

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



Ian Creasey

James Van Pelt

David Barr Kirtley

Natalka Roshak

Paul E. Martens

Julia Helen Watts

Karen Traviss

James Allison

Siobhan Carroll

Zoë Landale

nonfiction by  
Derryl Murphy

art by  
Angus Pecover

SPRING 2002 \$5.95  
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Financial support  
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We acknowledge the financial support of the **Government of Canada**, through  
the **Publications Assistance Program (PAP)**, toward our mailing costs.

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# onspec

spring 2002 vol 14 no 1 #48

<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society		
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*On Spec* is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$22.00 in Canada for individuals and \$30.00 for institutions (price includes GST). GST # 123625295. Full subscription rates on page 5.

Send all mail (letters, submissions, subscription requests or queries, art samples, advertising rate card, etc.) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph: (780) 413-0215. Fax: (780) 413-1538. Email: [onspec@canada.com](mailto:onspec@canada.com).

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

*On Spec* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA) and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association (AMPA), and is distributed in Canada by CMPA and AMPA, and in the United Kingdom by BBR.

Printed in Canada by Bolder Graphics, Edmonton AB

Publications Mail Registration Number 08148  
Postage Paid at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
© 2002 The Copper Pig Writers' Society

ISSN 0843-476X  
Email: [onspec@canada.com](mailto:onspec@canada.com)

*I still remember the first instant message  
I received, before I was aware of the  
enormity of everything: "So I guess this  
means you guys are at war."*

# The day the world changed

Derryl Murphy, Fiction Editor

THE DAY THE WORLD CHANGED—AT LEAST FOR THE SHORT term—I was still, for another three weeks, a United States resident. That morning, like most, my wife Jo was up for work and the kids had dragged me downstairs to set up a DVD to watch. A quick check of the web followed, and then I was over to the TV, much to the boys' noisy chagrin, watching what at the time I thought was the aftermath of a horrible accident in New York.

A flurry of emails followed, trying to make sense of what had happened and determine how this would affect travel plans. You see, Con-Spec was due to run that coming weekend in Edmonton. I was flying up from Salt Lake City on the twelfth, our guests Allen Steele and Michael Bishop were flying up the same day from their respective homes, and we also had Peter Watts and Karl Schroeder booked to come in from Toronto a couple of days later.

And then the second plane hit, followed closely by the Pentagon attack and the crash in Pennsylvania. I still remember the first instant message I received from Peter Watts that morning, before I was aware of the enor-

mity of everything: "So I guess this means you guys are at war." Shortly after, Allen phoned twice, the first to suggest that this may put a crimp in our plans, the second to allow that he didn't think flying would be a good idea right now (if he felt anything like me, he was pretty damned scared about the thought right then. And besides, who wants to do a con with this horror in the front of your mind?), and that we should consider cancelling. I agreed, more calls and emails were done, and ConSpec was postponed.

Jump forward to 2002, and we're giving this another go. Allen Steele, author of *Chronospace* and *A King of Infinite Space*, Michael Bishop, author of *Brittle Innings* and *No Enemy But Time*, and Peter Watts, author of *Maelstrom* and *Starfish*, are all again confirmed to be there. This time, though, we've decided to throw in our lot with the longest-running and most successful Alberta convention going, ConVersion. So this year, ConSpec will be in Calgary on the weekend of August ninth to eleventh, at the Metropolitan Centre downtown. For registration details, check out <http://www.con-version.org/>.

Guests for ConVersion are George R.R. Martin, Robert J. Sawyer, James Alan Gardner, and Geoffrey A. Landis. Add the ConSpec guests, the *On Spec* people, other luminaries such as Dave Duncan and Marie Jakober, and you have one of the finest convention lineups to ever hit western Canada. Add on top of that the fact that ConVersion is also host to this year's Canvention, Canada's national con and home of the Aurora Awards, and suddenly this looks like the best deal on the block—only \$40 (Canadian!) for the whole weekend.

So go. Hit that web site find out how to register. If you can't find the registration information that you need, then contact us here at the *On Spec* offices and we'll do what we can to make it easier for you. But just remember to be there, because this is going to be a dandy convention. •

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*...now that we've tasted raw agony  
and despair, we can't go back to the  
genteel, bloodless entertainments that  
once amused us...*

# The Sounds That Come After Screaming

Ian Creasey

THE CHAIR STANK OF PISS.

So many fighters had contributed that no superficial wipe would ever clean it. I reckoned that if a fire broke out, my chair was the safest place to be: surely it couldn't burn. There would be no chance of escape, of beating the crowd's stampede to the exit. Promoters of underground sports don't bother with safety regs, just as they don't bother with clean fittings. The grimy table, the smelly chairs, the strata of stains on the stage were all heritage, the instant tradition of a sport nearly five years old. Only the rig was new. The buttons take so much punishment during bouts that they rarely last a tournament.

The same, of course, applies to the combatants. As always, I didn't look at my opponent. Only the crowd's jeers at the other chair told me it was occupied. Today, I was their favorite. There were some cheers for me, but mostly they hated anyone from Wyke. I wasn't the only one here with dark memories of the war. The sweating, drunken fans pressed forward, yelling and spitting, as if they could win the contest for me. Bouncers patrolled the



stage, stamping with razor-studded heels on trespassing limbs. I thought it ironic that the only blood on the stage was shed at the edge.

At the referee's glance I signalled readiness, mirroring my opponent. A bell tinkled the countdown.

On the last chime, I screamed.

PAIN ABOLISHES TIME AND SPACE, SEIZING CONSCIOUSNESS LIKE A CONQUERING ARMY. I surrendered all contact with the present, as my awareness shrank to the spike. That was what the torturers—sorry, alchemists—had called it, a not-quite euphemism. They exchanged jargon over my strapped-down body, frowning when my shrieks drowned out their discussion. Afterward, they hosed me down, gave me a tonic, and helped me to the debriefing room.

“What level would you say the last one was?”

I frowned. “Oh, about fifteen pangs.”

“And the one before?”

“Ten ... no, twelve pangs.”

“Did you think you got the balm or the placebo?”

I almost smiled. “Oh, it was the balm. I felt a bit light-headed.”

“Did it muffle the spike?”

“You know how much pain you delivered. I said how much I felt.”

“Did you think it muffled the spike?”

“No. It never does.”

The transcript went into the database, along with the readings from the session. They always asked questions. If they thought our responses were honest, we got privileges: good food, association, care parcels from home; and so we cooperated in the fine-tuning of our torture.

They dismissed me with a blue ticket, which I exchanged at the canteen for a meal of rice and lentils, green salad, and a peach tart. I gave the tart and cream to old Winthrop, who'd screamed out his voice and couldn't earn himself a blue. While he set up the chessboard—it was his turn to play White—I looked around and was disappointed to see the same old faces. I yearned for more prisoners to be brought to the lab, so that each of us would have to spend less time on the slab.

I'd long since stopped hoping they'd run out of tests to perform. Having achieved the breakthrough of inducing pain without physical damage, the alchemists always had more experiments and calibrations to run. They established scales of intensity and quantity, measured in pangs and throes. They focused the attribute with different symbols to produce illusory burns, itches, gouges, maggots hatching underneath the skin. They refined the equipment, striving for cheapness, portability, efficacy

at a distance. I wondered if it had become a field weapon yet; and wondered what our side was cooking up in return.

As the afternoon faded, lamps began radiating stored sunlight to augment that piped in from the surface. Each lamp illuminated an image of the emperor, who seemed to watch the chess as intently as if our pieces were the armies fighting above. Winthrop won, extending his lead to 55–49. Afterward I took my turn in the gym: I dislike exercise, but I dislike boredom more. In the evening the nurse did his rounds, checking that our bodies were in good health for the next day's frying of our minds.

After lock-up we were left to ourselves, although there was little to do but listen. The crisp *thud thud* of a guard's boots was the sound of normality. If he stumbled as he did his rounds, that meant he was drunk and we could converse across the corridors, as long as we respectfully fell silent as he passed our particular cell. We recycled rumors about the war's progress, and fantasized the revenges we'd take when we were liberated.

There was one sound we came to dread: the click of a woman's heels. We never learned who she was—I assumed she was well connected to some general or courtier. She laughed when she flirted with the guards, whose frozen expressions showed they feared her almost as much as we did. She would circle the complex, wandering round as if at a zoo, often seeming to prolong the tour to intensify our dread. She only had to stop outside a cell for the occupant to flinch. Sometimes she'd change her mind, and move on. More often, she'd order the guards to enter the tiny cell and remove the prisoner.

That night of her first visit, I allowed myself to hope I was being transferred, perhaps even set free as part of a prisoner exchange, but the brief fantasy soon died.

"Maggot!" It was an insult often directed at white-skinned northerners; I longed for it to be true, so that I could pupate and fly away.

I knew better than to reply, or gaze at her directly—which would be considered insolent—so I looked at her delicate shoes, and the brown ankles below her fine silk dress. I expected her to ask what I'd done in the war, then gloat over my capture, but she just said, "Bring him to the research room."

The guards dragged me along the narrow stone corridors. I couldn't help remembering the blue tickets I'd collected for months—was this what I deserved for co-operating?

Even though it was deep underground, the lab had a different atmosphere at night, as if old screams hung in the air and haunted the control

panels. It was partly the emptiness, the absence of the usual bustle of alchemists jotting down readings, swapping jokes and arguing over whose turn it was to brew up. And this wasn't the routine round of testing. Anything might happen. The familiar equipment now seemed even more sinister than it had when I was a new prisoner brought struggling to the slab.

The guards strapped me down, while the woman stepped into the control booth and gazed at the panels. Like most southern women, she wore a hair-band of pale metal that set off her dark locks and features. The diamond-studded circlet made her look like a princess indulging a secret hobby.

The alchemists just did their job; they had no personal spite, and they understood the limits of their human material. She—whoever she was—had no such dispassion. At first she barely understood the apparatus, and turned dials at random to see how I reacted. When she experimentally tweaked one control, creating a mild throb that I estimated at 0.25 pangs, I yelled as if agonized, to make her think she was delivering more pain than she really was. It was a mistake. Now that she knew the dial did something, she turned it up, and up, and up. For a while I screamed in earnest, until she turned me down to take a call on her crystal.

“Hello? ... I can't tell you ... It's the secret lab, silly! ... Well, what else is there to do? ... Oh, all kinds of stuff. Listen!” With one firm twist she turned the dial to maximum.

My shriek must have registered on all the seismic monitors in Wyke. The pain was beyond agony, so much so that a new word was needed—or an old one, like *hell*. It lasted a few moments, a few years, a few centuries.

“Just a prisoner,” she said in the stretching silence. “No, I'm fine ... Yes, of course I'll be at the party. I'll see you later.”

She frowned and looked at the dial—still on maximum—then at me, wondering why I was quiet. She peered at the read-outs. “Why has this line gone flat?” she asked the guards.

They both shrugged. She raised her voice. “You! What's happening?”

Because the pain is artificial, when it stops there are no lingering aches or after-twinges. The relief was a more potent bliss than any drug I'd ever known. I felt weightless, as if only the straps stopped me floating up to the ceiling. How little can make us happy: just the lack of pain.

“There's a safety cut-off,” I croaked. I had no conscious desire to reply; my helpful response was conditioned by pain and privileges. What reward might she give? I imagined being taken to the party—I'd eat my fill and ogle the women, then find out I was the entertainment, expected to scream to the accompaniment of a string quartet.

“Take him back,” she said to the guards.

As I was marched out, I saw a half-smile play on her lips. Perhaps she was amused at the idea of safety features on a torture console, or perhaps she was pleased to have an anecdote for her party.

Perhaps she was looking forward to doing this again.

CONTROL. FOCUS. I DRAGGED MYSELF BACK TO THE DUEL: IF I SPENT TOO LONG remembering the lab, I’d end up defaulting. I looked at the readings on the rig—three pangs, the usual opening level. It was the heat of a scalding bath, a coffee spill, a dropped firestone. My jerking limbs tried to pull away from the phantom stimulus. Fighter’s twitch, they call it. Some duellists still twitch after the bout, and a few never manage to stop.

The throes accumulated as I waited for my opponent’s move. The crowd no longer pressed forward; startled first-timers yelped and squealed. The rig is engineered to radiate an overspill. Everyone in the hall felt the backwash of our pain, vicariously participating in the duel. Some would leave or faint before the end, though even the front row felt only an echo of our agony.

Sometimes I wonder what attracts the crowd. I can understand the glamour of the illicit; I can understand those who come to gamble, or because everyone else does; I can even half-understand the bright-eyed women who hang around after contests, offering their ministrations to the chairs’ slumped wrecks. But what of the others: the labourers who would otherwise fill public houses, the refined accents more at home in galleries and theatres, the faces stepping out of the gossip columns? It’s as if the war has poisoned us all, as if we became addicted to its pain and horror; and now that we’ve tasted raw agony and despair, we can’t go back to the genteel, bloodless entertainments that once amused us.

