'll know down here is that our skin is melting off our faces from some damned chemical they've shot into our atmosphere!"

The wall screen flickered. Taryn glanced at the gurgling Soreno technicians on the other side of the translucent wall.

"It appears our time is up," she said stiffly.

The Ambassador drew himself up straight. "You do realize, Dr. Brock, that the fate of both Earth and Soreno rests in your hands. Only you can end this outrageous genocide. You and Shakti Gawain. God save the Queen."

"It's not genocide," she said to the fading image. "It's their only means of propagation."

Grumbling, she turned and stepped off the transmitting dais. "I did not get a master's degree in psychology and a PhD in sociobiology to discuss orgasmic, holistic energy with extra-terrestrial life, Ambassador Tilby."

The crumpled form of her exosheath pulsed at the base of the dais. She struggled into it. "And I did not spend the most uncomfortable year of my life on a Soreno ship to tell a whole damn planet that their means of reproduction offends my species."

She stuffed Tilby's report into the pocket holding her husband's letter—her husband, a father?!—and activated her wand. As she melded the exosheath around her, the wand produced a singed-hair smell. Enclosed, she strapped the meld wand back to her 'sheath belt. A tap on the window startled her. She turned; it was Paramount Cenmo.

His canted nose slits indicated extreme agitation.

Oh hell, she thought. We've got another situation. The letter will have to wait.

She checked that her exosheath was melded and gave the thumbs-up sign. The pressure chamber door opened and Taryn stepped into the adjoining room and the gravity of Soreno; her exosheath rippled as it compensated.

Basketball player tall, his swollen joints splendidly displaying Soreno elasticity, Paramount Cenmo shuffled on his splayed, naked feet as he waited for her. She noticed that his flush had progressed; his coral hide was turning a deep red.

So it's true; he's nearing his peak, she thought. Her heart slid to her ankles.

Cenmo pensively wrapped an arm around his gigantic, mayonnaise-jar shaped head and gurgled at her. She waited as the many forks of his tongue efficiently squirted saliva into the desired tubes of his necklace translator. "We experience a situation."

Taryn leaned towards Cenmo's throat and said as precisely as the exosheath would allow, "Take me to your trouble."

She watched her voice trigger the saliva disc on his necklace; mechanical gurgles translated her words into Soreno. He blinked and side by side, they marched down the sponge-like corridor of the communication coonya, towards the transport hangar.

Seven minutes and many agitated answers later, Cenmo parked in front of the crowd of angry humans and perturbed Sorenos gathered in Earth Camp's experimental vegetable garden.

"So tell me if I've understood you correctly," Taryn said, eyeing the mob outside. "Lyle Mitchell, Earth Camp's esteemed neurobiologist, has a tattoo. He showed it to the Soreno tattoo artist who will be adorning you for your funeral tomorrow. The tattoo artist became extremely impassioned that a live creature should sport such a faded tattoo."

"Such deterioration indicates a lack of honor," Cenmo murmured. "The body should be deteriorated too."

Taryn nodded and watched the frantic digging of the men outside, noting glumly that the tiny, blighted carrot patch was completely trampled. "So the tattoo artist immediately enlisted the help of whomever he could find to perform a proper burial for Lyle Mitchell. Is that right?"

"Correct. The tattoo artist tried very hard to give this honor for Lyle Mitchell, to provoke peak and bury him."

Taryn sucked in a deep breath and turned to Cenmo. "But the man was alive, Paramount. You *know* humans don't peak—Lyle probably fainted. The tattoo artist buried this man alive."

Cenmo's nostril slits canted sharply in distress. "I understand this. But I was in a trance, preparing for the funeral—"

"Okay, okay. Let's just get to work."

It took a frantic ten minutes to convince the gathered Sorenos that the Earth Campers should be allowed to dig up Lyle Mitchell. With Paramount Cenmo gurgling effusively at the center, a cluster of Sorenos churned up the earth like

enormous frenzied gophers.

The prone body of Lyle Mitchell was dragged out of the wreckage of a coffin and passed up to one of Earth Camp's physicians.

"He's got a pulse," the doctor shouted, "and he's breathing! Let's move him inside."

It took over an hour to settle tempers and clear the debris; Taryn directed the humans to stay within Earth Camp until the misunderstanding was completely cleared. Gradually, the crowd dispersed.

"The Soreno proletarian class still has difficulty comprehending the human inability to peak," Cenmo said. "Another broadcast is necessary."

"That might be wise," Taryn said. She wiped her sweaty brow with a dirt-streaked hand and glumly surveyed the remains of the vegetable garden.

Cenmo nudged a blighted carrot with one of his prehensile toes. "They don't grow well in our gravity."

"No, but we thought we'd try." She rubbed her temples wearily. "Cenmo, we have to talk. About tomorrow."

"My funeral." His cheeks distended with pride.

"I'd like you to postpone it."

His nostrils canted. "Postpone?"

"Earth Camp needs you, Cenmo. *I* need you. I can't do this alone; I don't want you to die."

He tensed. "You, of all people, Dr. Brock, must realize how you've just insulted me."

"I didn't mean to. It's just that..." She threw her arms in the air. "You're the only Paramount who seems able to understand human idiosyncrasies."

"Paramount Lome becomes very proficient at this work. You understand him well." His tongue forks twitched. "Are you refusing my request to provoke my peak tomorrow?"

"I just want you to understand," she said carefully, "that I'm grieved at the thought of losing you. I'd prefer it if you stayed alive."

The Paramount didn't hide his anger now; his tongue forks writhed like a nest of vipers. But his ears also folded in sorrow. "I apologize. I misunderstood our relationship. I withdraw my request and will seek an alternative."

"Is that possible? I thought a peak instigator was irreplaceable."

"Correct." Without another word, he turned and walked away.

"Good work, Taryn," she mumbled to herself. "You've just refused Paramount Cenmo the right to have children and the right to die with dignity. Great."

She kicked a carrot. "And meanwhile, in a galaxy far, far away, your husband impregnates another woman in his continued quest to seek a divorce. You need a drink."

The coonya the Sorenos had sown for Earth Camp's only pub was still growing, the sponge-like walls murmuring like water against a ship's hull. But unlike most of the coonyas in Earth Camp, the pub could not yet simulate Earth's gravity. Inside, the many exosheaths in close contact with each other

sounded like bacon sizzling alongside fried eggs.

Taryn edged her way through the sticky mass of people, ordered a bitter, yellow wine concocted from a Soreno blossom, and downed the entire contents while hunting for a corner in which to bury herself.

“Care to join me, Dr. Brock?”

She glanced down at the voice. And stiffened. “Ah. Parker Bates. How are you?”

The man grinned up at her. “If you move my legs, you can join me.”

With as much dignity as she could muster, she placed her glass down on the table and gingerly lifted first one, then the other, of Parker’s legs off the only unoccupied chair in the entire pub. Both legs were in casts.

“I take it you were involved in another situation,” Parker said. “How’s Mitchell doing?”

“He’s alive.”

“Here.” He fumbled beneath his NASA jacket, withdrew a capped metal cylinder, and poured an amber liquid into her empty glass. “Try some of this.”

She sniffed it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Jack Daniels. I smuggled it on board the starship, figuring I might need it one day.” He gestured at his legs. “I figure that day has come.”

Taryn hesitated, then took the glass and slugged the entire thing back. It scorched a pathway down her throat and slammed into her stomach. She gasped and sputtered, but didn’t protest as he refilled her glass.

“I don’t know if I can survive another ‘situation’ like Lyle Mitchell’s, Parker.”

“‘Be flexible. Savour all the surprises life brings, and life in turn will bring more and more wonderful surprises to you.’ Shakti Gawain. A smart lady.”

“You’ve read Shakti Gawain? You can *quote* her?”

“Only after a certain amount of alcohol consumption.”

“You’re a NASA engineer; stick to spacecraft and magnetometers.” She picked up her glass and slugged back the contents again. It didn’t burn quite so fiercely this time.

“Have you figured out what to say at the funeral tomorrow?”

“I told Cenmo I couldn’t do it. I refused his request.”

Parker’s jaw fell slack. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Oh, Jesus, Parker, could you do it? Deliberately provoke the death of someone you admire?”

“But you *know* peak is crucial—”

“Knowing something and putting the knowledge into action is two different things. I can’t do it.”

They both fell silent. “You know,” he said after a moment, “anything that’s easy to obtain isn’t worth having.”

“Don’t preach, Parker; it’s unbecoming.”

He ignored her. “Take me, for example. I knew I was on the right track last week with Technician Shloss. I also knew that something was going seriously wrong with the translations. But I kept plugging at it.”

“And now you have two broken legs. I told you to avoid that kind of intense dialogue without Paramount Cenmo or Paramount Lome present—”

“My point is there’s a risk in every relationship, but the risk is part and parcel with the gain. I may be somewhat immobile right now, but I’ve come closer than any Earth Camper to finding the answer to the Soreno transgalactic propulsion system.”

“I’m not going to get into another argument with you about this,” she said.

“People suffer when they are unable to stop clinging to something or someone that has undergone change. People suffer when they have to part with their loved ones.”

“Don’t start quoting Shakti Gawain again.”

“Actually, that was Frank Leung, member of the Hua Ts’ang Buddhist Society and author of ‘How to Seek Self-Salvation After Death.’”

“Yeah, well he’s probably never invested all his time and energy into a relationship only to watch it end. I won’t do it, damn it.” She stood. “Look, thanks for the advice and the drink. But I should go write a report about what happened to Mitchell.”

The sultry, sulphur-scented night coated Taryn as she left the bar; she felt as if she were a marshmallow being swirled through dark chocolate. Thoughts of her husband clung to her mind as she dragged herself toward Earth Camp’s barracks, and they refused to leave her as she struggled to write the report.