WE DIVINED THE WAR’S PROGRESS BY WATCHING OUR GUARDS. MANY OF THEM disappeared, and the rest stopped bothering to patrol or enforce discipline—instead they drunkenly defaced the emperor’s image, and made bitter puns on the victory slogans. Perhaps the guards would all vanish, leaving us locked and starving in the dark, missing the liberation because no-one knew of the complex deep under Adel.

One afternoon I looked up from a chess problem to see a new arrival enter the canteen. They hadn’t bothered to take away his lieutenant’s uniform, perhaps because there were no more prisoners’ robes to issue—all supplies were diminishing, and even blue tickets no longer ensured good rations.

“Welcome to our happy band of brothers,” I said to the newcomer. “Have you been tortured yet? Let’s see your ticket.”

He smiled. “I’m not a prisoner. The war’s over: I’m here to take you out.”

Loud whoops and cheers echoed round the canteen, and I gave an extra cheer on Winthrop’s behalf. The lieutenant was immediately mobbed by prisoners demanding the latest from home. He bore it gracefully, giving what answers he could, until impatience overtook the crowd and they rushed to the unbarred stairs, longing to see the sun.

I held back, figuring the surface would still be there when the rush had died down. The lieutenant said, “Would you come with me? I’d be interested to hear your account of this operation.”

We talked on the way to the research room, where more of our soldiers were examining the equipment and questioning the operators. The alchemists explained everything, competing to be the most helpful. I wanted to punch them, to strap them down and torture them; but I realized the lieutenant would disapprove. These were our alchemists now: the best of them would be spirited away to the north, to install the apparatus of pain in our own secret facilities.

I couldn’t bear the sight of the lab, knowing that we would replicate and refine it. I slipped away and headed for the stairs, avoiding the knots of sullen guards cowering in corners. Some of them had already been beaten up by their former prisoners.

It was a weary climb to the surface. When I stepped outside, the first thing I saw was a woman being raped. The man wore the same uniform I once had; the victim was a well-dressed southerner. Her hair-band had gone—he’d probably taken it for the jewels—and her dark hair covered her face like a veil, muffling her curses.

The sun shone over the frenzy of victory. Our soldiers stole whatever they could, although there was little left to loot. I saw civilians and surrendering enemies being killed to save the bother of paperwork. I saw our troops butchering children and forcing their families to eat them.

I was glad that the Wykians were receiving a lash of their own whip, that they were suffering as I had on the slab. I wandered the fallen city in a daze, looking with glee upon the devastation. The atrocities numbed my mind: I only remember that first day of the liberation, though it took me a week or so to wangle a ride home.

For a long time after the war, I couldn’t sleep soundly indoors. Even the largest room I could afford felt too much like a cell, and my restless brain interpreted the tiniest sound outside as the *click click* of the approaching mistress of the corridors. In fine weather I slept outside; when winter came, I bought bottled sleep from the market. I still had

hours of shapeless nightmares, even though the healers had removed some of the worst memories. There were many mornings when I couldn't drag myself to whatever job I had. When I turned up I was a poor worker, dropping things when I heard female laughter of a certain pitch, or taking irrational dislikes to colleagues who reminded me of the staff in the underground complex. Employers, initially sympathetic, soon grew impatient; after all, I wasn't the only one with scars from the war. In turn I found it hard to care about reprimands, or indeed about anything. "Do your worst," I'd shrug. "Fire me." Nothing could possibly be as bad as what I'd suffered; self-pity was my constant consolation. The fixers wanted to remove more memories—probably the entire war, they said—though they warned me that excising so much would leave me a different person, with a blank childlike freshness. I refused, for I'd found that deleting memories didn't delete their marks on me, and only left disturbing gaps that made me wonder what had happened.

And by this time I'd already begun to ascend the rankings.

The alchemy of agony had soon spread to the criminal underworld. They say it was two rival gang-leaders who, in an excess of macho stupidity, first competed to endure the most pain. Thus began the perfect sport for the lazy, push-button age. Take a traditional contest such as boxing, remove the need for any physical skill or effort, and what's left is a game of endurance that anyone can enter. Pain is a great equalizer.

I was attracted by the chance to engage with pain as a fighter rather than a victim. But I didn't fight my opponents: I fought my past. I struggled to master the pain, to establish a control I hadn't had in the torture lab. I felt that the more I confronted the spike and faced it down, the stronger I would be. Every time I hit a button on the rig, I visualized it as mastering one more throe of those I'd suffered.

I tried not to let the fights become personal; but in hard-fought contests, when the pain became transcendent, I sometimes imagined my opponent as the mistress of the dials, plucked from the booth and strapped down beside me, sharing the agony. This is how it feels, I'd say. I can take it—can you?

I could take it. I could master it.

Control. Focus.

NOW I WAS IN A POT, BEING BOILED ALIVE. THE RIG'S CONTROLS SEEMED THOSE OF a huge oven. Would you like me well-done, glazed and crispy? Coming right up. My hand reached toward the buttons, shaking as the pain writhed me. The crowd called out suggestions, along with the usual witticisms and insults. I loved a big crowd for my bouts, partly because

players had a cut of the gate, but mainly because the fans' presence—the noise they made, the warmth and stench of them—anchored me in the present, saving me from being lost in memories of the research room, and reminding me that I had a button to press, that I was in control.

The rules had quickly evolved. At first, the combatants merely had to endure a steady increase in pain, the winner being the last one standing, or conscious. But now there are five buttons: Boost, Spike, Flavour, Cut and Quit. Boost is a modest increase, Spike a sharp jump in agony. Flavour changes the kind of pain the players both experience. Cut lowers the pang-level, a welcome relief. Control of the buttons alternates five seconds after each play. Then a player has thirty seconds to choose, or default. As fighters are only allowed to select each Flavour once, and only have three Cuts, there inevitably comes a time when the only legal buttons are Boost, Spike—and Quit.

To prevent inadvertent surrender, the Quit button is well to the left of the other four. My hand hovered over the rest as I pondered my selection. A mild increase or a large one? Many players favour a sudden assault, a rapid sequence of Spikes building the pain to a paroxysmal crescendo; but often they can't endure a long duel. I had endured much, and favoured the steady approach. I hit Boost, then slumped back into my chair as the scorching heat jolted a low moan from my lips.

As I made my play, I couldn't help catching a glimpse of my opponent.

THERE AREN'T MANY WOMEN IN THE SPORT. IT'S NOT THAT THEY CAN'T TAKE THE pain; it's just that hard-up women have another—if equally distasteful—option, and the rest have more sense. And there aren't many southerners in Gledhow, not since we deported the detainees. I hadn't seen a southern woman since the war.

I first saw her at the draw. Just the glimpse of her was enough to make me shake, as I remembered the mistress of the booth turning the dials up to maximum. Years of self-administered therapy fell away at a sight I was conditioned to associate with agony. Had I thought I was in control? How could I be, when I felt like a child in the thrall of an evil stepmother from an old story?

I had to see whether it was the mistress of the straps. When I'd had a drink and recovered some composure, I pushed my way through the crowd until I was close enough to get a good look. If she saw me, she gave no sign; her attention was fixed on the big board showing the draw's progress.

She had black hair, brown eyes, and dark delicate skin sprayed onto the bones. She wore a metal circlet in her hair, but it had no jewels;

the band was a common southern decoration, a style copied by our own fashionable ladies until the war made it unpatriotic. Was she the one? I couldn't decide whether it was definitely her, or definitely not her. Our propaganda had depicted the southerners as an insect-like mass, swarming over the continent, and my own experiences had not encouraged me to see past their skin color and think of them as individuals. I realized that now, five years on, I had no clear image of the mistress of the slab. No doubt this was partly because the fixers had removed some of my memories, but even so I felt I should still have been able to picture her specifically, rather than seeing all Wykians as evil.

I had to speak to this woman. I didn't know how I'd establish her to be the mistress of pain, or what I'd do if she admitted it, but I had to keep facing my past, mastering it, taking control. I couldn't live in fear all my life, flinching at the sight of southern women, the sound of tinkly laughter, the smell of a particular perfume.

I said, "Are you in the tournament?"

She turned to look at me, with a gaze like winter winds stripping the last few leaves from the trees. "I'm a qualifier," she said quietly, with the usual southern accent.

As the sport grows, so does the number of heats needed to weed out the hopefuls. It's an ugly batch processing job, clutches of people twisting and screaming until most drop out. I reckon they should arrange the prelims by category: jaded thrill-seekers, would-be hard men, damaged psyches like myself. The desperate poor would need sub-categories: guys with diseased families living in one room in the Nest, workers superseded by ghost-automation, luckless prospectors returning from the north without a skystone.

"Are you in the tournament?" she asked, reflecting my question back at me. She didn't seem to recognize me—either from the slab, or even as a ranking player. The Wyke press probably doesn't report northern tournaments.

"I'm the second seed," I said.

"Then you must be well acquainted with pain." She spoke as one on familiar terms herself.

"I saw plenty of it in Adel," I said with feeling.

Had I thought her gaze wintry? Now it chilled to a frost beyond winter, one that would never see a spring. "You were in Adel at the conquest?" she asked.

It took me a moment to realize she meant the liberation; then I nodded. I had thought to pour out the circumstances, to demand that she prove she wasn't my torturer, but her expression hinted at some tor-



ment of her own, and I didn't want to get into a game of "my scars are bigger than yours." Some subjects are too big to broach with someone you've just met. I was tired of talking about the torture anyway: talking never helped. That was why I played the pain game.

Now I doubted that she was the mistress of the read-outs. After all, what were the odds? And that haunted expression on her under-nourished face was not one I associated with the laughing party doll I remembered.

It seemed her own painful thoughts were also too oppressive to bring up in casual conversation, for she pointed to the big board. "They've just drawn me. It looks like we'll meet in the semi-final."

*SPIKE. PEGGED OUT ON THE DESERT IN THE SUN. BOOST. TWO SUNS, LIKE EYES burning down from the booth. Spike.* All the stars in the sky turned to suns, searing my skin, charring my bones to ash, vaporizing the ash to nothingness.

The nightmares were fading, but the days were no daydreams.

I hit Flavour for a change of pace, and we had our legs gnawed off by bears. I expected her to hit Spike again—when someone hits Flavour, it's normally a sign that they're weakening and vulnerable to the kill—but she only hit Boost. She must be nearing her limit.

I was nearing my own; I could hardly bear the five seconds before my play. I used an old fighters' trick and held my hand over Cut, promising myself relief. Then at the bell I veered right, to hit Boost. The bears roared, biting my arms, chewing my face, pulling open my ribcage to get at the innards. I encouraged them with my own shrieks. Eat me: eat my pain, my past.

I couldn't see my adversary—my vision had whited out—but I knew she was in a bad way. Across the rig I heard a noise familiar from the lab, a small keening whine. She was making the sounds that come after screaming. The seconds ticked by, punctuated by the bell. It seemed she couldn't bring herself to make a play, and could only hope that I'd quit before she did. The bears roared louder: the crowd were chanting. It was numbers, a countdown; players must move within thirty seconds.

It took me an agonized moment to register the numbers, but then I'd have smiled if I still had a mouth. When the crowd likes you, they count accurately so you don't miss your window. If they don't like you, they start the count late, hoping you're too pain-addled to have noted the correct time from the bell. If she waited for the crowd's *One!* to make a last-second play, she'd default. Would she fall for it?

I WAS SURPRISED SHE FELL FOR MY HACKNEYED LINES. ON THE WAY TO HER ROOM, I wondered why she was willing when we'd only just met. Perhaps I was the first Gledhonian to be friendly with her. Perhaps she liked to alternate the pain of competition with a bit of pleasure.

Perhaps I should stop analyzing the situation and start enjoying it.

I was glad I'd been drinking, otherwise I'd never have had the nerve to go back with her to the Nest. As we left the sky behind, I began to feel twitchy. The stone corridors were too similar to those I remembered. Her dim windowless nook was as tiny as the underground cells of Adel, its stagnant air heavy with recycled smells and sounds. I barely made it inside, but congratulated myself on managing it. Confront the past. Master it.

She had a rig, I noticed. I assumed it was for training, building up tolerance to pain. It was a level of dedication I did not share. The problem with solo practice is that you always lose: there's always an unbearable pang that defeats you. It wasn't an appropriate way to find the control I sought. Only in duelling was there victory. When the opponent surrendered, I'd defeated both the pain and him. Or her.

I doubted that she'd reach the semi-final: qualifiers rarely progress very far. I didn't wonder about her motives for competing—her malnourished body told its own story of need—but I wondered why she'd come to Gledhow. "Don't they have tournaments in Wyke?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "We have enough pain already."

Her tone was final, cutting off the conversation, and she was already removing her clothes. Again I was surprised. No cuddles beforehand, no endearments? She was as businesslike as a prostitute; I almost glanced around to check for a price list. But even half-drunk I was sure we hadn't bargained in that way, and I didn't think she was a whore. Instead she seemed single-minded, a woman who decided what she wanted and took it straight away—a woman to whom other people were mere distractions, obstacles, or amenities. And was I any different, using opponents to fight my past? How could I object if she used me in another way? We all use each other. She and I were kin; we were mirrors, and I removed my own clothes the better to reflect her.

She smiled. I smiled too: her naked form refuted some of the war's wilder rumors. I stroked her feet as if to confirm they had no spurs, then moved upward. Her thighs and belly were marked with faint scars; she flinched when I touched one, old though it was, and I desisted. She muttered something, then drew me down.

Outside, a pair of high heels clattered past, but I was too preoccupied for the sound to affect me. Strange that bully-boy pain seeks us out, yet

pleasure—his shy sister—must be pursued...

I was just about to reach her when her brother ambushed me. A lightning-bolt of agony struck the bed; I screamed and convulsed, my muscles spasming. I fell to the hard floor, the bone-jarring thud giving me a new ache to replace the rig's pulse. I rolled onto my back and saw her face look down on me, bright as summer. Another jolt ripped a screech from my throat. Again I was underground, being tortured. Again the dark woman laughed. Again I was the helpless victim.

Control. Focus. I reached for some remnant of mastery, and did what I'd never been able to do in the lab. I fled.

Later, much later, I thought what else I could have done. I could have hit her, though physical pain means little to the initiates of the rig. I could have thrown some coins as if she were indeed a prostitute with specialist services.

I could have talked to her.

I could at least have remembered to take my clothes.

NOW I FELT THAT GAZE AGAIN. ALTHOUGH MY SIGHT WAS REDUCED TO A RED haze, I knew she was there, opposite me, dialling pain. She ignored the chanting crowd—I wondered if she even heard them—and thumped the Flavour button. Fighters often treat the buttons as proxies for their opponent, punching them hard, sublimating pain through action.

We fell victim to all the ills the flesh is heir to. I acquired migraine, abscesses, kidney-stones, gout, and uncounted other aches I couldn't name. Pain reminds us we're alive, I thought. If we hurt, we live.

The episode in her room was so humiliating that I'd tried to forget it; I'd even thought of having it removed, but my memory was too porous already. I'd assumed that she'd soon be knocked out of the tournament, that I'd never meet her again. But here she was in the semi-final—I had to face her.

Why had she done it? Was it a bizarre training ritual? Was it to obtain some obscure psychological advantage, should we meet on-stage? Surely she knew that any man thus treated would only be more determined to beat her.

Was she the mistress of the controls, developing exotic procedures for the victim on the bed, the slab?

It was easy to think so, easy to imagine her as my old tormentor. She fitted the bill so well that I could pretend it *was* her, and that if I won the bout, I would finally have conquered her. Having mastered pain and memory, I'd be free. How tempting it was to make that parallel!

But what if I lost? What if the image of my torturer beat me? Wouldn't

that lock me into the cell of my past, destroying all hope of ever escaping it?

These thoughts had all occurred to me before the bout; I had dismissed them, confident of victory, thinking that to brood on them could only weaken me. Now they resurfaced, much less coherently, in the small portion of my brain not completely swallowed by the pain. If victory was to be so hard contested, I had to know what or whom I was fighting. Yet it was impossible to think in the all-pervading ache. I was a sickroom, a hospital, a quarantined city all in one frail body. The crowd were medical students come to see me, the model patient with every symptom of every disease—including the sickness of mind that drove me to this insane sport.

I pressed Cut. Oh, sweet cessation. Astonishing how a level of pain that might seem intolerable, if reached as a crescendo, becomes bliss when less than before. The migraine lowered to mere agony, and I was sure one of my toes didn't hurt a bit.

Some vision returned and I looked at my opponent, trying to decide who she was, what she meant to me. Despite the easing, she didn't show any sign of relief; her stare was still as piercing as if she didn't see me at all, but only looked right through me at something in her memory or imagination. Who was she? What was I to her? What was she to me? I couldn't come to any conclusions in the brief five seconds before her turn. I'd hoped she would also enjoy the respite, and allow the full half-minute before she made her own play, but she pressed Boost as soon as the bell permitted her.

"Maggot!" She followed this with more swearing, her first coherent words. Duellists frequently swear to help cope with the pain: it's more dignified than pissing yourself.

Her southern curses took me back to the end of the war—the chaos of the anarchic city, the sight of our troops looting, raping, killing. I hate recalling that, because I don't recall the rest: the week after the liberation. The memories had been removed. Was that to protect me from what I'd seen, or from what I'd done?

I only remember stepping out into bright sun, and the cries of the helpless southerners. They were echoed in my opponent's bitter insults.

Perhaps she'd been beaten, raped, seen her family die. Perhaps what she'd done to me had been her own revenge on the Gledhovian conquerors: feel the pain that I felt. Perhaps she identified me with her rapist; and perhaps I deserved it.

Perhaps she was too like me for comfort.

I pressed Cut again. The crowd jeered and threw feathers, thinking I

was giving in. The imagists began gathering on-stage, braving the backwash of agony for a close-up of the denouement. I saw my opponent clearly now. She smiled, thinking I was overwhelmed, then pressed Spike, triggering a relapse and a new textbook of symptoms. Before my vision evaporated once more, I saw her expression acquire another element, one I'd seen in images of myself from past contests. It was the look of someone who'd already dismissed their defeated opponent, and now wrestled with old pain.

I knew I could win. She expected me to press Cut again, for the last of my three lives. All I had to do was press Spike, and she would collapse. I reached out to the controls, my hand flailing in agony. It flapped left, then right, then left again, over the whole menu of torment.

Gently, I pushed Quit. The pain stopped; some fighters compete purely for that bliss. Through the melee of imagists scrambling for a picture of the winner, I glimpsed her look of surprise, tinged with contempt.

Perhaps one day she'd know that losing the bout was no real defeat, just as winning was no real victory, only a stale rehash of history. I hoped she would someday realize what she had shown me by reflecting myself: the futility of trying to overcome the pain of the past by wallowing in it. My control had been an illusion; while trying to conquer the agony, I was still in its grip. By surrendering, I acknowledged that I could never master the pain—yet I could be free of it, and I was.

I wanted to sit and enjoy my liberation a little while longer, but I saw angry faces in the crowd. Professional gamblers stake large sums on these bouts, and they'd suspect I could have taken her. They would not be pleased. But I was. Losing had given me far more pleasure than victory ever had.

I got up and walked away. •

### **in upcoming issues...**

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY, ARI GOELMAN, HARRY JAMES CONNOLLY, HOLLY PHILLIPS, RANDY D. ASHBURN, BARTH ANDERSON, S.A. BOLICH, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, KEN RAND, SUSAN URBANEK LINVILLE, JANCIS ANDREWS, WES SMIDERLE, DANIEL KSENYCH, KEVIN COCKLE, ANN MARSTON, LESLIE BROWN, DAVID K. YEH, and many more!

*"Quit selling," he told her once, even though it would cut off his supply.  
"Cops don't waste users. Just dealers."*

# Nothing is Normal

James Van Pelt

CATDEATH SNORTED TWO GRIEF POPPERS BEFORE DECIDING on a zebra motif for skinart. A lace band covered her nips without detracting from the herd thundering across her chest and belly, up her neck, across her face and over her shaved head. Still life. After this season, maybe, she could afford animation, and the animals would wander on her, seeking water holes, raising dust, making four-legged love on a dry, Kenya plain. She locked her sleepcot back into place, then checked her look in the mirrored wall. See-through lace shorts. Black tennies. Jungle print bag with a quarter mil of emotiphin poppers individually packaged for quick use. Two large tears tracked down her cheek, over a zebra's back. Good stuff, Grief. She could really feel it: her stomach ached; her face dragged on the bones with frowning.

She slapped a security jangler on the crib on her way out. Better than a lock, it'd zap an intruder and buzz Scrote two doors down. He'd be out with a taser before any pop head could bust through and go for the stash. She fronted him an emotiphin a week for the service; used to be he'd go for AmbitionN, but lately he'd been hitting her hard for RegreT. "RegreT lasts longer. It's deeper. Is this the real stuff?" he said.

"Best I got," she said. At least he didn't want anything sexual for the

service. Not that it would be that bad. He was twenty years older with a skin condition, and a botched retinal replacement that left one eye canted away from the other, but he'd always been kind. There was a lot to be said for pudgy too. "Quit selling," he told her once, even though it would cut off his supply. "Cops don't waste users. Just dealers."

Homeocyte waited for her at the slideway rail. He had to speak up over its perpetual rumble and the talk of commuters sliding past. "J-note's dead. Tunnel cops found him this morning on the east portal station. Said he'd cooled for an hour. He'd been there all that time. Must have been a thousand people stepped over him. Jesus." He staccotoed his fingernails on the rail. Twitchy. Buzzing on something. Maybe AnxiouS or just uppers. Moonscape skinart spread across his chest. Stubble fuzzed the image. He needed to shave more often. "No load on him. They got him on the way home. Figure he couldn't have been carrying more than two or three doses anyway."

The news didn't effect her more than what she was already experiencing. If she didn't already feel so bad, she would have laughed. The poppers made her feel worse than J-note's death would have if she were straight. "North tunnel guys?"

"Kids, I figure. Didn't like his skinart, maybe. The burning cross thing again. They slashed it pretty bad."

"You cover his clientele. I'm going down to Georgetown." Catdeath choked back a sob. The Grief topped out, and everything struck her as stunningly melancholy. Even the graffiti on the walls cried with meaning. Everything touched her.

Homeocyte whistled. "Out of your territory. You'll be staining some slideway yourself." He looked at her shrewdly. "You're emoti-tripping now, aren't you? How many are you popping a day?"

Catdeath wiped her eyes. "Mind your own business. It's a delivery. Take care of subscribers here, and I'll watch after myself."

She stepped forward onto the slideway between a matronly type wearing a house duster's smock, and a scrawny bowlhead. Catdeath couldn't see his face; the bowl covered all but his mouth, but she could hear his music thrumming, and a light flickering in the goggles said he was deep into some v-scape that probably looked a hell of a lot better than this one.

"Hi, beautiful," he said dreamily.

"Sure," she said. In his virtually enhanced world, she could be Aphrodite, for all he knew. He probably thought the middle-aged woman in front of her a goddess too.

A half-mile of residence cribs scrolled at a little better than walking speed on her left. Battered doors, some patched a dozen times over.

Burn marks. Steel bars and padlocks. Everyone trying to protect their little bit. She rode the tail end of the Grief high and mourned not only her fate, but everyone's fate she passed. Over 11,000 workers lived in Shotgun City, the low rent Eisenhower Tunnel projects, converted from auto traffic to housing thirty years earlier. She embraced their lives' sadness. Those that had jobs worked in the I-70 urban corridor from Idaho Springs to Copper Mountain. Food service, household domestics, manual laborers, data manipulators: a river of them moved in and out of the twinned 1.7 mile long tunnels twenty-four hours a day. Flexsteel flooring, thin partitions and an abandonment of anything aesthetically pleasing left over a half-million square feet of cheap residential space. Two 26-foot-wide, very long cities, connected in numerous ways, side by side, boring through a mountain. A worker's ghetto. Catdeath shifted her bag strap to the other shoulder. The Grief was wearing off already. Being her own best customer meant she'd built a tolerance, and the lovely despair slipped away, leaving nothing.

A flashing yellow light on the ceiling, and a bunching up of people on the slideway, told her a cop checkpoint had been set up ahead. They'd be doing ordinary stuff: ID confirmation, work permit verification, hidden weapon scan, but she couldn't risk they'd look in her bag. She stepped off the slideway and into a paratobacco kiosk.

"Gotta use your back door," she said, while lifting a panel and crawling under a pipe paraphernalia display. The bored-looking clerk, whose skin-art slowly revolved red and white stripes like an old fashioned barber's pole, just nodded.

Catdeath wormed her way into the service passage, the shoulder-width space between the tunnel lining's original tile, and the back of the kiosks and workers' cribs. Wires, cables and pipes competed for space overhead, and she watched her step so as not to bang her head or trip over building substructure as she went around the checkpoint. Condensation ran off the tile, and the air smelled of damp fiberboard and mildew. Shadowy people fled her approach—the lowest of the low, living behind the thin walls.

Through gaps in the paneling, she glimpsed a sushi shop; a home defense weaponry boutique; a skinart emporium, where a young man lay naked on a bench while the tech applied the micro-electric sensitive dyes and the nanochips that controlled the display. "You've got flowers? I like petunias." said the client.

Ten minutes later, she walked behind darkened residences. Most workers were at their jobs, so when she figured she'd gone far enough, she kicked open a weakly latched panel and crawled into a lightless crib. She



flashed a penlight around the room the same size as hers, six feet by eight feet. Walls covered with Arabic posters. Two little girls, no more than five or six, sat up on the cot, their dark eyes fearful. Probably illegals, or they'd be in day care instead of sitting in the dark. She figured they were lucky. Catdeath put her finger to her lips. "Just passing through."