It was with a tone of both annoyance and relief that she responded to a knock on her door a few hours later. “Come in.”

Paramount Cenmo shuffled through the door. “I apologize for the invasion of your privacy.”

“Oh.” She struggled to her feet. “No need to apologize.”

They regarded each other awkwardly, like ex-lovers. Cenmo finally broke the silence. “I have come here to beg.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. All right. Sit down.” She groped for her own chair and sat, suddenly not trusting her legs.

Cenmo sat swami-like on her bed and reflectively folded one arm around his head. “You and I have accomplished much together. We have a partnership; my fame and glory is connected to you, and so I need your exaltation to peak. If I forego peak, my pride dies. What life does a sentient being have without pride?”

Taryn looked away and studied the sponge-like holes of the nearest wall. *I do pretty well.*

“I have a confession,” he said. “It is for this that I come to beg. To beg your forgiveness for invading your privacy. I gurglegurgle.”

They both looked at his translation pendant in disgust, then his tongue forks squirted an alternate word into the necklace. “I spy. On Earth Camp’s transmissions. It’s part of my function. I know about your gurglegurgle.”

“My...?”

“Your mate.”

The letter from her husband—he'd read it. Outrage filled her. "You read my personal mail?"

"Yes, and I now understand that your refusal to provoke my peak is a misdirected anger against your mate, that you are emotionally dependent upon others for love and esteem."

"How dare you read my mail!"

"Life is a river, Dr. Brock, and you cling to the bank, afraid. You must realize that once you let go, you can guide yourself with the current, and choose whichever branch of the river you prefer to follow."

"What?"

His cheeks distended with pride. "It took much practice to say that correctly."

A nasty suspicion began to form in her mind. "Was that a Soreno proverb?"

"No. I read it in the latest report sent to you from Ambassador Tilby."

"Shakti Gawain?"

"Correct. A formidable earthling."

With a groan, Taryn covered her face with her hands. I give up, she thought. The universe is not as I wanted it to be.

She looked up as a hand softly touched her shoulder. Paramount Cenmo crouched before her.

"Please provoke my peak tomorrow. There have been so many preparations. The entire world of Soreno anticipates the event." She stared into the orange and blue specks of his eyes.

"If you love something, set it free," she murmured.

"Shakti Gawain?"

"No. But it might as well be."

NASA ENGINEERS AND EARTH CAMPERS FROM ALL DEPARTMENTS CROWDED THE auditorium corridor. A hush settled over them as Taryn appeared. Parker Bates smiled at her from his wheelchair.

She scratched her left ear, below one of the irritating ceremonial flowers that decorated her hair.

Slowly, the airlock door to the funeral coliseum swung open. The sound of rain on a still lake—Soreno singing—filled the air.

"All right," Parker murmured. "That's our entry cue. You lead, Dr. Brock. Earth Camp will follow."

She scratched vigorously at her tingling scalp, knocked a flower loose, then stepped forward.

The coliseum was huge. Tier after tier of singing, swaying Sorenos encircled and towered over Taryn. She felt like an ant within the shadow of a skyscraper.

The Sorenos had built a floor section specifically for Earth Campers, so they could participate without the encumbrance of exosheaths. Only a slight shimmer, like a sheet of oil suspended in the air, indicated that a wall surrounded and separated them from the Sorenos.

Taryn's gaze swept across the arena, toward the glimmering metallic podium where Paramount Cenmo stood. Every portion of his red and coral hide displayed an ornate, black tattoo. He swelled with pride as she approached.

His chosen harem of thirty females, twinkling with flaxen hide mites and steaming with nutmeg-like pheromone scent, waited on the other side of the podium.

For the mating, Taryn thought. Ambassador Tilby is going to have a fit.

She lowered herself onto one of the chairs. Around her, Earth Camp likewise filled the seats.

The Soreno singing swelled from soft rain to a stormy monsoon, then crashed into the blood-churning roar of a waterfall. Then silence.

Taryn vigorously scratched her left temple and avoided looking at the empty podium on Earth Camp's side of the gravity barrier—it was intended for her.

Paramount Lome stepped up beside Cenmo, closed his nostril slits respectfully, then wrapped an arm around his head.

"I am honored to begin Paramount Cenmo's funeral service. Let me start by listing the Paramount's rich successes. Foundation father of gurglegurgle, his mastery of cognizance supersedes gurglegurgle technogurgle..."

This is where the translation necklaces fail, Taryn thought. What if *I* fail? What if the necklace can't translate what I've tried to say?

But then, what if I succeed?

She looked again at Cenmo's expectant, steaming harem, then at Cenmo himself. The patches of coral remaining on his hide were slowly starting to turn brick red as Paramount Lome continued to exalt Cenmo's accomplishments. Cenmo continued to flush as the ceremony progressed, as Soreno after Soreno stepped onto the platform to express their admiration for him.

Beside her, Parker Bates shifted.

"Perhaps they have it right," he whispered. "In fact, I'm convinced we do it backwards."

"What?" Taryn scratched her scalp and another flower fell loose.

"We wait until the person is dead before gathering together to praise his worth—backwards. I'm going to recommend to the Pope that we adopt the Soreno method."

Taryn became vaguely aware of murmurs and movement behind her. A hand tapped her shoulder and she turned slightly.

"Taryn?" the person behind her whispered. "There's a botanist in row nineteen who thinks the flowers in your hair are poisonous. He suggests taking them out."

"Oh hell!" She fumbled with the sticky blossoms in her hair.

"...present gurglepartner and guest of honor, Earthling Doctor Brock," the Soreno on stage announced.

Her stomach lurched into her throat and she stared at Paramount Cenmo. He waited expectantly, only the faintest coral tone remaining around his eyes.

This is the last time I'll see him alive, Taryn realized. I can't do this. I'm not

ready to be alone.

The entire coliseum grew still. Waiting. She slowly looked around—row upon row of Sorenos held themselves tautly.

Taryn, she told herself sternly, it's time to let go of the riverbank and flow with the current.

Taking a deep breath, she rose to her feet, walked to the podium, and climbed onto it. Paramount Cenmo stood on his podium on the other side of the gravity barrier.

Carefully, she unfolded the creased visiplast upon which she'd transcribed her speech, then cleared her throat. The floor of the podium glowed and the sound magnified and filled the coliseum.

"I am honored to be chosen by Paramount Cenmo to fulfil this position today," she slowly began, "and Earth Camp is honored by the invitation to view these death rites. We are proud to represent our planet at this momentous occasion.

"Although my species understands the biological necessity and the sacredness of these rites, they are hard for us to accept: humans treasure longevity. Therefore my agreement to provoke the Paramount's peak was one of the most difficult decisions I've had to make.

"Yet Paramount Cenmo has helped me remember that friendship is a cherished experience that humans often obscure with fear. We fear that if we lose a friendship—from distance, change, or death—we'll be alone. Humans are afraid to be alone."

She paused and took a deep breath.

"Paramount Cenmo has achieved all the distinguished things you heard about today. But his greatest achievement has yet to be mentioned: he has given me that which is valued most on both Earth and Soreno. Paramount Cenmo has given me both the gift of friendship and the courage to face my fears."

Taryn looked up. Through the rippling oil appearance of the gravity barrier, she met Cenmo's gaze.

"It is therefore a great privilege for me today to declare that Paramount Cenmo has indeed reached the peak of his existence."

The coliseum fell silent.

Cenmo's blue and orange eyes bored into hers and his nostrils slits closed in respect.

A roar shook the ground. Taryn jumped; around her, every Soreno was standing, gurgling thunderously. She looked back at Cenmo. His whole body pulsed as his brick red hide flushed into a brilliant, gleaming crimson. It was as if a light had illuminated inside him.

He's peaked, she thought.

His eyes met hers for the last time, then he turned and with great dignity stepped off the podium. Immediately, his harem descended upon him.

Taryn recoiled and stumbled off the podium.

"That was magnificent," Parker Bates murmured as she collapsed back into her chair. The coliseum continued to roar around them. A numbness drifted over

her and her eyes remained riveted on the activity on the other side of the gravity barrier.

This is happening because Cenmo is at his physical, emotional, and mental prime, a remote voice intoned inside her head. A male Soreno can only manufacture reproductive cells when he's in peak condition, which ensures that his strengths will be genetically encoded in his offspring. Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, with a Soreno evolutionary twist.

She continued to soothe herself with her detached, clinical lecture.

Creation of these reproductive cells, combined with subsequent mating activity, exerts such a toll on the male Soreno that death is the result. This ensures bio-diversity, for a male Soreno can impregnate up to thirty chosen females during peak.

"My God," she whispered. "It looks like a shark feeding frenzy."

"More like a Roman orgy," Parker Bates said.

Taryn glanced at him; he was perched at the edge of his wheelchair, watching the mating intently. He caught her eye and bashfully tried to cross his legs.

No, the universe is not as I thought it would be, she thought.

She reached up and scratched the rash blossoming across her scalp.

"DR. BROCK," THE GIGANTIC NOSE SAID.

"Hello, Ambassador Tilby," Taryn said.

The Soreno technicians in the adjoining room adjusted the wall image; the nose shrank to normal proportions.

Taryn squared her shoulders and plunged into the conversation. "Ambassador, I'm sending you a film of Paramount Cenmo's funeral; the Sorenos request that it be broadcast on all the major networks. BBC, YTV, the works."

"You were supposed to prevent the funeral and stop him from peaking!"

"I tried, Ambassador Tilby. In fact, I almost had him convinced. But unfortunately, your report changed his mind."