Outside, beyond the cop stop, she caught the slideway again. It carried her through the long curve to the east portal, where she blinked against the open sky's brightness and mid-day sunlight. On the mountain valley's sides, condos, offices, shops and step-malls covered the slopes. Ghostly tendrils of Grief eddied within her, and she tried to raise the specter of the mountain landscape beneath the cement, but the feeling wouldn't last.

She moved to a tram turnstile, keeping eye for north tunnel muscle. They ran the business at both portals. It wasn't until she passed her wrist code over the scanner to pay for the tram that she spotted Corvette and Insulin. Corvette was a little guy who had a nasty thing about pain: he bought it, sold it, took it, gave it. Nobody knew what Insulin liked, but he hated south tunnel action, so Catdeath watched from within the tram as they charged toward her, knocking down a couple of civvies at the turnstile, but missing the closing doors by an arm's length. Frustration warped their faces as the car lifted from the platform on its monorail and sped down the valley. She felt around within her bag. The poppers' hard-shelled wrapping didn't tell her their contents. Some Satisfaction would be good now, or even a whiff of Giddy. With effort, she took her hand from the bag. Temptation pushed her to choose one randomly. Two would be even better. Regret tinged with Terror. Maybe a little Guilt and Pride mixed together. Too many people around her. Impossible to tell narcs from civvies.

An unbroken line of brick, steel, glass and concrete passed under the tram. City transport. Antiseptic smelling. Cracked seats. Life-dead workers going or coming. Some carried meals in their laps. No children. All in day care. No seniors. An employees' car. Catdeath kept her cheek pressed against the Plexiglas, letting the city roll by. The mountain air chilled her. It wasn't tunnel warm or tunnel humid.

Georgetown platform came up too soon. Catdeath thought about finding a rest room where she could pop. Anything to give her an edge, an emotion to swing from, but she needed to be sharp. Big deals don't come along that often, she thought. Have to stay focused.

She glanced around when she stepped off the platform, but the chance a north tunnel dealer would be this far east was remote. A covered escalator took her into white collar land. Swept streets. No graffiti on walls.

Polished glass doorways. Machine conditioned air like rain-washed pine trees. The doorman at Kingston Heights wore tuxedo skinart. Real collar. Real cuffs. Fancy. Expensive work. Impossible to tell he was otherwise naked until she got up close. "Nice suit," she said.

"Nice zebras."

After checking her bona fides, he let her up. The private elevator's walls were mirrors, but the glass floor was utterly clear. The doorman was right; her zebras looked good. The ground dropped away. Catdeath shut her eyes and hummed along with the music, a slow-paced popular commercial instrumental from the week before.

"Do you have it all?" said the buyer. Shimmery gold pants. Black silk codpiece. No shirt. No skinart. Health club musculature beneath a pre-carcinogenic looking tan. Young body. Old face. He sat on an all white couch. Silver linoleum floor. No scuffs. Catdeath checked the apartment. Glass walls, like the elevator floor. Nothing concealed. Bed. Bathroom. Balcony beyond nearly invisible sliding doors. No sign of a kitchen. She didn't like the set up. A remnant of last night's ParanoiD? She wasn't sure.

"Just like you ordered. An emotiphin smorgasbord." She dumped the bag on the coffee table (real coffee—he offered—she drank).

"Even the tough to get stuff?"

Catdeath held up four caplets "Two LusT, two RagE. Ten months and an neural adjustment just for possession. Make sure you take them in context. Rape on the one and assault on the other. Right situation, right friends, proper supervision, they're fun, but you have to set them up. I wouldn't mix them."

The buyer balanced them on his hand. "Wouldn't you, dear? That's not what I heard. Why don't we both try them and see what happens?"

Catdeath smiled. She knew it disarmed her face. Made her look vulnerable. "I'll pop now and then, but the two I won't mix are business and emotions. Now, what about payment?"

The buyer waved his wrist over a reader built into the table. Account info she couldn't decipher from her angle popped into the air. He manipulated the figures. She gave him her code, and the credits transferred to a roaming, misnumbered account Scrote had set up for her. Number changed constantly. Money stayed with it. Technically invisible to the bank. Only she could access it, and no one could trace it to her, theoretically. "Services rendered," the buyer said. "It'll look like a year of high class domestic work to the Feds. Salary's good when you earn it on your back."

"I wouldn't know." She queried the terminal to confirm the transaction.

"Too bad. We could boost your payday." He grinned, and a network

of fine white scars radiated from the corners of his eyes and mouth. He could be a even older than he looked.

She gathered her bag and glanced over her shoulder at the elevator door.

"Why the zebras, dear?" He scooped the caplets into a drawer she hadn't noticed before in the couch's base, and when he closed it, there was no evidence it was there. "They're extinct. Last week, tigers. The week before, wolves. All extinct animals. Why?"

"You've been watching me."

"Smart business to know who you're dealing with. A friend talked with one of your associates. Tried your product. I needed to be sure you weren't working for parties who'd use this little purchase to my disadvantage."

"Politics, it's a bitch. If I get caught selling, ten years and some invasive psychotherapy. Except for those specialty poppers, you get caught using, and it's a fine," she said. She reached into her bag. The bottom supports were snap-away plastic. Fast acting depressants melded into both sharpened ends.

"Appearance, my dear, is sacrosanct to some people."

The elevator door clicked behind her. She didn't wait to see who came in. Left the bag. Cleared the couch on a sprint. Scratched the buyer with the depressant in passing, and knocked a balcony door off its runners going through. As she swung from the railing, she looked back. Tuxedo, hefting a pistol, leaned over the prostrate buyer. Using drugs wasn't that big a deal legally, but hand guns certainly were. She dropped onto the balcony below, slipped into an empty apartment, ran down a hallway, found a maintenance exit locked to the outside and hopped a public escalator down the mountain. White collar holo ads called from the ceiling: clothing, personal services, pharmaceuticals. No one looked up. Most people wore more than she did. No one shaved their heads. Her appearance marked her. Tunnel trash. She knew it. Didn't care.

At the second junction, she transferred to a slideway going east. If the buyer sent a crowd to find her, they'd head west for the tunnel first. Watch the trams. Post spies at the portals. After ten minutes on the slideway, she stepped off. Walked down a broad stone promenade into an open market, stopped in a skinart shop, bought a popular floral print. The tech reprogrammed her nanochips, changing the dyes' alignment. Zebras faded and a bright cascade of roses bloomed on her arms. Leaves encircled her neck. A spray of petals marked her cheeks.

Next door, Catdeath found a floppy hat ("Guaranteed UV compliant!") and jacket, paid for them, then hustled back onto the slideway. Her account was supposed to be untraceable, as long as no one knew it

existed. They might find it if they looked hard enough, and the buyer had the her wrist code from a half hour earlier.

Four transfers later, switches of direction each time, she went to ground in a envirobar near Idaho Springs.

“Desert decor today,” toned an automatic greeter as she walked in the door. From where she stood, the room opened like the Mojave desert at sunset. Rock-like tables sprinkled across the sand. Long shadows. Vermilion horizon above the sun’s edge. The place was nearly empty. She took a table as far away from the door as possible, next to one wall. Up close, the illusion fell apart. The desert display on the near wall blurred out, although across the room the virtual Sierra Nevadas rose up fifty miles away.

Head aching, she ordered an iced camomile tea, rolled the cool glass against her forehead, tried to relax. A whiff of ContentmenT would be nice now, but she didn’t know any vendors this far east. Blind buying would put her onto a narc for sure.

Dabney Fortineu, AKA Catdeath. Age twenty-three. Mom: licensed domestic. Father: unknown. Mom transferred Dabney from one corporate day care to another her first fifteen months before Mom died in an industrial brothel. Cause unknown. Suspected suicide. Social Assistance took ward. Dabney diagnosed with typical reactive attachment disorder at thirty-six months, an endemic fate for poorer children. Corporate provided therapy until seventy-two months. Case worker listed his conclusions upon cessation of treatment, “Muted emotional responses. Near-incapacity to form personal relationships. Can’t be touched. Expected behavior from a child of her background. Prognosis: normal.” In the margin under the dates and signatures, someone had scrawled, “She will never love.”

When she was four, she disappeared from her foster crib for two hours. They found her on the slideway, tugging on strangers’ sleeves. “Have you seen my daddy?” she asked them.

AFTER TWO HOURS, CATDEATH MOVED. PAID FOR THE TEA, THEN HIT THE SLIDEWAY running. The buyer might not be tracking her purchases, but she couldn’t take the risk. She clenched her hands to keep them from shaking as she transferred from one direction to another. Her mouth’s insides stuck to her teeth. She ran her tongue over them, but it didn’t help. Signs of emotiphin withdrawal. The headache would get worse, she knew. She’d become weak. Walking would be hard. All she would want to do would be to sleep. If she didn’t pop, the symptoms would linger for a week or two. The physical discomfort would taper, but inside she felt

nothing—interstellar space nothing. That wouldn't fade. Nothing was normal for Catdeath.

The buyer said he'd "had a talk with one of your associates. Tried your product." No way he could do that. Catdeath sold emotiphins by subscription. Her people ran regular routes, delivered to old customers. Lots of advantage to the system. She never ordered too much material. Only she knew her supplier. Low risk to her runners. She opened up all the new territory and made special deliveries. Tougher for her to be cheated. Tougher for the big hitters to find her operation. So J-note probably hadn't been killed for his skinart. More likely he'd run into Tuxedo, or some other of the buyer's toadies. Wouldn't pony up the goods and ended up dead at the slideway's end.

So why did it go down the way it did? She didn't believe his explanation that he wanted to check her first. There were many ways to do it that didn't involve taking out a low level guy like J-note. In fact, why deal with her at all? Georgetown had its own suppliers. She should have smelled how bad it was, but the credits tempted too much. A month's worth of product moved in one sale. Who could pass that up? Her head hurt. Thinking called up tiny buzz bombs behind her eyes. Sleeping sounded good. She needed to get back home, but to do that, required someone to give her an all clear at the east portal. The north tunnel guys might still be hanging out, waiting for her, or the buyer's crowd could be there, or the cops. She'd have to send one of her people to scout the portal.

Catdeath found a public vidcom booth near a park, a city block of dry looking mountain grass, some natural granite boulders; hands-off wire circled a sickly aspen. She toned Homeocyte's address. Waited for the connection. After forever, a strange face swam into the monitor. Catdeath took it in: two uniforms in the background. Distinctive grey. Homicide. She clicked off, jogged across the park, hopped the back of a delivery cart and rode it for twenty minutes. Found another vidcom, toned her supplier and got an "address not found" message.

She drummed her fingers on the blanked monitor. Her supplier, an augmented paraplegic, ran a chem-shed operation from a false front news stand in South Tunnel. He wasn't going anywhere. He wouldn't go anywhere, so if the address was terminated, he probably was too.

The buy was a setup. The buyer was the new man in South Tunnel, and she was the freelancer on the way out. Knowing it didn't help her head.

AT FOURTEEN SHE LOOKED TWENTY. LONG LEGS, NO BREASTS. ALMOND EYES, high cheek bones, mahogany skin. Welfare teacher wouldn't leave her alone. Pressured her for "private" lessons. She saw them for what they

were. Went to Social Assistance to complain. The case worker set up appointments to work with her. Locked the door behind her one afternoon. Slipped her something in her water. She woke up in South Tunnel. Sore crotch. Quit school. Quit Social Assistance. Met Scrote who gave her a mattress on the crib's floor. "I don't need your help," she told him. He said, "I know," then hacked her into the system. Found her credits to live on by delaying welfare payments to hundreds of recipients for a couple hours each. Money was hers during the interim, and the traveling shortfall didn't show up on the city's audit program long enough to set off an alarm. In a month Dabney Fortineu vanished from the records. Catdeath appeared. For the weeks she lived in Scrote's crib, she waited for him to lower himself off his sleepcot in the middle of the night, to join her on the floor. She expected it. Was resigned to it. Never happened.

Her first skinart: dolphins. Blue dolphins jumping from a green ocean. Grinning faces. Sparkling eyes. Shiny, white foam splashes. Dolphins died in the minor ozone breach of '48. None left for the major in '54.

CATDEATH WAITED UNDER AN ARBOR AT A PUBLIC ACCESS TERMINAL TABLE FIFTY yards from the vidcom booth. At the next table, a couple prepubescents cruised through porno vids, one after another; a sexless voice interrupted the moaning every minute with the message, "Extended exposure to prurient material may result in antisocial behavior." The boys giggled, and not too subtly checked out Catdeath's legs every chance they could.

A man and woman, skinarted in the same style as Tuxedo—except the man wore a Hawaiian print and the woman wore a French maid's outfit—walked briskly to the booth Catdeath had used. The man removed a military issue genescope from his bag and scanned the vidcom's buttons. Meanwhile, the woman, hands behind her back, examined the faces of the passersby. Before she looked in Catdeath's direction, Catdeath ducked beneath her hat's floppy brim and slipped out the arbor's back side.

So the buyer did have her code, and any place she used it, they would be after her. They undoubtedly knew what clothes she wore and the skinart.

On the street again, the sun blazed. Everyone wore a hat outside, so she was less conspicuous. The headache escalated into a solid, throbbing pulse. What she wanted to do most was shut her eyes. Dodging would do no good now. They had a map of her purchases, and she realized a half dozen other places required her wrist code where she'd given it without

thinking. Within a half mile or so, they knew her location. Artificial Intelligence tracking software probably profiled her moves. The thing to do now was either go to ground and hope they'd miss her in a sweep, or to quit telling them where she was.

A long walk, bypassing slideways that required wristcode for access, brought her to the east portal express tram. She sat to the side, watching as each car filled and departed. No obvious spies here. The platform emptied each time. Perhaps they depended on her code to signal her whereabouts, and they'd be waiting for her at the other end. The billboard beside her changed colors. Became a different ad. If she stood directly in front, she'd hear its message too, but being off center muffled the ad's pitch. She leaned against the slick surface, closed her eyes; envisioned okapi, giraffes, pandas, and they changed into empty jungles, leaves burned black. Then, sullen, grey waters rising in falling in sterile rhythms beneath a searing sun, and the waves rolled into buffalo wandering below her, a brown mass reaching to the horizon. A breeze drifted across the plain, stirring up animal smells and wild wheat. She jerked herself from a doze. How much time had she lost? She couldn't tell. Workers stood on the platform, ready for the tram.

Catdeath rose. Stood beside a tall woman wearing a cellophane raincoat, blazing fireworks skinart underneath, expanding into new colors by the second. An outfit a little extreme for the middle of the afternoon, Catdeath thought. The platform filled; the tram arrived. A line formed. Catdeath stayed close behind the fireworks woman. When she stepped into the turnstile, Catdeath pushed herself against her, forced her knee into the back of the other woman's knee, and almost knocked them both down.

"Sorry," said Catdeath, helping her up.

Fireworks woman's eyes were all pupil. "My fault entirely," she drawled, letting the last sound trail into silence.

They were past the tram's people counter. No alarm. It saw Catdeath and Fireworks as one. No one knew she had boarded. Gentle acceleration pushed her into the bench seat as the tram rose and ascended the mountain. She moved by rote now. Inside, she found no motivation. Couldn't care. Didn't even want to pop. What would it matter? Gummy taste in her mouth. Head a painful heartbeat. Her arms and legs so heavy, she could hardly move them. Catdeath tried to muster a feeling for J-note and Homeocyte, but she found none within her. Even anger at the buyer would be welcome, but she couldn't picture him through the headache. Only sleep would help.

The darkness within frightened more. No glimmer of feeling. Every emotiphin trace washed from her system. Total black hole. Catdeath bent forward to wrap around the emptiness. Her heart sucked it all in, released nothing. An immeasurable void in her chest. She had the headache's pain. She had the texture of her legs beneath her arms. That was all she had.

The tram hurried to the east portal. Catdeath had hardly closed her eyes when the car slowed. People moved to the aisle, ready to depart. She looked up dully. Fireworks rested her arm on the back of Catdeath's seat, a sparkler glittered in the skin of her palm.

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS HUSTLING DIFFERENT SCAMS, CATDEATH GOT INTO EMOTIPHINS. Built a customer base. Settled in. She spent most her time in her crib, reading. No social life. She knew dozens of people who believed she was their friend. They weren't. For her, every relationship was a business one. Occasionally Scrote knocked on her door. He'd found a new pastry, and he bought an extra one for her. Sometimes he came in, sat on the sleepcot while she read. Didn't talk much. Programmed her reader to give her free access to the biblioweb. Listened when she told him about muskrats, skunks, raccoon and squirrels, about how they used to be wild everywhere, about how they disappeared.

Emotiphins were good. Like vacations to foreign lands. In between highs, she felt colorless. Tried not to think about meaning. Didn't consider consequences. Just the ever present "now" mattered. Once, when she was ten, she told a teacher, "I used to be a liar, but that was yesterday."

AN OBESE WOMAN, CANES FOR BOTH HANDS, HEADED FOR THE EXIT. CATDEATH forced herself up and behind her. She pulled her brim to cover her eyes and crouched a bit. Through the windows, she saw Corvette on a guard rail ten feet above the slideway. No sign of Insulin. Farther on the platform, Tuxedo sat on a bench, a news reader in his lap he wasn't looking at. No cops.

Catdeath used the fat woman for a shield. Stayed low as she stepped off the tram and waddled toward the slideway. At the last second, a few feet from Corvette, Catdeath straightened, took two quick steps and had one hand on Corvette's chest to hold him off balance and the other between his legs.

"Keep your hands clear," she said as he reached for a pocket. She squeezed, and his eyes went wide.

"That hurts so fine..." he started to say, and this time she twisted her



wrist. His jaw snapped shut as his face paled.

“Too much of a good thing?” Her back was to Tuxedo all the way across the platform. She guessed he probably couldn’t see them. Lots of foot traffic into and out of the trams.

“I don’t have time to mess with you.” She squeezed again for emphasis. He sucked air between his teeth. “There’s a guy in a tux sitting near the tunnel entrance.”

“Black suit?” said Corvette through white lips.

“Yeah. He’s part of a Georgetown crew that’s planning on moving poppers in the tunnels. I’m already out. They’ve scrubbed my people, and my best chance of getting through this alive is to let you know about it.”

“Why should I help you?” said Corvette. His hands moved slowly toward his sides. Catdeath pushed him back a bit so he was even more off balance. If she let go, he’d fall off the rail. Just ten feet, but nothing to cushion the blow.

“I don’t need your help. He doesn’t have your best interests at heart. If they’re taking South Tunnel now, they’ll be in North Tunnel soon. I know them; *I* can help *you*, but I’ve got to get in the tunnel first. You distract him, and I’ll remember it later. Don’t take too long to decide. I’ve got a headache.” She dug her fingernails in a little.

Corvette whispered, “Ouch. All right. You say they killed tunnel people?”

Catdeath nodded, loosened her grip, pulled him upright.

“I think you drew blood,” Corvette said.

“Maybe you can get Insulin to kiss it for you later. Get me a few seconds.”

Corvette limped into the crowd. Catdeath kept her back to Tuxedo, but turned enough so she could see. Corvette set himself up behind Tuxedo, then nodded her way. She stepped onto the slideway and began moving toward the two. Tuxedo had an unobstructed view of everyone on the slideway. It would be impossible to get by him undetected. As she glided forward, it occurred to her Corvette might do nothing. He could let Tuxedo kill her and still take her warning into North Tunnel. It’s what she would do. She watched from under the hat’s brim, but she struggled to care one way or the other.

An autocart carrying steaming teas and neuvocoffees rolled by Corvette. He waved his wrist code over the scanner, took a large insulated cups and removed its lid. As Catdeath approached, he raised it to her in a salute, stepped forward and poured the entire cup over Tuxedo’s shoulder and onto his naked chest.

Lots of screaming. People rushing about. The last thing she saw as she disappeared into the tunnel was Corvette working his way against the flow of onlookers gathering around Tuxedo.

Ten minutes later, she got off the slideway in front of her crib. Tunnel noises seemed too loud: the slideway's metallic rattle, voices, music, doors closing, bells—too loud, too obtrusive. Catdeath rotated her head on her neck, eyes closed, but even through her eyelids, the lights glared, and overwhelming it all, her head's incessant pounding escalated. It nauseated her. Through a painful squint, she walked to her own crib, reached out to disarm the jangler, then stopped. It wasn't her jangler. Close, but not hers. If she touched it, it would alert whoever put it there. For a moment, she kept her hand poised above the device, and she almost punched in the code anyway. Finally, she sat, knees up, face pressed against her legs.

Everything was gone. She fell over on her side, knees still curled, eyes open, not looking at her door anymore. No emotion, but nothing else either. She tried to think how she ended up this way, but memories wouldn't connect. Her thoughts kept returning to seals, penguins, robins, garter snakes, all gone, all gone. She'd worn them on her skin. Didn't know why, but she liked extinct animal designs. She imagined wearing skinart that rotated images, badgers would rise up, turn away, become tortoises who'd waddle into antelope springing across the prairie. Delicate antelope, impossibly leaping ahead of predators. Beige skin. White rumps. Brilliantly hurtling sagebrush and fences and muddy little creeks. Then, the final transformation. The leaping antelopes would turn into images of Catdeath.

She'd wear herself on her skin.

A herd of Catdeath would wander on her, seeking bars, raising ruckus, making love on a rumbling South Tunnel slideway. She could keep herself alive as she did zebra and tigers, animated on her skin canvas.

But she'd have to get up. Couldn't do it on her own. Had to find help.

She groaned, rolled to her hands and knees, her head like a terrible weight. Staggered to Scrote's door and knocked. Fell into his arms.

Later, she didn't know when, she awoke. For moments she blinked slowly, trying to place herself. Scrote's crib. In his sleepcot. A pale blue monitor glowing, the only light. Her head rested on his leg; his hand cupped her shaved head. He slept sitting up, jammed into the corner of the room, snoring softly, like bubbles rising from the sea bed where dolphins lived.

Catdeath closed her eyes. The top of her head was warm. His fingers

traced a path of heat. She didn't feel like brushing it away. For the first time ever, a human touch was good. And deep within, the emotional nothingness twitched. A small twitch, a weak, weak echo of a good emotion, but she felt it anyway, stirring in the darkness.

A real feeling, of hope. •

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## About our cover artist

# Angus Pcover

USING THE HUMAN FIGURE AND IMAGES OF ANIMALS, OUR cover artist this issue, Angus Pcover, creates “mindscapes” that are both original in their color and their dreamlike state. The transformational nature of the figure or animal in these mindscapes reminds the viewer of First Nations images.

Angus Pcover is a self-taught artist living in Edmonton. To purchase prints of his work, please call (780) 433-9857. •

*They put two rats in a cage and give 'em electric shocks. One rat can push a lever to make it stop for both of them, the other rat can't...*

# The Second Rat

David Barr Kirtley

MY WIFE, DEBBIE, HAS BEEN TALKING TO THAT DAMN VISITING nurse again.

“She says you’re dying,” Debbie tells me, hollowly.

I can barely speak. I try, but my lips move awkwardly. I say, “She’s right.”

I want it to happen at home, with my family. I’m feeble now, frail. My face is twisted and I can’t untwist it. I try to avoid looking in the mirror.

Debbie feels my forehead, as if it might help. “You’re too warm,” she says, and twists the blinds closed. A line of sunlit dots stretches across the blanket near my ankles.

“You’re still so young,” she says absently.

I’m thirty-four years old.

“It’s just not fair,” she adds.

I pull her close and stroke her hair. “It’s all right,” I tell her, and then think to myself that it is fair. It’s more than fair.

My body is only thirty-four, but my mind has lived more than its share of days. I can rewind life, you see. Even now, I could escape death that way. I could flee back to those healthy, free days of my youth.

But I won’t.

ONCE, I WENT ON NATIONAL TELEVISION AND TALKED ABOUT HOW I CAN REWIND life. I thought it would be a lot of fun. Besides, no one would remember

afterwards, anyway.

They stuck me at a desk, with bright lights shining in my face. Beyond those, in the darkness, I could see the shadowy figures of technicians, and black bunches of cable that looked like coiled snakes.

Dan Findley from *The Evening News* interviewed me. He had curly, greasy hair.

“Mr. Todd Rawlins,” he said, “welcome.”

“Glad to be here, Dan,” I replied.

“Now, Mr. Rawlins. You’ve made remarkable amounts of money investing in the marketplace. Tell us, what’s your secret?”

“It’s really quite simple, Dan,” I said. “You see, I can rewind life.”

There was long pause. I heard a technician cough.

“I’m sorry,” Findley said finally. “What was that?”

“The way you rewind a tape. I can do it in real life. I can go back to any point in my past and start over. I observe which stocks do well, then rewind and invest in those.”

“This is a personal philosophy of yours?”

“It’s not philosophy,” I said. “I mean it quite literally.”

Findley shot a confused glance towards the studio director. “Mr. Rawlins, you’re saying that you control time?”

“I can make it go backwards, yes. Forwards is always normal speed.”

“That sounds very strange.”

“I can prove it.”

Findley leaned back in his chair and tossed his pen out on the desk. “All right, then.”

I pointed to his pen. “Write something on a piece of paper. Don’t let me see it. I’ll proceed into the future and find out the answer. Then I’ll rewind time and tell you what the paper says—before I’ve ever seen it.”

Findley shrugged. He scrawled something in his notebook, then placed it face down on the desk. “Now what?”