"My report? What on earth do you mean?"

"He read Shakti Gawain, sir. She says, and I quote her, 'Death is the choice to block the flow of life energy. When someone dies, they are unconsciously choosing to leave their physical body and take charge of their spiritual journey.' Your report convinced him it was time to take charge of his metaphysical voyage, sir."

"He's *dead*? Because of my report?"

"Shakti Gawain's beliefs apparently mirror Soreno theology."

"This is disastrous!"

"Paramount Lome and I have prepared another report for the UN. It details the exact biological necessity of peak. I hope you'll read this one."

"Well! I can't believe Cenmo's gone. He was a rather likable chap. Bit damp at the dinner table, but otherwise... Good heavens! You're bald, Dr. Brock!"

"An unfortunate brush with a poisonous native plant, Ambassador. The medics are certain my hair will re-grow."

The screen buzzed. Taryn glanced at the gurgling Soreno technicians on the

other side of the translucent wall.

"It appears our time is up."

"Yes, well, I'll inform the General Assembly about Cenmo's demise. But you must keep up the fight, doctor. Never give in."

"I shall never surrender, Ambassador."

"Good show."

Taryn paused. "Ambassador Tilby? Could you...could you perhaps tell my husband that his request has been granted? He can send the appropriate forms for me to sign. He'll know what I mean."

"By all means." The image started to fade. "God save the Queen, Doctor."

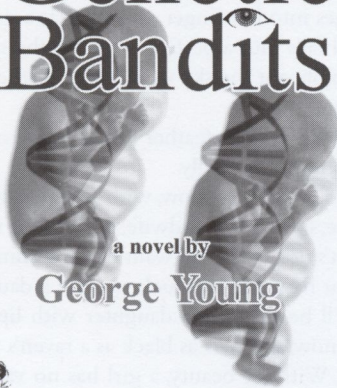
So, Taryn thought as she stared at the blank screen. I've finally done it. I've let go of the bank and am once more in the river.

A tap on the glass startled her. She turned. It was Parker Bates in his wheelchair, cheeks flushed and chest heaving. Paramount Lome stood beside him, nostrils sharply canted.

Oh hell, she thought. We've got another situation. •

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Snow White Dreams

Elizabeth Matson

IN A CLEARING IN THE WOODS, PRESERVED UNDER GLASS,
a woman lies sleeping....

Snow White dreams. Snow White dreams of her mother belly bulging with possibility. Her mother sits with her fine needlework by the window. The open casement lets in the pale winter light and a bitter wind. Through the window all her mother can see is sky, piercingly blue. Drowning in the color, her mother leans closer, her nimble fingers tugging the needle and thread through the fabric without her direction. The needle plunges into her finger and extracts a drop of blood. Her mother watches as the blood falls into a perfect circle on the snowy window ledge. A shadow momentarily blots out the sky and a black feather falls in its wake, drifting down beside the blood.

“Ah. I wish. I wish I could—” She reaches for the feather but her embroidery gets in her way. She sighs, bleeding hand upon her belly.

“I wish for a daughter as bold as blood, as pure as snow, with wings to fly.”

“Tsk. Tsk,” says her husband’s old nurse, soon to be midwife, her tongue reverberating on the roof of her mouth. “That’s not what you want to be wishing for. You want to be wishing for a son. If you have the bad luck to have a daughter at all—the dear Lord preserve us—you’ll be wanting a daughter with lips and cheeks as red as blood, skin as white as snow, and hair as black as a raven’s wing. That’s what you’ll be wanting, my dear. Without beauty, a girl has no value to her father at all. But, that’s all stuff and nonsense anyhow as it’s a son you should

be wishing—and praying—for, milady. It's a son his lordship wants—as should you."

The old nurse snaps the shutter shut and the blue disappears with a bang.

"No—no," says Snow White's mother. "I wish. I wish." But the old nurse clucks and bundles her away to the fire. The dark shadows of the castle close in on Snow White's mother and cloud her mind. She lets her wishes find refuge in the child within her and starts to lose her hold on life.

SNOW WHITE DREAMS. SNOW WHITE DREAMS OF HER MOTHER. NOT THE MOTHER who bore her but the only one she ever knew, her father's second wife, the mother of his sons. She is brightly colored and fast moving and doesn't fade into the shadows when the shutters snap shut. Snow White's mother stands in the dark and glows like a candle. Her alabaster skin glistens and her eyes sparkle like emeralds. Her soft voice bends the will of the strongest man and draws anyone she might desire to her. She has eyes and ears everywhere. Snow White can see filaments of gossamer threads radiating out from her mother's body, connecting her to each and every inhabitant of the castle, and beyond them to any other person or place they may know outside the castle. They are all charmed by her and will do whatever she asks of them. Snow White's mother never leaves the castle—she thinks it is because she does not need to.

Snow White creeps around the edges and tries not to be noticed. She sees her mother reach up to gently tug a gossamer thread, setting her lady-in-waiting, then the housekeeper, and then the little chambermaid in motion and reeling in Snow White from the shadows. Snow White feels like a fly trapped in her mother's web. She cannot escape those threads.

Her mother's hands arch delicately into the air at the sight of Snow White's uncombed hair and dust-encumbered skirts. Snow White has been exploring the hidden passages and secret byways again, searching for a way out.

"You mustn't creep about so, Snow White," says her mother. "Shine, Snow White. Shine."

Soft hands relentlessly guide Snow White to the wall. On the wall is her mother's most prized possession. Her bridal gift, her dowry. To this dark castle filled with shuttered windows, Snow White's mother has brought a looking glass. It is not a glass you can look out of and through. It is a glass you can only look into. Snow White tries not to look at all. She gets lost in the glass when she does and cannot find her way out again.

Snow White's mother brushes and arranges her daughter's hair.

"So soft. So black. Like a raven's wing," she murmurs.

Snow White's mother powders her daughter's already pale face, smears goose grease on her red lips, and pinches her rosy cheeks until they glow.

"Skin so white, like snow. Lips so red. Cheeks so rosy," she murmurs.

She dresses her daughter in her own clothes, tucking and tightening to enhance her charms.

"Don't breathe in so deeply, dear, you'll ruin the line of the dress."

But Snow White can't breathe at all. She is smothering in her mother's web, wrapped snugly and ready to be devoured.

"Chin up. There now, don't you look lovely?"

Snow White's gaze cannot avoid the looking glass as her mother pats her chin up. Her eyes are caught by the image in the glass. Snow White sees her mother's face painted over her own. She cannot find herself anywhere. She is her mother's reflection, only younger and more beautiful.

Snow White raises her hand to her cheek to see if she is still there. Her false reflection does the same. She reaches out her other hand towards the glass, fingertips blindly searching. A coldness wraps around her hand, surges up her arm, tugging at her heart. On the other side of the glass, a hand grasps her own. Snow White struggles to pull her reflection back into herself. But a cloud of perfume settles over her head, distracting her, as her mother puts the finishing touches on her creation, and Snow White loses the battle. Now it is the reflection's hand that tugs, jerking all that Snow White knows herself to be out of herself and into the glass. Snow White tumbles to the ground, skirts in disarray, seams splitting, and hair tangling.

At first it is such a relief to be free of the false reflection that she doesn't notice that she is trapped inside the glass. But after she scrubs her face with her skirts and picks herself up, Snow White sees that on the other side of the glass her reflection has taken on a life of its own. Outside of the glass, Snow White's reflection lowers her eyes, her lips curling up secretively, demurely. Her mother nods her approval and, hands on her shoulders, propels the false Snow White towards the door.

Wild and unkempt, Snow White is left alone in the room. Her hands and nose press against the glass while Snow White's reflection goes to the Great Hall with her mother to eat and drink with the lords who are vying for her hand. Back inside the looking glass, Snow White screams and shouts and pounds her fists bloody. But no one notices, no one sees. She is as trapped as her mother was, her other mother, the one who escaped only by giving birth to her.

SNOW WHITE DREAMS. SNOW WHITE DREAMS SHE IS OUTSIDE THE CASTLE WALLS FOR the first time in her life. It is a betrothal party. Such a big affair, with so many people and such fine weather, that it is being held outside on the castle grounds. An unprecedented event. She is outside where she has always wanted to be, but that barely penetrates beneath her mother's painted-on face. She scarcely sees the trees and the sky. She is doing her best to shine.

And she is lovely, radiant, beautiful. Everyone says so, before moving on to talk to someone else more important or interesting. Snow White is left behind in the crowd. There are such a lot of people there, so many fine young men and wealthy lords, Snow White can't quite remember which one she's been betrothed to.

Left on the edges of the party, Snow White joins the young ladies playing hide and seek and blindman's bluff. As the ladies skirt ever closer to the edge of the

forest and farther away from the stern strictures of their elders, their stays loosen and they laugh more freely and run more earnestly.

At first Snow White finds herself in the forest quite by accident, a misstep in the game. She is just that close and the party just that far away. But having stepped in, she finds she can't step out. Pinesap and humus assault her nostrils. Birds sing out sweetly and raucously by turn, as the woods rustle and sigh around her. Branches shelter her in their shadows. She is hidden from the game. The party goes on without her. There is something she has forgotten and the forest is asking her to remember. Snow White turns away from the party and the forest floor sucks her fine shoes from her feet. Bare feet picking their way over gnarled roots, she holds hands with the trees who, in turn, gently shred her fine gown and tangle her hair, bringing her slowly back to herself.

Something is calling to her through the trees. A soft sound, like a child's giggle, ripples in endless repetition. Snow White stumbles out of the trees and into a clearing. A brook merrily empties into a still pool. Snow White dips her sore feet into the water and picks wildflowers from the banks. Her toes squeeze mud and mossy stones between them and her fingers weave a crown. She has forgotten everything until she stands still and looks in the pool. The smooth surface reflects like glass, like her mother's looking glass. Snow White is transfixed.