“Show it to me.”

Findley frowned, and held up the notebook. It said *Evening News*.  
*Rewind a few seconds.*

Instantly, everything resumed its former condition. Again, I watched as Findley placed his notebook face down on the desk. “Now what?” he asked.

“You wrote ‘*Evening News.*’”

“Yes, that’s right.” Findley held it up so the camera could see.

“Do it again. Something harder, something personal—something nobody could possibly know.”

He scribbled on the paper.

“Show me,” I said.

He had written *Gruddie*.

“My stuffed rabbit,” Findley explained, with a touch of embarrassment. “I had it as a kid.”

*Rewind a few seconds.*

Findley was still writing.

“It says ‘*Gruddie*’—your toy rabbit.”

Findley didn’t move for a while. Finally, he turned and stared at me, his face a mixture of confusion and awe.

“You’re serious about this?” he said.

“Yes.”

“How do you do it?”

“I don’t know. I just do.”

Findley chuckled and shook his head. “Wait, wait. Let me see that again. One more time.”

“All right,” I said. “Just one more time.”

*Rewind a few months.*

I was getting bored with that interview, anyway.

I HAVEN’T ALWAYS BEEN ABLE TO REWIND THINGS.

When I was a little kid, they brought me to the hospital and I was scared.

Dad broke the news. He always wore flannel shirts, and a floppy blue baseball cap. He worked as a machinist in a paper mill.

“The tests came back, finally,” Dad said. “I’m sorry, Todd.”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

He took off that floppy hat, and scratched at his straw-colored hair. “It means you’re very sick.”

“Like Mom?” I asked. Mom died when I was three. She had Huntington’s chorea. Now I did too.

I swallowed hard, and the world seemed all fuzzy around the edges. “Is it gonna kill me?”

Dad scrunched up one side of his face and stared towards the window. I begged him, “Please don’t lie.”

“Yeah, it is,” he answered, almost immediately, and then added, “eventually.”

I stared down at the turquoise blankets. “When?”

“The doctors don’t know, for sure. They said if you’re lucky you could live well into your thirties.”

“Thirties,” I echoed. “How old are you?”

Dad grimaced. “Um. Twenty-four.”

I stared at him, and he stared away. He put his hat back on.

My eyes ached from unwept tears, and I started to snuffle. “I told you not to lie—” I said.





HINDSIGHT.

Most people probably feel that acute desire—to take it back, to do it over, to make it right. I was different, I just wanted more time.

I always saw the universe as a great clock, which ticked towards the end of my truncated life. All I ever wanted was for it to run the other way.

Rewind one second. Rewind two seconds. Rewind one minute—

I was twenty, in my dorm at college. I lay in bed, lost in exhaustion and confusion, and my 8:00 a.m. alarm droned mercilessly on.

“Turn it off,” my roommate moaned.

*Rewind one minute.*

I could feel it happen that first time, that first second. It was like electricity dancing up and down my spine. I saw the clock and suddenly it was 7:59.

“Did you see that?” I mumbled, startled suddenly awake.

But my roommate was still asleep. Then the clock hit 8:00, and the alarm went off.

He wasn't aware it had happened; no one was. No one could perceive that time had progressed beyond the present, and that I had yanked things back.

At first I was afraid to rewind very far. Instead, I did simple experiments.

I flipped a coin on my desk. It landed heads.

*Rewind five seconds.*

That same coin spun wildly at the apex of the exact same toss. It bounced across my desk several times, quivered in place, then came to rest.

It showed tails.

Scientists call it chaos—this fundamental randomness.

Some things were predictable: words on paper, the top card in a deck, people's immediate intentions. Also the progression of fatal illnesses, and the average change in stock market prices over long periods of time.

I spent a few years after school investing in the market, making money, getting more comfortable with my ability to rewind. I gave that TV interview.

That all started getting boring after a while, though. I was ready to move on to bigger things.

THE FARTHEST BACK I EVER WENT WAS SOPHOMORE YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, BECAUSE there was something I needed to do.

*Rewind ten years.*

Willy Pierson, whose breath smelled like onions, loomed over me like some damn vulture.

“Hey there, Rawlins,” he said, and shoved me forwards.

My heavy backpack rolled off my shoulders, over my head, and it exploded across the floor. Books and papers spread away from it like

waves on the beach.

I turned. Willy stood at least a head higher than me.

“You know,” I told him, “you’ve been asking for it ever since eighth grade.”

He sneered. I punched him.

My knuckles exploded with a pain that burst up my arm. Willy’s face turned away, then snapped back, and he shoved me hard. My head struck against the grill of a locker, and the world turned in wrong ways, and then my cheek was squashed against floor. Willy was somewhere above me, kicking—

*Rewind a few seconds.*

He went to shove me, but I dodged aside and wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled, and we both went down. I was vaguely aware of the dark press of faces and knees and shoes and chanting, which went, “fight, fight, fight!”

I got on top of him, and pressed my knee into his spine, but he caught me in the jaw with a wild elbow and—

*Rewind a few seconds.*

I threw my face away from his elbow as it came and I seized his curly hair in my tight fingers, and slammed his goddamn forehead against the floor until it ripped open and a thin line of kickball-red blood ran out and dripped bright, spattered spots across the tile.

Fight, fight, fight.

THAT DEATH I’D FEARED SO LONG SEEMED BANISHED FOREVER. I WOULD NEVER die. I would always be young and healthy. I would experience every possibility that life could offer.

I ran away from home when I was seventeen and spent a few months living around Vegas, hustling. I didn’t mind leaving home that way. When I was done there, I’d just rewind things, and everything would go back to the way it used to be.

I was worthless at roulette. That crazy steel ball might bounce anywhere—chaos theory again.

I preferred a good game of blackjack.

I had my hole card, plus a king.

“Hit me,” I told the dealer. It was always worth a shot.

He dealt me the six of clubs. My hole card was a nine. Makes twenty-five.

*Rewind a few seconds.*

“I’ll stay,” I said.

One night I met a dark-haired girl on a street corner there. Her skin and her eyes seemed to glow, bathed in that otherworldly neon light.

“I saw you at the tables once,” she said. “You’re really good.”

“It’s all just luck,” I replied.

I had some booze back at my apartment. She had this friend who sold us acid and other stuff. We smoked some, and snorted some, and ingested the rest. Then I went to bed with her.

When it was over, she started crying.

“I’m so fucked up.” She kept repeating that, rocking back and forth on the edge of the bed. “I’m so fucked up.”

“No you’re not,” I said. “It’s all right.”

“I can’t believe this.” She glanced around the hotel room with wild, wet, ferret-like eyes. “What the hell am I doing here?”

The room seemed to rock back and forth like it was a boat. The couch glowed, and the walls were singing out of tune. “Everything’s going to be okay,” I tried to tell her.

“I should go—now,” she said, stumbling across the carpet. She knocked over a small table, and our illicit things spilled across the floor.

She bumped into the door frame.

“I did it again,” she said crazily, half to herself. “I told myself I’d never do it again.”

She stared at my eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You need to get yourself tested, you know? I’m so fucked up. I’m so—” She stumbled out of the room.

I lay back on the bed among the thick red blankets and stared at the oddly shifting ceiling. I shrugged. I didn’t need to get tested, of course, but I hated this place anyway.

Time to leave. Time to go home.

*Rewind a few months.*

But nothing happened. The apartment retained all of its confused presence. I blinked a few times, and stared around that smoky room.

*Rewind a few months. Rewind a few—months. Rewind!*

Nothing happened.

I leapt out of bed and ran half-naked through the empty apartment halls. I couldn’t be trapped. Oh God, not here—anywhere but here.

I moaned and screamed and pounded on the walls. This was retribution, I realized suddenly. This was my own private hell. I had been proud, and this is how the universe would pay me back.

I broke out through a service exit and into a crumbling alleyway. I ran stricken through those mad, gleaming streets. Far away, beyond the pavement, I found a patch of loose dirt and yellow desert grass and fell on it. I ripped at my clothes and sat feverishly staring at the blurry lights which quavered in the distance.

Then I thought of something else.

I was wrecked, I was trashed. I was stumbling, incoherent—I’d taken

all that shit and it was screwing with my head. Maybe when I sobered up I'd be able to rewind things again.

Maybe.

I closed my eyes, and waited a long time beneath that dark, horrible Nevada sky.

*Rewind a few months.*

Please.

Then I was in my old home, my old bed, before I ever ran away. It was Christmas break and I started to cry, gasping great sobs of relief.

Dad opened the door. "Jesus, Todd," he said. "Are you all right?"

I was curled up, stiff and ragged. I started to shake. "I had a bad dream, Dad," I said softly. "A very bad dream."

Half an hour later, I was back in control. My heart had slowed, my breathing was normal.

*Rewind one hour.*

I didn't want Dad to remember seeing me like that.

I DIDN'T REWIND FOR A LONG TIME AFTER THAT. I WAS AFRAID IT MIGHT NOT WORK, and then I would feel as helpless and stranded as I had that horrible night in Las Vegas.

My sense of mortality returned.

Rewinding was no guarantee of safety. I had been aware of it before, in some abstract sense, but now it came to haunt me. I might die in an explosion, a sudden car crash, a gas leak—I might die in my sleep. I could never let my guard down, not for a moment.

A MAN TRIED TO KILL ME IN NEW YORK.

I stepped off the subway, and he came out of the crowd and stuck a knife right into my chest. It tore through my T-shirt and ripped out a great, hanging mass of muscle. I fell back against the closing doors and sank to the pavement, coughing up great spouts of blood and bile, smearing my innards across the grimy steel.

I might pass out within seconds, I realized madly. I might be dead within minutes.

The man who had done it looked down at me with the oddest expression of rage and fear. He was tall, with a wild beard and long, scraggly hair.

*Rewind a few days.*

I was standing in Dad's kitchen. I tore open my shirt and rubbed desperately at my smooth and uninjured flesh. I drank some water from the sink. Then I went into the bathroom, and vomited.

I didn't have any idea who he was. It was a random act of violence then, by a disturbed individual. I would probably never see him again.

Still, if I did see him, I wouldn't rewind so far. I'd find out who he was first, and why he wanted to kill me.

I SPENT THE NEXT FIVE YEARS DRIVING UP AND DOWN THE EAST COAST, WORKING IN various places, earning enough money to get by.

I met a girl named Debbie.

She had graduated in the spring from college in Minnesota and come to Boston to do graphic design work. We went to the museums, the cafés, the galleries. We took our shoes off and walked barefoot through the park as the clouds began to turn towards pink and orange.

Debbie said, "The interesting thing about Mozart is that he was such a terribly flawed man, but I guess you don't have to be a perfect person to write perfect music."

"Yeah," I agreed, and then, "Can I kiss you?"

Her hazel eyes narrowed, and she smiled. "Well—all right."

We got married two years later, I was twenty-six. Our first years together were wonderful. I wouldn't change a thing.

ONE NIGHT, I AWOKE TO PANIC. MY EVERY JOINT WAS STIFF AND BLOATED, AND my whole body shook violently. Pains shot up and down my limbs and stomach.

"Todd?" Debbie mumbled drowsily. "What's wrong?"

"Symptoms." I groaned. "I'm getting sicker, Deb."

I was thirty-one years old.

The night before, we had talked seriously for the first time about having kids. If our first child was a boy, we were going to name him Timothy.

The next morning, Debbie made me breakfast in bed. It hurt to swallow it. It even hurt to talk.

"I waited too long," I told her. "I should've married you a lot sooner."

Debbie sighed. "Don't think that way. It's all in the past now."

I nodded. She was right.

I was still lying there when Debbie left for work that morning. "Bye," she called up the stairs. "I love you."

I pulled myself out of bed and hobbled to the window. I watched Debbie pull our little Honda out of the garage, and head away down the road.

I had been complacent with time, careless. I had let it lead me to this place of sickness and pain. I shouldn't have to live like this, and neither should Debbie. There was a better place out there. A young, eager place where we could be happy, and free.

"I love you too, Deb," I whispered to the window, "and I'll find you

again. I swear I will.”

*Rewind ten years.*

DEBBIE HAD GONE TO COLLEGE IN MINNEAPOLIS, SO I DROVE THERE. I SPENT A few days searching for her, and then I found her, just by accident. I was walking past this bagel place on the corner, and there she was, sitting at a booth reading a book.

I sat down across from her. “Deb,” I said softly, grinning like a fool.

She looked up. I reached for her hands, I couldn’t help it, and she pulled them away. “Do I know you?” she frowned. I was unnerving her, I could tell.

*Rewind two minutes.*

I took a few deep breaths. Debbie sat at her table, reading.

I approached her booth. “Hi,” I said.

She looked up from her book. “Hi.”

“Do you mind some company? I’m new in town.”

She eyed me for a minute, then shrugged. “Sure. Have a seat.”

“My name’s Todd,” I said, offering my hand.

She shook it. “I’m Debbie.”

We talked for a while. I told her I had just moved from New York. She said she was studying biology in college, but was thinking about switching her major to art.

“I mean, I do like art,” she continued, “but I’m not sure I’m the right kind of person for it. It seems like you really have to be passionate, and I never seem sure how to feel about anything.”

“Well, it’s kind of like that thing you said about Mozart,” I said, playfully.

“What thing?”

“That you don’t have to be a perfect person to write perfect music.”

She frowned. “I never said that.”

I arched an eyebrow.

*Rewind a few seconds.*

Deb said, “—and I never seem sure how to feel about anything.”

“I think you’d make a great artist,” I said.

“You hardly know me.”

I shrugged. “Even so.”

We talked for another half hour or so. At one point, Debbie put her chin in her hands and scrutinized my face. “I have the weirdest feeling like we might’ve met somewhere before.” She took a napkin and wiped a bit of cream cheese off her lip. “Does that ever happen to you?”

I nodded. “All the time.”

THIS TIME, I WAS ONLY NINETEEN WHEN I MARRIED DEBBIE. I FIGURED THAT WOULD be plenty of time.

Dad was worried.

I told him, "I asked Debbie to marry me and she said yes. End of story."

"You know what your problem is?" Dad said. "You think the universe just revolves around you."

I grinned. "Not all the time, Dad, but sometimes it does."

He frowned and shifted uncomfortably. "It's just that you're so young. You hardly know this girl."

"But when I'm with her," I replied, "I feel like I've known her my whole life."

We waited until Debbie finished school, then moved to a small house in Boston. We lived there for a few months. Debbie was pregnant. Everything seemed right.

THAT SAME MAN TRIED TO KILL ME AGAIN IN BOSTON.

I was standing on a street corner, where a small crowd was waiting for the light to change. Loud and angry cars whizzed by us. Suddenly, I heard someone gasp and I turned my head just in time to see the barrel of a shotgun being raised towards my face.

*Rewind one minute.*

I spun around and spotted him immediately, about ten yards behind me. He had the same straggling hair, the same cold eyes. I could see the vague outlines of the shotgun that he grasped beneath his trench coat. There were five or six people on the sidewalk between us. Even if he went for the gun, I'd have plenty of time to escape into the past.

He met my gaze.

"Why?" I shouted, spreading my arms. "Why are you trying to kill me?"

He took a few more steps towards me, then froze. Some people stopped and watched. Most others pushed on by.

The man's voice was gravelly and harsh. "To make it stop."

I frowned. "To make what stop?"

"I saw you on TV," he said. "You're the one who keeps making the future disappear."

I dropped back a few steps. "You remember that?"

"I remember everything," he said, "and I'll get you someday."

Then he went for the gun again.

*Rewind—rewind, rewind away.*

I HAD BEEN SO STUPID, SO CARELESS. THIS MADMAN WAS AWARE OF MY REWINDING, and because of that stupid interview he knew who I was. There were

some things even I couldn't take back.

I fled with Debbie to Chicago, where the murderous man wouldn't find us. We bought a nice apartment and went to Cubs games on weekends. I was twenty-three years old. There was plenty of time still to build a future, raise a family.

Our son was born, and we named him Timothy.

Timmy was bold and bright. He had his mom's eyes, and sand-colored hair just like my dad. But most of him was just—Tim.

When he was four, he found a dead bird by the side of the road.

"What's that?" he asked me, pointing.

"A bird," I said. "It's dead."

I think it was a robin, although it was hard to tell. A lot of it seemed to be missing, and I wasn't sure which of the dark regions were its natural coloring, and which were dried blood. Timmy bent over to examine it more closely.

"Don't touch it," I warned.

Timmy stared at that bird for a long, long time. "I wish they didn't have to die," he said, later.

He was a good kid. Things were going all right for us. I had gotten to the point where I wasn't rewinding life at all.

Then something happened.

IT WAS A BITTER COLD EVENING IN FEBRUARY, AND I STOOD LOOKING OUT THE HALF-OPEN window. The world outside seemed edged in blue, and dark leaves fell softly on the porch. The phone rang.

I said, "Hello?"

The voice on the other end seemed distant, insubstantial. "I'm looking for a Mr. Todd Rawlins?"

"Yes."

"I'm very sorry, sir. I'm afraid there's been an accident. Your wife is going to be all right, but your son Timothy—"

"No," I gasped.

I didn't want to hear those awful things. Timmy was injured, he was maimed—he was dead. I didn't want to hear about his tiny bones as splintered shards, his soft skin ripped in blood-spattered strips, or his bright hazel eyes crushed and dripping from his face.

The man began again. "I know this is—"

"Don't say a thing," I shouted at him. "Don't say a goddamn word to me."

*Rewind. Rewind twenty-four hours.*

Shuddering, I walked through the dark hallways to the room where Timmy lay safe, breathing softly in his sleep.



I WAS OUT IN MY OWN FRONT YARD PLAYING CATCH WITH TIMMY THE THIRD TIME that murderous man came. I didn't realize he was there until I heard him chuckling softly behind me.

I turned. He stood just a few feet away, on the sidewalk outside my fence. His long hair still ratty, he wore the same gray trench coat. He held a pistol, pointed towards my head.

*Rewind one minute.*

I spun around again, and gasped. He was still standing there, his gun pointed straight at me. How long had he been waiting like that?

*Rewind five minutes.*

This time he was out on the street, the gun held by his side.

"I could have done it," he called out immediately. "I could have shot you."

I met his gaze, and held it for a long time. What he said was true. I waited. Finally, I said, "All right."

"I want to talk."

I turned to my son. "Timmy, go inside. Now."

Timmy nodded. He dashed across the lawn, bounded up the porch steps, and disappeared inside the house.

I turned to the man with the gun. I took a deep breath. "Okay," I said. "We'll talk."

"I TOLD YOU I'D GET YOU SOME DAY," THE MAN SAID.

We walked two-and-a-half blocks along crumbling sidewalks to the town park. It was autumn and dead leaves were strewn through the grass.

I said, "Who are you?"

The man with the gun kept his eyes turned towards the dull, gray clouds overhead.

He said, "I read about this experiment once. They put two rats in a cage and give 'em electric shocks. One rat can push a lever to make it stop for both of them, the other rat can't. Even though they always get the same amount of electricity, only the second rat dies—the one with no control."

He turned and stared me in the eyes. "That's me, Rawlins. I'm the second rat."

We stood near a dark picnic bench made of damp, warped wood. There was a swimming pool, covered over by a giant sheet of blue plastic.

"I'm Ian Kyle," he said, "the man who watches life vanish. I can be walking down the street, I'll be reading a book, or sitting on the goddamn toilet—and then suddenly it's five minutes ago, or the day before, or the year—"

He shook his head. "I was going to kill you, Rawlins. That's what I came to Chicago for. I didn't know you had a kid, though."

“His name’s Timmy,” I said.

Kyle sighed. “You’re a dumb shit,” he said. “Killing you now would be a favor.”

I frowned. “And why’s that?”

“Your family—your kid.”

He broke off suddenly. “You know, I had kids once, a long time ago. I had these two beautiful little girls. Ashley was three, Katie was five—though they got younger sometimes, in fits and starts. One day I blinked and they had never been born at all.”

Kyle heaved a great, wretched sigh. I watched him, and I felt a mixture of sadness and horror.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I didn’t think—”

He cut me off. “My marriage disappeared too. My wife didn’t recognize my face. I had been a painter, then one day my art had never been. I had nobody, nothing—nothing but an empty apartment and some bastard on TV named Todd Rawlins, who proved that he had caused it all.”

I watched the ground. “I had no idea,” I said slowly, “I thought I was the only one who knew.”

“Well, you were wrong!” Kyle hissed. “I knew! You should be thankful it was just me, or there’d be a lot more people who’d want you dead.”

I tried to explain, “I was born sick. All I ever wanted was to live.”

Kyle grinned sourly, and shook his head. “Don’t we all, Rawlins? Don’t we all?”

I spread out my arms. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to suffer.” Kyle inclined his head towards me. “You should never get too attached to anything. I learned that the hard way—now it’s your turn.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“It won’t bother me now if you rewind, I’ve got nothing to lose.” He pointed at me. “But you’re stuck. You love your family now. You don’t want them just disappearing all the time. Now you have to choose—what’s more important? Your family, the rest of the world? Or you? Either you suffer, or you die.”

He watched me for a moment, then turned and started to walk away.

“Either way you choose now,” he said, “I’ve got my revenge.”

IAN KYLE WAS GONE, BUT HIS WORDS STAYED WITH ME. HE WAS RIGHT. I WAS CAUGHT in a trap of my own making, and there was no escape.

If I didn’t rewind at all I would die, but every time I did I lost a piece of my life. I rewound in bits and pieces. A week here, a day there, or an hour.

“Hey, Timmy,” I said once. “You want to go fishing?”

Timmy nodded. "Okay, I guess."

"You remember how?"

He looked confused. "No."

Debbie called from the kitchen, "He's never been, Todd."

He had, of course. I'd taken him myself, to that smooth blue lake off Sycamore Drive. We'd paddled through the rocks, through the shaded and murky waters beneath those great mustard-colored trees. Timmy had picked it up quickly. "I got one!" he'd exclaimed. "Look, Dad. I got one!"

I had rewound back past that part, though.

"Come on, Tim," I told him sadly. "I'll teach you."

I wanted it to count. I wanted Timmy to remember all the places I took him, all the bedtime stories I read him, not just some. Each time I rewound, I would watch him struggle over the same schoolwork he'd once known, and I felt guilt and misery.

There was something else, too. As long I lived, Timmy could never be older than ten years old—or thereabouts.

"I want to be a fireman when I grow up," Timmy said one evening, "or a vampire."

"I think," I said sadly, tousling his soft brown hair, "that you're going to be something wonderful when you grow up."

SO I'M DYING.

Rewinding now is out of the question. I couldn't steal the last year from Timmy. I couldn't take the last month, not the last week, even.

Debbie brings him into the bedroom. He's crying, and he jumps up on the bed with me. "I don't want you to do die."

"It's all right, Tim," I tell him. "You have to take good care of your mom for me, okay?" Timmy nods solemnly.

My dad's here too now. He's wearing a flannel shirt, and that same stupid blue cap.

I can rewind life. I could be young and healthy and free. I could fight Willy Pierson and win. I could make a fortune in Vegas, or on Wall Street. I could be on TV. I could be kissing Debbie again for the very first time.

I could do all those things. This instant, if I wanted to.

Timmy watches me, with an expression of trust and hope.

I can rewind life.

But I won't. •

Happily ever after, *they said. But domesticity is a cage for wild things.*

# Mrs. Wolf

Siobhan Carroll

*AS SHE ATE THERE WAS A LITTLE CAT THAT SAID: "A SLUT IS SHE WHO EATS THE FLESH and drinks the blood of her grandmother!"*

*"Undress, my child," said the bzoou, "and come and sleep beside me."*

*"Where should I put my clothes?"*

*"Throw them in the fire, my child, you don't need them anymore..."*

— "Little Red Riding Hood" (early version).

On cold nights she leans against the windowsill, waiting for him to come home.

She no longer wears red, of course: red is a girl's color, and she is no longer a girl. She has tasted her grandmother's blood, and her childhood was devoured by flame.

It was only the smoke that stung her eyes.

Her crimson hood hurled sparks that crackled in her lashes. *You're standing too close*, he said, but she did not move away. The sparks crawled under her skin, and some nights she would wake with her eyes streaming—from standing too close to the fire, you understand.

Lately she has become restless. At night, while her husband hunts, she paces the floor, back and forth, trying to ignore the old cat that hisses and spits in her direction. *Collaborator*, it says, *slut*. But these are old wounds that draw no blood.

She has grown uneasy around her gray-haired husband, and refuses to meet his hungry gaze. They have no children. Her nieces and nephews come by moonlight with mouths full of knives, and it is hard to tell whether it is fear or envy that peers at them through her eyes.

*Happily ever after*, they said. But domesticity is a cage for wild things.

Alone, she begins to contemplate different endings.

Twine.

Woodcutters.

Blood.

*The story has grown stale*, she says to herself, *it is time I learned to plot again*.

And so behind her housewife smile she begins to tell stories. Different ones. Tales in which she finds her stolen skin and returns to the woods, wearing the form she dreamed of, the shape she prayed for as a girl snug in her grandmother's bed.

*What form is this?* You ask scornfully, believing only what you can see with your eyes. Be careful. There is more than one type of shapeshifter, and not all of them change on the outside.

So. One day she will run to the end of her crimson tether and snap the tale that binds her. Then, and only then, will you fear her for what she always was: not a red-hooded child, not a supine princess, not an ash-cloaked Beauty, and certainly never the victim you took her for.