In the water, she can see her own reflection. She recognizes herself. It is the wild and unkempt true image that was trapped like a wild animal inside her mother's looking glass. Snow White reaches out towards her watery image and her hand slides smoothly through the surface of the pond. A cold hand firmly grasps her own. With a douse of water that fountains over her head and down the front of her gown, Snow White surges back into herself and her reflection disappears from the water.

On the clear surface of the pool, Snow White now sees her mother back at the castle. The castle is in an uproar. Her mother looks in her glass, but she cannot find Snow White. She sees only her own reflection, suddenly old and haggard with worry. Snow White wiggles her feet in the water and her mother disappears. Her eyes on the ripples, she does not notice the huntsmen until they are upon her.

Out of the woods, they come, green-clad, on silent stalking feet, casually surrounding her. It is a moment before she picks out the seven huntsmen from the trees.

"It is dangerous in the woods for a woman alone," they tell her. "No telling what man or beast might do to her."

They are all armed with the tools of their trade, sharp knives, long bows, and arrows. For the first time, since she entered the forest, Snow White is afraid.

"It is a good thing we found you first. As it happens, we are in need of a housekeeper, as our last one ran off and none of us can cook or clean," the huntsmen tell Snow White. "Come with us and we will keep you safe in return."

Snow White's feet grow chill in the water and her breath comes in shallow gasps. It is not the forest that she fears. She does not want to go with them and

be shut inside walls again. She wants to jump up and dart through their encircling bodies and run light-footed without stopping through the trees. But so deep that she does not even think it but feels it as a squiggling worm of fear inside her, Snow White comprehends that if she does not go with the huntsmen and agree with their suggestion, there is no telling what they might do.

A crown of fading wildflowers falls from her head as she gathers her clammy wet skirts and allows the huntsmen to lead her from the water. They courteously open up a path for her through the suddenly impenetrable woods.

SNOW WHITE DREAMS. SNOW WHITE DREAMS SHE IS LIVING IN A SMALL HOUSE WITH seven men. She is generally left alone but there is so much washing and cleaning and mending and cooking to do that she does not notice this. She is busy and overworked and can no longer see the trees reaching out their limbs to her.

Then, one day, out of the woods comes an old woman. Snow White hears a sound like a giggling brook and looks through the window to see an old hag, gaudily dressed in layers, fashions and colors not meant to go together. On her back, a pack tinkles and clanks with pots and pans, bangles and beads. Wooden spoons, ribbons and laces fly up from the edges of her pack and expand her profile into a hazy illusion of wings as she walks. The hag waddles slowly forward and cracks her cane demandingly against the little house.

"Come and see, my pretty, come and see," she cackles to Snow White through the window. "Come buy my wares. I have your heart's desire in my pack."

Despite herself, Snow White comes to the window, trailing mending and sheets. The peddler is ugly, old and crooked, missing hair and teeth. Snow White finds her repulsive. She has never seen anyone quite so old or quite so unattractive before. Yet there is something strangely compelling in the old woman's demeanor, in her very repulsiveness, that makes it hard for Snow White to look away. "How can you possibly know my heart's desire, old woman? You do not even know me."

"Oh, I know you well enough. Probably better than you know yourself."

Looking at the hag's wrinkles, Snow White puts her hand to her own smooth cheek and suspects this to be true. A crooked finger beckons her closer as the old woman withdraws a brightly polished ebony comb from her pack.

"A pretty comb for your raven tresses perhaps, my pretty."

Snow White pulls back from the window, laughing and tossing her head. Her black hair, long ago cut short for practicality, is easily finger-combed. "And what need have I for a fancy comb, old woman?"

"Some pots and pans, perhaps? This one will never bubble over. This one will never stick. I have here a marvel of a slicing tool. Or perhaps a new wash-board?"

The old woman's prattle is like a game as she whips one item and then another from her pack and as neatly and cleverly tucks each away again. Snow White comes closer, leaning on the windowsill, shaking her head and laughing.

"No, no, and no. I have no need of such things. I have plenty enough already

to keep me busy.” She invites the old woman to look in at the small house crammed to capacity with cleaning and cooking implements that the huntsmen bring home to keep her happy.

The old woman purses her lips and nods. “No, you’re right, these are trinkets and gewgaws. Best to be left behind. But, now, I know I have here your very heart’s desire.” The old woman pulls from her pack a fresh, ripe, rosy apple and holds it up before the window.

All at once, the little house is awash with the smell of apple blossoms. The scarlet apple glows enticingly in the window like a setting sun, illuminating the trees, the forest, behind it. Snow White suddenly remembers running barefoot through those trees. She reaches for the taste of freedom. Then hesitates.

“But I have nothing to give you in return.”

“Then we’ll share.” The old woman withdraws the apple from Snow White’s grasp and takes a large, noisy bite of the white flesh. The juice of it dribbles down her chin. She chews, mouth open, slowly, appreciatively, smacking her lips. Snow White’s mouth waters in mockery of the apple’s juices. The old woman wipes her mouth backhanded and offers Snow White the unblemished side of the apple.

“There, now, I’ve had my fill. You take the rest, there’s a dear. Spoiled goods and all, you know.”

Snow White takes her first bite from the apple. The flesh tears easily, crisply. The juice explodes in her mouth, waking up all her senses. Snow White can smell the dark, secret odors of the forest. She can see leaves beckoning, quick shadows moving. She can hear the birds entreating her, feel the wind’s embrace as the juice and flesh of the forest rolls around on her tongue. She does not notice the old woman’s waddling return to the forest as she greedily devours the rest of the apple.

She eats even the core. Empty hands, sticky with juice, fall from her lips and she feels dizzy. The little house feels off-kilter, like it’s closing in on her. She reaches out with both hands, touching opposite walls, to straighten it. She is suffocating. She cannot breathe inside the house. It is too small. There is no room for breathing.

Snow White stumbles towards the door but she has grown too large for the house and cannot get out. Her arms stick out the windows, her head out the chimney. She stands up to stretch out her cramped legs and the house rips free of the earth. She is wearing the house like a dress. It itches. It doesn’t fit. She wants to take it off but she has grown too large to leave.

The huntsmen return home on the run, sensing something amiss. Snow White never realized before how small they are. The little men run around at her feet like demanding children and, then, like inconsequential ants. She tries very hard not to step on them as she heads towards the forest. The trees reach out to her breaking off bits of the house as she goes.

Somewhere ahead of her, through the trees, she hears a tinkling, clinking sound. She follows it, uncertain whether it is the old woman or the brook.

Perhaps it is the forest itself laughing at her confusion. Dizzy in the dappled shadows, roots reach out to snag her toes, tripping her, stalling her in her forward motion. Falling to the ground she loses hold of everything. Relieved of the confines of the house, she is small under the trees but the taste of the apple is still large in her mouth.

IN A CLEARING IN THE WOODS, PRESERVED UNDER GLASS, A WOMAN LIES SLEEPING...

In summer, the unrelenting sun roasts her cheeks to a blossom's bloom. Her once-rosy lips drain of color, become cracked and dry. Her skin peels and then darkens to the rich loam of fertile soil. In autumn, the fallen leaves shroud the brown earth of her skin. Her hair grows as long as the grass, blanketing her against the winter chill. Frost writes secret love notes to her on the glass.

Then, one spring, the sun kisses her lips and the glass cracks under the sun's fiery passion. Fault lines spread and multiply. Glass and dreams shatter to the ground. A green tendril reaches towards the sun.

The ground shakes with the clump of hooves, the jangle of leather and metal. The deep guttural resonance of men's voices shatters the stillness. Twigs snap, birds take flight, wildflowers cringe underfoot as men break through the trees and into the clearing, searching for the prize they have been told awaits them. They are too late.

In the center of the clearing an apple tree grows from the belly of the sleeping earth, surrounded by shards of glass. The men leave disappointed.

Snow White rises up from behind the tree. Her toes curl into the soil. Black hair rustles between her fingers as she reaches towards the sky. The pale parchment of her palm closes over the globe of a blood red apple. Holding her fate in her hand, she takes a bite, juice running down her chin.

Snow White has dreamed herself awake. •

Nine-Tenths of the Law

Catherine MacLeod

THE DEMON ZOO IN ROME IS FULL OF SPIRITS I'VE ferried there. They have to be exorcised, absorbed and removed inside the aviary. You can't mail demons in a litter box.

I was their best courier. I didn't blind myself or implode—in this job “burn-out” isn't a figurative term.

After today it's not my job anymore. I just got the gold watch, the handshake, and the boot.

My boss always wondered how I kept the cargo in check. Maybe he finally realized the demons fear me.

Maybe he realized he did.

He wished me a happy retirement. He actually suggested I get a pet.

Hmm...maybe. My current demon seems happy. He's in there licking my eyeballs, kissing my cortex. Feeding him wouldn't be hard. Another mess in my psyche couldn't smell much worse.

I wonder if I could teach him to fetch. •

The Valeherd

Lena DeTar

MY FATHER ALWAYS SAID IT WAS EASY TO BE POOR, BUT I don't think he really believed it. I certainly didn't. We had a house, four Valeoxen and one pregnant cow. He tended trees for them, chopped feed for them, washed them, healed them, and tended to their humors every single day of his life. For gen-modi feeders, they were insanely labor-intensive even with six strong children to help out after our mother left. And despite the general health of our cow, we had barely enough milk to eat with eight mouths. I never saw a coin until I was sixteen. We were rich of people, but empty of stomach.

My father died two days before the Valecow started labor. As I waded through the shallow water in the marsh to answer her distress whistles, her massive head reared into the air, eyes rolling. She wanted him, not me.

"Hush," I whistled, as the beast brought her neck down to hear me over the wind. I wondered if she picked up the sounds of the funeral dances. Only my youngest brother had come back from the big city on Tau Ceti to lead them. Like father said, the blood was running thin. My brother hadn't even offered to help me now.

The Valecow's dark fleshy belly rippled suddenly, and her head swung around to lick her pelvic notch. Encouraging the slow-born to speed up their final drop.

I whistled a soother, and waited until her eyebrows relaxed before I sloshed closer to her swollen stomach. My father had described this to me so many times, always with an expression of awe and greed: *The notch blazes red with burst vessels before the cow uses her forked tongue to unlatch the uterine bones. Any male in the area will come running, because the wind through the fine hairs of bone makes the 'call of birth.'* *To a herder, is the most beautiful song in the world. But it's also a good idea to have two or three strong-bred handlers in the area, to help scatter the oxen when they come. Because if she births female...*

"Well, Father," I said to the distant funeral dance, "here goes nothing."

I watched as the valecow continued tasting her uterus with her blue tongue, the long neck craning to reach every spot. The notch was almost glowing red in the murk, and her eyebrows kept downing when she touched the edges. It was painful for her.

"Go on," I whistled; a walking command but she knew what I meant. I waited tensely. The cow swung her head back up into the trees, nearly knocking me over, and kissed at a wet branch. Then just as fast, she dove back down and slipped her tongue expertly into the swollen notch.

One side burst open. Not enough that the constant wind could enter and play on those fine hairs. Not enough that the calves could be born, even with assistance. No knife is strong enough to cut through a Valeox's stomach. But I could see them, and my heart leapt. The small things—well, small compared to their mother—wriggled, eager to be birthed. The precious things. What my brothers called my father's true children, even unborn.

I was about to whistle another "go on," but the cow knew instinctively what she was doing. One more swipe, and the air was Sundered.

I HAD NEVER REALLY BELIEVED THE STORIES THAT BEING RAISED ON VALEMILK would give you herd senses. I found it unlikely still that the first Valeherd breeders had gen-modified themselves as well as their stock, to better care for their feeders. But now I began to suspect a truth in those stories somewhere, for the music—glorious, reverberating, intense—picked me up and moved me to a different time.

I was washed with visions of my father, as he was when he danced with the males in the marsh twenty years ago, when we bought the cow as a calfling and first planted her. I remembered the thrill of my first ride on the brown ox's back. The way they brought food for the female, the tending of something for futures' sake. The way they came when my father called. The night I got lost and they led my father to me, just before I drowned.

Reaching through the wriggling little males, I grabbed the one female calfling by the ruff and floated it through the marsh about thirty paces, just as the grown oxen rounded into the cow's vale. I drove her trailing root into the sub-water soil with a strength and grace from deep inside me, still drugged by the sound in the air. The oxen were dancing in slow motion.

The calfling opened her huge eyes, blue like the sky at half-night, for all the

worlds the empress of all she could see. Stretching her neck, she made a low harmonic call to her mother. The cow slowly lowered her neck-spout that had fed me so many times and aimed it perfectly into the calfling's mouth. The first feeding, the only feeding.

As her uterus collapsed, the music stopped.

I BECAME SUDDENLY AWARE OF MY PROXIMITY TO THE MATING FRENZY. THE BROWN ox almost crushed me as it crashed over to the calfling. I slapped its flank to let it know where I was, but it was too hot with lust. And then the speckled, and then the grey were around me too, legs like tree trunks splaying and splashing. Dancing with the smaller calves. I could not see where I was among marsh and legs and mud.

Over the wind and the ruckus I could hear the white, the oldest of our males, putting a clear counter beat to the calfling's shrieks as the others assaulted her. I yelled, and slapped the speckled ox's side, but all he did was quiver and dump me into the mud. Another foot came down, too near, splashing water into my face just as I took a breath to whistle.

While choking I thought: well that's yet more of us dead today. Something else buffeted me to the side, but I could not see. Mud was in my mouth, in my eyes, in my throat. I could hear the calfling's shrieks intensifying. I pictured the males commencing their mating, each placing spores from their own modified milk-faucets into the tiny slow-born's uterine notch. I was pushed to one side, then somebeast's foot crushed my thigh onto a root. I heard a crack through the pressure and pain. I hoped it was the root.

And then there was a soft whistle near my head, and a forked tongue lick. I felt each lobe wipe a side of my face. My arms grabbed the neck, and we swung into the air, tree high, flying above the males and their almost culminated mating.

The Valecow set me down safely, near her torn womb that was flooding the stagnant marsh water with blood and fluids. Her eyebrows were sidled, violet eyes gentle as she tasted the mud on my face again. She was dying, of course. I put out a hand, and rubbed the thin-haired crest of her skull hard until she whistled softly in pleasure. I hoped she was not too much in pain.

At a hoot of the white ox, the four grown males disappeared into the more foresty marsh. The young ones followed suit, seeming silent because their whistles were yet too high for me to hear. The cow opened her eyes to glance at her calfling, who was busily rooting, chirruping whistles to show us she was recovered and ready for milking.

And then slowly, so slowly I thought I was time-spelled by the "birth-call" again, the old cow laid herself down under the water. Giving herself completely to the calfling in a nutrient supply that would last over a year. I felt like weeping, not sure if it was sadness or relief welling up inside me, inside my herder blood.



I WAS JUST TAPPING THE NEW SLOW-BORN'S NIPPLE FAUCET FOR THE FIRST TIME when I noticed the sounds of the dances had stopped. My left leg was useless, so

I was sitting in the mud and stroking the calfing's head with my wrench when my brother waded into the vale, fancy Earth-style clothes soaked with mud and sweat.

"Is this a new one? We did get a female?" he asked hoarsely.

"Pregnant and milking. She's sweet-meat now, from the womb-life. It's a cream crop for the next few days," I said, equally hoarse. I could still feel mud between my teeth. I extended my hand, and he helped me up, immediately concerned when he saw the angle of my knee.

"Did the oxen stampede?"

"I was unwise to be in the way."

"You won't manage here with that." He looked annoyed. I did not like the tone he used, the way he referred to parts of me as a thing, and not living. I was not my father's heir for nothing. I shrugged his hand away, and whistled high for the brown ox.

"I can trade a bucket of sweet for a bone-job in Mahno. The funeral dances are done?"

"Father's ashes will be nutrients for the soil. Those that still live here ate a morsel of his flesh for herding luck, before the burning. I think your neighbor saved one for you. I tried to tell them it wasn't necessary anymore, with all the children and mouths moved away and protein in adequate supply. They appreciated the dancing, but they still like the old ways."

As he spoke, I thought of the calfing feeding on her mother over the year. The devotion my father showed to the Valecow and oxen. Slow stores for the future. The faithful brown came splashing over to us, still frothy from the mating exertion. He would be docile now, gentle, willing to obey my whistles and carry me home. When I whistled "mount," he knelt down in the marsh, low enough so I could swing up carefully onto his back. As I did so, my brother took a swig of the sweet-meat.

His look of surprise ran contrary to his words. "You'll never be wealthy, even with milk this good. Valeherds are a poor way of life, sister. Your children will spend food, not money."

"By that my children will learn the true value of living, brother." The brown pawed the water impatiently, causing me to gasp with the jarring pain. I took a breath and continued before my youngest brother could interrupt. "They will learn the value of patience, of family, and commitment. And their children will have milk, and plenty. There is more to life than coin and meat."

He shook his head, and mumbled something about being out of the universal depression, about poverty and stupidity hanging together. I did not want to argue. I whistled "go on," and the ox set off on the trail to my house, where the local healer would still be mingling with my father's oldest friends. I smiled as heard the cow-ling start to whistle a song behind me. •

Green Time

Steve Mohn

NEDROW LING FELL NAKED IN DOWNTOWN SYRACUSE at 22:00 of a Wednesday evening. He hit the sidewalk from a meter up, landed on his right shoulder and hip and tried to focus his eyes. Then he vomited. His stomach was empty so he tried again and kept on trying till it felt like someone's arm down there, clawing for more. But Nedrow was empty as a cave. Time travel cost money. You had to cut down on mass.

"Jeez Chryse." The staring man dropped his bottle and fled. Wine bloodied the sidewalk. Nedrow, small and wiry, got to his hands and knees. The concrete was hard and cold but at least he wasn't out in the woods.

As he stood, a passing lectricar slowed. Nedrow saw the driver: thick black hair beneath a barely conical woven hat like a small cymbal, dark eyes on a pale face, his passenger the same. Then Nedrow saw a police car stop.

A man stood from the car and slid a baton through a loop on his belt. He had a big hard belly and eyes so lifeless it might have been that he'd found them on the floor and had figured they would do as well as any. His partner roared at the stopped car: "You *doin'* in the middle a the street?" There was no traffic.

Grinning, the first cop asked Nedrow, "It's nice out so you thought you'd leave it out, that it?"

It made no sense but Nedrow remembered to be modest and, with both hands, covered his bush. "Where am I?"

"Where am I, where am I? You're on my beat, jerko!"

Red and white light strobed in the shadows of monumental sculpture that had once supported an elevated highway. Looking up, Nedrow saw reflections on a transparency, saw a zipper of geodesic teeth. Not a dome: a form-fitting skin plated over the city.

THEY WRAPPED HIM IN A SCRATCHY WOOL BLANKET AND PUSHED HIM FROM ROOM to room. He was questioned and passed on. He was polite. He knew nothing but tried to be helpful. "I just don't know. I'm really sorry but I just don't remember anything." Dull stuff for detectives eager to get home. They sent him to Upstate Medical, Psychiatric—"You figure him out."

Dr. Mavis Trash had dark tired eyes. Black hair hung about her face as if someone had handed it to her a moment ago.

Nedrow read a dented title-holder. "Doctor...Trash? Trash?"

"Isn't that a horrible name?" She leaned at him, interested.

"I—well—you know." He sketched a figure in the air, giggled nervously and broke the first rule: "Nedrow."

"Nedrow? That where you're from?"

No idea what she meant, he said, "No idea." Was she a contact? They had sent back one psych, a man, but may have sent this woman. "Can't remember."

"Ts-ts-ts," went Dr. Trash, shaking her head, knowing perfectly well that he was full of it.

They kept him a month, ran him through batteries of tests. He stuck to his story and his memory stayed lost. Dr. Trash, hands in her lab-coat pockets, said, "Poor man." You cannot hold such people against their will merely because they cannot recall their names or where they live. You can hold them only if they are violent or have said they come from the future. She made some calls, found him a low-level job. He had to check in once a month but not with Dr. Trash. After four months he stopped checking in and no one cared enough to look for him.

HE LEANED ON A LONG-HANDLED SQUEEGEE, BREATHING COUNTRY AIR, AND TIPPED back one of the wide woven hats washers wore to shade them from the sun. The more fashionable hats were small, so you could wear them in a lectricar. No tan proved that you spent little time outside.

Nedrow kept the gleaming ceramic glass and metal-strip roof clean of bird mess most of the year. Sometimes he cleared off snow. A living. But he had not found his Cell. He had meant to travel but this was the best job he could get and being paid in actual coin set him among the lowest: a Coiner.

IT WAS MID-JULY AND NEDROW HAD BEEN IN SYRACUSE ABOUT A YEAR. HE DID NOT know if any of his fellow travelers had made it or if they were scattered like dust. Where was Les Wiley? Les had been one of three sent back who knew them all, knew everything about them. Only Les had known the entire plan.

Disaster, thought Nedrow.

But it was fine up there. He saw ruggy green rolling hills, blue highways of

lectricars, magisterial clouds. South lay the Town of Nedrow—the days he had spent running *that* down! Six times Nedrow had hiked to Nedrow in search of The 4 T's—"Time travelers tread lightly but leave a trace"—which might have led him to a cache of forged ID, passports, visas, plastic or metal, phone numbers, street addresses, access codes.

Finding nothing, he would return to the glass-plated city, hands in his coverall pockets, sniffing back tears, climbing the glass like an ape to wait out the night, shivering on the roof, his wide woven hat slung back.

The Coiner crew would find him at dawn.

"Ned—for crying out loud! Don't you know to come *in*?"

He would grin like a simpleton, wanting to shout from the top of the city what he knew.

HE WAS BUYING LUNCH AT McDONALD'S WHEN HE HEARD MAVIS TRASH:

"Ned Row! Is that you?"

He snapped alert. He had not seen her in a while, had tried not to think about her. "Hi, Mavis." He asked how she was and said, "Nice haircut." Her hair no longer looked as if someone had tried to burn it.

"So, how's the old memory?" Mavis got around to, as she always had at Upstate. By then he had his tray and was standing to one side, trying not to block people. Mavis cut her metal through the slit without looking (Wing Hang Bank iridium) and said, "Any luck?"

Nedrow sighed. "Actually—" But Mavis cut him off:

"Cause, you know, it's the oddest thing. A case in Chicago then one in LA. A few in the hinterlands too—it's just raining naked people with amnesia." To a grinning bot-kid she said, "Large MacSoy, no sauce, small fries, medium Sloke, for here." And turned back. "Like to meet 'em?" Poked a straw in her mouth and bit it, lifting her eyebrows.

He felt as if every trace of language had flown out the door.

When he could hear again through the roaring in his ears, he cleared his throat and asked, "Why would I want...to meet...them, these people?"

"They might have things to tell you."

His mind whirled. Why hadn't they started a Cell? Why hadn't they laid a Foundation? Why hadn't they *contacted* him?

Still, they were here. It sang through him like pain and light.

He sat with his lunch, not eating till Mavis joined him.

She gazed at the park-like street, drinking through a straw. Nedrow caught himself watching her breasts rise and fall with her breath then cut to the ring on her left hand, white metal, an emerald. Heirloom, he had decided at Upstate, not a wedding band.

"What were you supposed to do?"

He'd been watching how the sunlight fired the down on the curve of her cheek. "Do?"

"It must have been pretty important," she said, "since some of them didn't get

through alive. I'm guessing but that's what I do for a living. Anyone tells you psychiatry has advanced beyond guessing is a psychiatrist, guessing. But some of them didn't get through alive. Nude woman found floating in a back-yard pool, but she's twice the size she should be and the extra hundred percent of her is pool water. Or the man they found in the concrete floor of a mall. The floor was buckled up where he'd suddenly taken on his own volume in concrete. I would have thought there'd be an explosion if you materialized where there were lots of other atoms already."

"Sounds right to me." He bit his sandwich. Act like she's the crazy one, he thought, chewing. But go along. He *had* to! It was the first break he'd had in two years. "You saying I materialized out of thin air?"

"Air may be thin but it's still molecular. I'm saying you should have had the worst gas attack in history. I'm saying you should be dead from it."

"And I'm not," he reminded. He had liked sparring with Mavis at Upstate. And he had gone into it knowing that some of them would die: until the subject solidified in space-time, the introductory field ballooned from the insertion point with electrostatic force sufficient to repel air molecules.

But not concrete, nor even water. There would be no explosion, only an immediate accommodation.

So a concrete man. And a woman who would, left in water, dissolve.

He did not know their names and, perhaps, never would. Only Les Wiley and two others had known all their names. That had been their security against one traveler's violent despair betraying everyone.

"The cases were so similar," Mavis said, "I thought of you." Watching his face, she ate a fry. "You must think I'm terrible."

"Yes." Shook his head. "No, of course not." Shut his eyes.

Mavis laughed. "I know. You do and you don't. You're even a little glad someone knows..." She let it fade, watching the street.

"*What* do you know, Mave?" He caught the twitch of her head: she didn't like being called "Mave." He had learned that while still at Upstate Psych, being treated like a child:

—Stop (she had said) calling me that.

—Yes, Dr. Trash.

—I said to call me Mavis.

—Okay, Mavis, I'll call you Mavis. Stop calling me Ned.

—Why did you say your name was Ned Row?

—I saw it on a sign somewhere.

—You weren't anywhere near Nedrow when you were found.

—Before I was found, I saw it on a sign somewhere. I *can* read.

—You're not amnesic, she had said, watching him, her big eyes full of black light.

He said, "Your burger's getting cold."

She nodded. "I like them cold. They're runny until they get cold. I knew you weren't amnesic so you had to be something else."

"So I have to be a time traveler? Jesus, Mave." He sucked in coffee hot enough to scald his tongue.

Again she let *Mave* pass. "You were scared when they brought you in but not the right way. Then you calmed down. Too fast. You didn't mind that you'd lost everything—you didn't mind enough. You weren't shocked enough by it. You did a good job bluffing but you were too sullen about it."

"I was tired of talking to policemen," he said.

"They're not policemen," she said, "they're cops."

So she had him figured. Not from the start—that was just Mavis talking big. But she'd heard of too many unaccountable amnesiacs who were otherwise normal as light bulbs.

"When you all got together, here, now, what were you supposed to do?"

Nedrow sorted through his fries.

"Since you all speak English the same way, an accent I've never heard, not even in movies," she said. "And you're all about the same age, about the same size. All you had to be was uniformly blond and blue-eyed to really scare the hell out of me."

"Blond?" he said. "Blue-eyed?"

Mavis smiled. "And I never said you were a time traveler, Ned. You did."

THEY WALKED TO THE HILL, WHERE SHE WORKED. IT WAS FARTHER THAN A PERSON would walk just to eat at MacDonald's so he guessed she had been watching his movements long enough to know his Thursday habits and that he had those afternoons off. He had never thought he was being watched. Who would watch a Coiner unless he was in a good sector after dark? It flattered him that Mavis had been watching, following. The kind of women available to him were uniformly desperate to make any kind of marriage, add in any way to a meager income out in the crumbling burbs. Nedrow had stuck to the city. Illegally, but he had caused no trouble, had stolen nothing, molested no one, had not prostituted himself. (They had been taught to "turn tricks," deemed safer than "pulling stick-ups.")

It was always warm under the glass and Nedrow unzipped his coverall to let his other T-shirt air. Mavis walked with hands in the pockets of her pleated navy slacks. Her flat woven hat rode the back of a man's white shirt. She did not carry a purse, as some older women did, but a variety of wallets, some hard to get at. Often-used cards she wore on separate chains. To leave or enter many places required only her palm print, and Coiners earned a few tin wiping plates as they accumulated hand grease throughout the day.

They said nothing while covering half the distance to the medical center. Then Mavis asked, "Are you choosing your words for posterity or can you just blurt it out? Starting with telling me how you do it."

"That's a lot of physics I don't have. And it takes a whole annihilator to punch you through." He explained annihilation in a vague way. The process drank huge gulps of energy. "It's ninety-six years before annihilation will make time travel

even feasible.”

Mavis said, “Maybe you shouldn’t have told me that. I’ll buy up all the stock and start a chain of events that leads to World War Three.”

Nedrow thought of telling her that 2W3 would begin in the Middle East over oil and end up with all six parties walking nude over the sand...but told her instead: “You know, you’re way too cool about this. Why don’t you call the White House? The FBI?”

“Because I’ve seen the movies. They’ll think I’m crazy or try to kill me for knowing too much. Your friends who didn’t make it have made some tongues wag. I’m not the only one who wonders how you get a concrete man who is, for all that, a man, right down to the myelin sheathing his nerves. You see, no one makes myelin concrete. Or hemoglobin concrete. Or liver—”

“All right,” said Nedrow.

They walked uphill.

“So what *are* you doing here?” Mavis asked.

He was going to tell her. Guilt sank through him. But he’d been alone so long. And Mavis was more than his link to those who had come through. Mavis alone had come looking for him.

He said, “People think if you jump time you make paradoxes just by doing that—jumping time.”

“Makes for chancy vacations,” she agreed.

Her composure in the face of his real difficulty, also the sheer unlikeliness of it, made him rush his confession: “Say someone goes back to kill Hitler—”

“Who?” she said.

He stopped cold, staring at her.

Until she laughed and said, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

He shook his head. “God damn it, Mavis.”

“Sorry, I apologize. Go on.”

He took a breath. “Or avert a war, or a plague. And for circular reasons it doesn’t work. Some paradox turns up chasing its tail and giving birth to itself. Or a butterfly sneezes and a billion years later a hurricane sinks Miami.”

“Too late,” she drawled. The Warming had soaked Miami off the map.

Nedrow met the interruption with a nod. “But either the universe allows time travel and, therefore, all the paradoxes you can heap onto it, in which case trying to avoid paradoxes becomes irrelevant because it *is* irrelevant. Or it does *not* allow time travel. And that’s the end of that.”

He cut his eyes left. She might have been interested. She might have been leading him on just to lead him to a cage where they could dope him, straitjacket him, shock his brains out. His loneliness, his need of a friend, hated to believe it.

“Of course, the first thing you have to do is prove you can do it,” he said, “so they sent back some null object, put it where only they could put it then dug it up to prove they’d put it there.” He gestured absently. “Didn’t work. They kept losing it.”

Mavis pulled up her flat hat to shade herself and adjusted the chin strap.

He said, "It's like those robots they sent to Mars. They worked okay but had to be told everything. And building an AI that would survive the landing would cost as much as sending people. So they sent people."

"Good God," she said, "it's not the same."

"No," he agreed. "And they couldn't send just one. He'd go crazy knowing how alone he was. But if they sent back a team..."

"To do what?" she pressed.

Hands behind his back, he said, "Every now and then, I come back in time to kill myself before I do something I know I'll regret later. Trouble is, I'm getting to like it..."

"Don't bullshit," Mavis warned. "Besides, that *would* be a paradox."

"Physics doesn't care, or it wouldn't *let* you travel. Say you go back and kill one of your parents before you're conceived. So what? You were conceived, *then* prevented your conception—but *after* the fact." He looked at the sky. "Anyway, only three of us knew in detail. Basically, we'd build something and leave it in a designated place."

"Then just quietly live out your lives? *Not* play the stock market?"

"The butterfly sneeze." Nedrow nodded. "But why should it matter to the future if I get rich by knowing what companies to invest in? So I'd be a rich man, one of many. So China *won't* break up into its provinces? One rich Nedrow Ling does not an alternative future make. Not even twenty of me."

"Twenty," she said, thinking as they climbed on toward University Hill, a crown of towers under the spidery geodesic struts. "If I'm right, only six made it."

"Six." His feet kept walking. "Six..."

On a bench along the way, she sat with him till he felt better.

NEDROW SPENT THAT NIGHT WITH MAVIS. THEN OTHER NIGHTS.

She believed he was never going back. It only made sense. But she would not immediately help him find the others.

At first he was angry.

"You *don't* trust me!" He walked away. Mavis sat in her breakfast nook, eating grapes. "That was just Dr. Trash being clever with the crazy guy."

"Wash your step," she said, grapes in her mouth. "You ever stop to think I'd have to pay for this jaunt? You don't mind living off people 'cause you're on a mission: you're the movie hero and everything just happens, like the train that pulls in when you need one."

But she had vacation time coming. They could follow the leads she had found. She dragged the Net. "West. San Francisco. Santa Barbara. Maybe Seattle." She bought him clothes, a small flat hat of current style.

The high-speed train blurred through wooded hills and past cities under glass checkered with solar panes and fractal antennae cut out like the mysterious symbols on archaic lightning rods. The land flattened to endless fanning rows of corn and soybeans molten green beneath a wicked sun baking big rolled biscuits of wheat golden blond. It was more than he had seen of his own time and place, a

vast canvas of life and labor. Placid cattle grazed under solar-sheet awnings that watched the sun cross the sky. Boulders veined like flesh heaved out of the land to build mountains furred in pine and splashed with quaking aspen. Their train hurtled onto marsy deserts of mesa rubble along shimmering-hot highways, as if the pavement would burst into silver flame.

Then flat lettuce fields, orange groves watered by icebergs parked offshore and wrapped in foil. Finally, pharaonic Los Angeles, the pyramidal arcologies riding cthonic quake-absorbers. In the water vapor risen from a billion fuel-cell motors, rainbow holograms spelled: "Love! Kill! Repent!" Skinny Jeezers hung bleeding, projected live as they died for The One Material Church of Yucca Flea Mall. Some things never change, Nedrow thought as the train veered north.

In San Jose they rented a lectricar and drove through the Oakland Hills to Walnut Creek, a once affluent inland oasis voided by the Panic of '37 and now an environmentally-correct tent town with harmonized gardens. "If Dogs Run Free Then Why Not We?" spelled in junk-iron welded to the gate.

An armed guard made them ride bicycles in.

Though sent back first, Les Wiley had struggled from San Francisco Bay two months after Nedrow's jump, had crossed to Oakland through the old BART tunnel, had worked for food in Berkeley then Richmond. Now he lived in The Dog Run.

"DOING WHAT?" NEDROW ASKED WHEN THEY FINALLY MET AGAIN.

Les was a tall, lean man of small eyes and muttonchop whiskers gone gray, like an elderly schnauzer. Chewing a timothy straw, he said, "Doing ecology." He watched Mavis carefully.

They sat on tatami in a cool hut of wood and paper. The soles of Les' feet had the compressed look that comes from barefooted field work.

Nedrow stared. "I've been on a public payroll for more than a year. You could have found me."

Les moved his chin at Mavis. "Who, exactly, is this?"

"She's who found me, after you didn't."

"Psychiatrist," Mavis filled in.

"Pill-pusher," said Les.

"She helped me find you," Nedrow said. "There are three of you here. Two others came through. Are they here? Do you even care if anyone came through? What have you been doing all this time?"

Les said, "Avoiding technological society."

"Are you afraid of causing something?"

"I'm guarding the environment."

"Look," said Nedrow, "you don't have to fake it with Mavis. She figured it out before I told her anything. She linked me with you and the others before you came here. And, back then, you did have access to network terminals. You could have found me, like she found you. Why didn't you?"

Les calmly pulled the timothy straw from his mouth and said, looking at it,

“You’re upset.”

Damping his anger, Nedrow asked, “Why this evasion—why won’t you answer my questions? I’ve been through everything you’ve been through. If not for Mavis, I would have been alone all this time, with no one to confide in. That was the main thing we were supposed to avoid. What if I had cracked and started telling people? I could have been locked up—conceivably, I could have been *believed*. The ones who died coming through, have you heard about them? The woman in the pool? The man in the concrete floor?”

“Keep your voice down,” Les told him.

“Then talk to me.” But Les was like a shut door. “Please.”

“Sorry. Best I can do. The others see you as a product of your time.”

“I’m not a product—how can I be—” Flabbergasted, Nedrow cut a laugh, then, having been taught that time travel might cause brain damage, earnestly inquired, “You okay?”

Eyes shut, smiling sadly, Les nodded. “Typical. You don’t understand so I must be crazy.”

“No, he’s asking ’cause you’re being such an asshole,” Mavis corrected.

Les nodded at her. “Typical again.”

“You don’t know what’s typical,” she told him. “A hundred years is still a long time in human terms. What’s typical of any age and its people can’t stay that way, can’t survive the generational invention. You can study this age all you like but you’ll always be a little weird for it, like him,” she said, nodding at Ned. “He goes around with his mouth open a little all the time ’cause he still almost can’t believe it. And neither can you.” She shifted on the tatami. “I remember how scared he was the night I met him.” Mavis turned to Ned, smiling. “It was the wrong kind of scared. So’s yours. You’re scared too but for different reasons. Not ’cause you’re here and pretending you’ve always been here, not ’cause you’re not going to do whatever you guys were supposed to do but because you *are* doing it. Something you decided to do before you left.”

Les glanced at a window. Nedrow saw it as a giving-up gesture. Mavis had Les covered. But Nedrow didn’t see it. He looked at her, then looked hard at Les.

“What,” he asked, “what are you doing?”

Mavis said, “Nothing. He’s an environmentalist now. He’s green. But he was green before he came back. He was just a different shade. Invisible.”

“I’m doing the right thing,” said Les to the window.

“Don’t tell me,” said Mavis. “Tell Ned. I’m fine. I was born here and now. He’s the one you stranded.”

“You think time,” said Nedrow, getting it slowly and going numb, “is an environment...”

Les Wiley took a breath and spoke but still could not face them. “If I build what they want me to build, where they want me to build it, then they’ll know it works. And they’ll come back. And come back and come back till they’re sure it’s safe. Then they’ll start manipulating. Changing things. Little things, to see if it’s okay. Then bigger things. And they’ll keep adjusting it, tuning it. But they’ll get

rid of things." He faced them. "At first just bad things, like AIDS and H-bombs. They'll get good at it. They'll try for more. They'll *reach* higher. Make a perfect world, with a perfect history. Do away with everything and everyone who's ever been bad. Spare us all that suffering! And the people making these decisions—"

"—will be you," said Nedrow. "By not letting them even try."

"What you found to do, where you live, is needful," Les argued. He waved one hand expansively. "You keep the windows clean, you let the sun through."

Mavis got up. "This is baby-talk."

"You've found your proper niche," Les hurried as Mavis left. "What you do is environmentally *and* temporally sound! Don't you see how necessary—?"

Nedrow ran after Mavis, afraid that she was leaving *him*. He could not bear the thought of being left.

"Where you going?" He caught up with her. "What, are you sorry? Are you sorry you helped me?"

"I'm not sorry." She grabbed her bicycle and walked it toward the gate with the junk-iron slogan. "I'm sorry I know, not that I helped." Nedrow wheeled his own bicycle by the handlebars, walking fast to keep up. Mavis noticed but would not slow down. She said, "He's right. That's what I hate." She laughed bitterly. "I would have liked them to change something. Anything—haven't you noticed how hot it is? They might have changed *that*."

He watched her mount and ride away, her shadow and that of the bicycle drawn-in tight by the noon sun, as if a black slick of Time conveyed her across a bright future that might never fully contain him. Nedrow knew that he would follow her. Les may have been right but you don't follow a man who betrays you, especially one who betrays you for your own good. But Nedrow's place in the world had again shifted sharply. He let Mavis cycle alone to the car.

And looked back. In that hot light, the door into Les's wood and paper hut looked black. The baked earth before it showed no footprint, no tread, no mark of any kind.

"Time travelers tread lightly but leave a trace," he said.

Their motto.

He let the bicycle fall. One handlebar end gouged the blank earth. Nedrow kicked down on it, chipping loose a clod. Kicking more gouged a longer scar. He kept kicking, furiously, digging it as long as he could.

Having heard the racket and come to his door, Les stood watching.

Nedrow stopped, grabbed up the bicycle, mounted and pedaled to the car. "I'll see you!" he called back over one shoulder. His jaw shook with emotion. He was sweating.

HE BROKE UP WITH MAVIS AFTER THAT. A YEAR LATER, THEY WERE MARRIED—THIS is a time-travel story. But for months, Nedrow spent many cold evenings on the city roof, riding the lights, as they called it, thinking through the profound thing that had happened. As if it were yesterday (meaningless phrase!), he could hear Les Wiley, back *then*, drilling into them the dire do's and don'ts of the

peculiar career he had elected to pursue: that of the sailor who maroons himself. Pretend you can't remember! Cooperate with everyone! Admit nothing! Pigeon poop—and yet, the perfect cover for what Les had wanted them to do. Nothing.

Perhaps, thought Nedrow, watching between his feet the crawling lights of the traffic below, Les had been right to mislead and betray them, just because Les had thought to do it. Les had known why he was coming back.

But Nedrow had had his own reasons for coming back. A wild, beautiful chance at something no one else had done. A chance to know, day by day, not what might happen or what he might do or even live in fear of doing but just know that he moved in a new time, breathed an air he was not meant to breathe, the purest kind of visitor.

Now he had to adjust not only to never going back but to having no life but what he could invent. A job on a roof was not enough, not a life. What could he do? Nedrow had to laugh. "I'm normal!" he said aloud. Not that man on a mission Mavis had made fun of, the man for whom trains arrived when needed.

Wind beat his wide woven hat and nearly took it. Arms out as if crucified, he held it by the luffing brim. Scudding clouds limned in moonlight tore apart overhead, showing stars like bits of ice. He felt as small as they were distant and ached in his heart for Mavis. He was on that part of the roof washers called The South Flats, above the downtown cluster. To his left was the old Interstate-81 arboretum and, half a kilometer further, University Hill and the medical center, crowns under geodesic facets, lights gone smeary behind condensation. If not for that, he might have seen her at her window—

The wind took his hat. Not thinking, Nedrow lunged for it, missed, saw it whirl off like a dark flying saucer. He broke his forward momentum with all his weight on his rigid right leg. The boot tread slid and hit the rim of that geodesic section. The impact dropped him on his hip and right shoulder, hard. He felt the section flex concaved beneath him then snap convexed and toss him up as on a trampoline. Falling in the dreadful slow motion of peril, he saw that the section had imprecisely realigned itself in the frame and that, hitting it again, he would bang it loose for sure and fall to his death on Adams Street.

"The likelihood of your falling is greater than any other," Les Wiley had told them. "As you make the jump, keep your eyes open and fling your arms and legs out wide—grab anything you see."

He just caught that little gutter on the frame into which the section had fit. Caught it with just four fingers. Had the gutter been bare metal, Nedrow and his fingers might have fallen separately. But it had some rubbery composite coating.

His other fingers dug in. His knuckles went white.

The fallen section hit the street edge-on like a guillotine. It stood on edge, wobble-warping back and forth in its frame, then fell flat with a huge clap. But it was late, no one hurt. Nedrow did one strong chin up, pressed up and doubled onto the neighboring section. He stood and, accepting for now that he could not afford to lose this job, tread lightly away. •

About our contributors

ROBERT H. BEER writes in Fergus, Ontario with a very understanding wife and two little distractions, plus a cat who shows what life can be like, if you only just believe. Robert's work has appeared in *On Spec* before, in the winter 1999 issue, and in numerous other places around the small press, such as *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Eternity*, *Spaceways Weekly*, and *Jackhammer*. He also has stories in the anthologies *North of Infinity* (One and Two) and WP Kinsella's *Baseball Fantastic*. Current projects include a children's picture book and a novel (of course), and updating his web site at: www.mirror.org/robert.beer

DAVID LIVINGSTONE CLINK was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, and Toronto, Ontario, and is related to the Scottish explorer, David Livingstone. He has spent the last ten years working on a 5-minute presentation of *Dune*, using finger puppets. A member of the Algonquin Squaretable, a Toronto poetry group, David has published poetry in *Cicada*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, and *The Prairie Journal*. His website is poetrymachine.com, a resource for poets.

At eighteen, JANINE CROSS set out to bicycle around the world, and two years and 24,000 km later, returned to her hometown of North Vancouver. Since then, she has competed in martial arts, learned how to bellydance, worked as an animal health nurse, published half a dozen short stories (in *Parsec*, *Strange Wonderland*, *Canadian Storyteller*, *SF Horizons*, and the anthology *Shore Lines*), and given birth to an amazing little boy. The last put everything in perspective.

PAULO DA COSTA was born in Luanda, Angola. He was raised in Portugal and since 1989 makes his home in Calgary. His work has been published in literary magazines in North and South America, Asia, Europe and Australia. He is the general editor of the Canadian Literary Magazine *filling Station*.

LOUIS DE NIVERVILLE (please see "About our cover artist," page 5).

LENA DETAR is currently studying Anthropology and Biology at Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, USA. She is a multiple runner-up for the Isaac Asimov Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Science Fiction and Fantasy. She plans to continue writing, and to go to Medical School on the side.

CORY DOCTOROW won the 2000 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer at the Hugo Awards last September. His website is www.craphound.com.

CATHERINE MACLEOD says "I wrote my first postcard during a case of writer's block, in the hopes that trying something new would get me started again. Blocked or not, I knew I could write 150 words. What I didn't know was that writing postcards would become a happy addiction. I enjoy the challenge of working within strict guidelines, and I think my postcards might please my first journalism teacher, who said, 'Just tell the story and shut up.'"

ELIZABETH MATSON has been immersed in traditional tales all her life. She grew up in her mother's children's theatre company in Guelph, Ontario, and became a professional storyteller (in the oral tradition) after moving to Madison, Wisconsin, where she currently resides. She is the co-author (with Stuart Stotts) of *The Bookcase Ghost: A Storyteller's Collection of Wisconsin Ghost Stories* and a graduate of Clarion '98. Elizabeth works part-time in retail to help support her writing and storytelling habit. This is her first SF/F sale.

STEVE MOHN has published several stories and film essays in *On Spec*, including his story "Not Plowed or Sanded in Winter," which received an Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. He lives in Montreal.

HOLLY PHILLIPS lives in what may be the only garret with a view in south-central British Columbia. She says she would write up a fanciful bio, only she's used all her creative energy to finish "yet another novel no one will publish." Despite this glum prediction, Holly managed to impress the *On Spec* editors, who were pleased to award her with our annual Lydia Langstaff Memorial Award for her story "No Such Thing as an Ex-Con" (Spring 2000).

Gordon Snyder of Snyder Fine Arts, Burnaby, British Columbia, is agent to de Niverville in North American and Europe. To view a selection of works and articles by de Niverville and other artists represented by Snyder Fine Arts, visit our web site at www.snyderfinearts.com. Gordon says: "Louis' work been the subject of many articles and reviews over the years, my favorite of which is titled 'Artist's nightmares extraordinarily beautiful,' which was written by Sol Littman and published in the *Toronto Star* in 1974."

One of the 1999 finalists for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, JAMES VAN PELT teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. His fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*, and he has work forthcoming in Asimov's and Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*. He has twice been given Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His website is www.sff.net/people/james.van.pelt.

VIVIAN ZENARI recently completed a Master of Arts degree in creative writing at the University of Alberta. Her work has appeared in *Blood & Aphorisms*, *The Quarterly*, *Zygoté*, *Transversions*, *Treeline*, CBC Alberta Radio's *Alberta Anthology*, *Curaggia: Writing by Women of Italian Descent*, and the *Dalhousie Review*. •

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Above: "Vandyck's Baby" Louis de Niverville
Below: "Cake" Gordon Snyder

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