The wolf on two legs,  
raging forth to devour the universe with her eyes. •

*"You don't take me seriously, you never, never do! You're so—so—"*  
*She searched for a word and then spat it at me. "Ynnngla!"*

# Ynnngla

Natalka Roshak

I FIRST HEARD THE WORD FROM MY TEENAGE DAUGHTER, Ashley. The night before, I had been fighting with her and she had stormed out of the house God knows where, off with her loser friends, I suppose. She hadn't come home by morning, and I went in to work feeling frustrated and mad and not really knowing what to do. Over lunch I grabbed Bob and told him the whole story.

Bob is one of the most sensitive guys I know, more sensitive than most women, and that's saying a lot. My wife walked out on me four years ago and left me with two teenage daughters: Cora, who seemed to be turning out well, had a life and ran some clubs at school and looked like she'd be going on to college; and Ashley, who I just didn't know what to do with. And then there was Bob, friend of mine for years, who ran the practice with me and, though he had no daughters of his own, kept me sane while I struggled to bring mine up right.

"It sounds like she's just feeling frustrated," said Bob through his sandwich. "You keep her under pretty tight control, Jim."

I gestured exasperatedly. "What else am I supposed to do?" I said. "She's failing one of her classes, she skips school to be with her weirdo friends, next thing I know she's going to be shooting up like that Palmer

kid whose mom keeps bringing him in because he won't gain weight. Needle tracks up and down his arms and she wonders why he's so skinny! I've got to get her on the right track, Bob. I know she's a good kid, I just don't want to see her screw up."

Bob nodded. "She is a good kid," he said. "Smart, too."

"I know she's just rebelling," I said. "But she's so damn stubborn about it. If I let up on her there's no guarantee she won't just fight back harder. You know what they say, kids need limits. It just seems to get worse the stricter I get, but it doesn't get any better if I don't draw the line."

Bob considered me for a moment, sipping his coffee and saying nothing. Then, "You want me to talk to her?"

I pushed back from the table. "Nah," I said, screwing up my sandwich wrapper and stuffing it in my empty styrofoam cup. "I'll be okay. Thanks, Bob." I hated it when Bob talked to Ashley for me. He'd done it once before, after Jessie left me, and afterward the two had looked like they had some secret understanding that I could never comprehend. Ashley had done better after that, at least for a while, but I never forgot that feeling.

I went back to work not much comforted. Fortunately I had a heavy load of patients that afternoon, plus Ingrid to look in on, so I could at least be distracted. Ingrid was the second-newest doctor in our practice, the only woman doctor, as a matter of fact, and I liked to at least keep an eye on her so she knew I was there if she needed. I admit to having been a little sceptical when Bob first suggested bringing her into the practice, but she had certainly made the office a friendlier place, and I thought she had a way with the younger patients—kids Ashley's age seemed to open up better, 'fess up to their drugs, sex and smoking more easily with a younger, woman doctor. And on days like this one, I even welcomed the extra timesuck of making sure Ingrid was doing all right. I might be messing up as a parent, but at least I knew how to give advice as a doctor.

Eventually the day was over, though, and I had to go home and face Ashley. Or rather, the absence of Ashley. I got home late as it was, after dawdling over some patient files at work. Cora had been home for an hour and had dinner ready, but there was no sign of Ashley.

"I saw her at school today," Cora said. "Just a glimpse, but at least she was there."

I shook my head. "Well, at least there's that," I said. "This is ridiculous. Let's just eat, and I'll deal with her when she gets home."

After dinner Cora went into her room and did homework, and I sat in my chair in the living room and stewed. By the time I finally heard

Ashley's key turning in the lock at quarter of ten I was just about ready to explode.

I was out of my chair and in the front hallway to confront her before she was even in the door. "You're awfully late" and "Where have you been?" were fighting for dominance on the tip of my tongue, but the moment I saw her, they both melted acridly away.

Instead I said, "What the hell did you do to your *hair*?" She had chopped it off, her lovely brown hair, in the most raggedy-ass, uneven possible way; it stuck out at weird angles; and it was *purple*. I couldn't believe it.

She set down her backpack—army surplus, stitched with band names like *DayGlo Abortions*—and said coldly, "I *cut* it, Dad."

It all went downhill from there. I told her she had terrible taste and could have done a better job with a lawnmower, and why did she have to dress like a homeless kid anyway. She countered with doubts that I had any taste beyond soulless conventionalism, and said I couldn't understand her wanting to have a life because I didn't have one myself. And in a matter of minutes she was shouting "You just don't understand me!" and I was yelling back.

"You're right, I *don't* understand you!" is what I yelled. "I don't understand why you're messing up your life instead of doing one goddamn thing that's sensible and right!"

Ashley tossed her chopped-up purple hair and glared at me, her fists clenching. "You—" she said. "You don't take me seriously, you never, never do! You're so—so—" She searched for a word and then spat it at me. "*Ynn gla!*"

I shook my head, clearing my ears, and stared at her. "What?" I said. "Is that even a word?"

My daughter made a noise of pure frustration. "I should never even've come home," she hissed, grabbed her backpack, and walked out the door.

AFTER ASHLEY LEFT, I SAT IN MY CHAIR SOME MORE AND WENT OVER THE conversation, if you can call it that. I shouldn't have exploded at her. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned her hair. I hadn't even gotten the chance to find out where she'd been last night. For all I knew she'd slept in a gutter. And what the heck was that word she threw at me?

I heard a noise behind me and turned. It was Cora, standing on the stairs in her pyjamas.

"I just came down to say good night," she said.

"Cora," I said, "is there a slang word out there now called *ynngla*? I



mean, do kids say that for something?”

Cora paused and considered. “No,” she said thoughtfully, “but you know, now that you say it, it does sound awfully familiar.”

“Really?” I said, frowning. “Is it something bad? It’s an insult, right?”

“It doesn’t feel like an insult,” she said, “but it doesn’t feel like a compliment, either. It just feels, you know, *familiar*. Like an old friend. It’s like I understand it, even though I couldn’t tell you what it means. You know what I mean?”

I shook my head. “Not really, actually,” I said. “But thanks, kiddo. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Dad,” she said, and went upstairs.

It occurred to me, as I watched her walk up the stairs, that I didn’t really understand Cora either. *Like an old friend? About a word?*

WORK WAS FRUSTRATING FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS. IT WAS HARD TO concentrate on somebody’s bronchitis or bowel irritation when I wasn’t sure where my daughter was. And I found myself avoiding Bob, embarrassed to admit how badly I’d handled the situation, I guess. I was trying to track Ashley down, which turned out to be hard: I hardly knew who her friends were any more. I called parents of kids I remembered seeing around, only to find out that their kids hadn’t hung out with her for months and now barely knew someone who might know the name of one of her friends. It was humiliating. Finally I heard she was at the house of a boy called Wyrn—yes, Wyrn with a “y,” known as Warren to his parents and other similarly sane people. I had to call the school and beg to get his phone number, but it paid off. She was there and I drove her home.

We were reconciled, sort of. I didn’t mention her hair or her clothes, and she agreed to at least call if she was going to stay out late, and maybe consider going to school on a semi-regular basis. We were as awkwardly polite around each other as strangers, or new lovers. We both knew it couldn’t last.

In all the confusion I mostly forgot about the strange word she’d thrown at me. And when I did remember, I felt too uneasy with our truce to ask. Like the dumb kid at the back of the class, who doesn’t want to ask what’s going on in case it reminds the teacher to pick on his stupidity. But mostly it was out of my mind.

So it was a shock when, a couple of days later, I heard the word on the radio on the way to work. The announcer was talking about some new gay rights legislation in the Northeast, something about letting gays marry each other legally. Frankly, given my own experience with the

institution, I didn't see why these people would want any part of it. But I figured it was none of my business anyway. So I was half-listening, eyes on the road and thoughts on the traffic, when the announcer said, "LAMBDA spokesperson Dale Womynborn described the new legislation as heralding a new era for gay rights. 'This is like nothing we've ever seen before—this is positively *ynn gla*.'"

I nearly swerved into the next lane. "What?" I said out loud, and fumbled with the volume. But the program had finished with Dale Womynborn, the announcer didn't repeat her words, and in a moment they had moved on to cod prices. I pulled into the parking lot at work and sat in my car with the radio on until the end of the news hour, but the word didn't come up again.

Over lunch I asked Bob about it. "Have you heard people mentioning a word called *ynn gla* lately?"

Bob got some of the same thoughtful look in his eyes that Cora had had. "I can't say I have, actually, but it does sound familiar," he said. Then he shrugged, dismissing it, and looked at me.

"Well, I've been hearing it around lately," I said. "I can't figure out if it means something good or something bad. One minute it's an insult, the next it's the best thing in the world."

"Kids," he said abstractedly, which was completely unlike Bob. "Listen, Jim, I'm sorry if I'm a little distracted. I've got something going on."

This was unusual, too. Usually I had the problems and Bob had the shoulder. "What's up?" I asked.

Bob shook his head. "It's hard to describe. It's— Nothing's happening, it's just a feeling."

I frowned. "What kind of feeling?"

"It's like—" He leaned forward. "Like something pressing in, all around the edges of my thoughts. That's it, it's like a pressure. It's like that moment when you're just about to understand something and it's pressing in on you, but it's coming from all around me. From everywhere. Do you know what I mean?" He was staring at me intently, eyes locked on mine.

It was my turn to shake my head. "I'm at a total loss," I told him.

Bob leaned back in his chair, looked off to one side. "Maybe I'm imagining things."

I had no idea what to say.

THE WORD STARTED COMING UP IN CONVERSATION. AT FIRST I'D JUST CATCH IT OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EAR, TOSSED INTO CONVERSATIONS THAT WERE PASSING ME IN THE HALLWAYS OR ON THE STREET. NEVER PEOPLE I KNEW, AND I COULD NEVER BRING MYSELF TO CHASE AFTER STRANGERS AND ASK. THEN JULIE THE RECEPTIONIST,

a girl not much older than Cora, told me one afternoon that my next three appointments had all cancelled.

“I’m not sure if I should be glad or annoyed,” I answered.

She shrugged and smiled. “Oh, well, ynngla,” she said.

“What the heck does that mean, anyway?”

She looked surprised that I hadn’t understood her. “You know,” she said, gesturing vaguely. “I just mean, like, it’s good and it’s bad too, y’know? Like, take the good with the bad?”

I sighed. “Totally, Julie,” I said, heading for my office.

The word cropped up on the radio again, and then on TV. Stock prices were “ynngla.” The weather was “ynngla.” Negotiations with the Serbs were stalled because of “ynngla.” I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what it meant. And then it started coming up in my practice. I’d ask a patient how they felt on the new medication, and they’d say “Ynngla.” I’d say, “Hmm, could you expand on that a little?” or “Where exactly does it feel ‘ynngla?’” And every time, they’d look a little surprised, then go on to say things about their spleen or their sinuses or their back. They were as understandable as ever in their explanations, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was missing something because I didn’t know how to interpret their “Ynngla.” I hated it.

Everywhere I turned, that damn word, and me unable to figure it out. And all this time I knew Ashley knew what it meant, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask her.

THE PEACE BETWEEN US BROKE ANYWAY. I GOT ONE TOO MANY CALLS FROM THE school telling me she’d skipped some class, and when I confronted her, she said “Oh, Dad, that class sucks.”

“Does it suck because you already know everything, or because you’re not doing the work?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “The teacher’s an anal bastard,” she said. “It’s so not worth it.”

I let the language pass. “How not worth it is it? How are you doing in it?”

Ten minutes of evasive answers later I found out she was failing it, and five minutes of yelling later, she was out the door.

I called Wyrn’s house, but his mother was evasive and suspicious and wouldn’t even tell me if her son was home. God knows what Ashley had told them about me. I hung up feeling sick.

AT WORK I BROKE DOWN AND TOLD BOB THE WHOLE STORY. “I DON’T EVEN KNOW where to look for her,” I finished.

“Mmmh,” Bob said. I paused, but he didn’t say anything else.

I looked more closely at him. I realized, with a little sting of surprise, that he was looking pretty haggard. Circles under the eyes, messy hair, the whole deal. It even looked like he’d lost a little weight. I guess I hadn’t been paying much attention to him for the last couple of weeks, what with Ashley and all. I’d completely forgotten that he’d told me he was dealing with some kind of problem himself. I felt a little stab of guilt.

“So, how’re you doing with that whole ... thing?” I asked him.

“Huh? What thing?” He looked like I’d jolted him out of some private meditation.

“You know, that ... mental pressure thing you were telling me about,” I said. I didn’t really know how to phrase it, and truth be told, I wasn’t sure I remembered the details anyway.

“Oh,” he said. “Actually, Jim, it’s just been getting worse and worse. Every time I’m around people, it’s worse. It’s not coming from everywhere, it’s *everyone*. Every time I’m near someone I can feel this, this nameless pressure coming from them, it’s like some invisible third hand coming out and pushing. The more people, the worse it is. I can feel it off each one of them.” He took a swig of coffee, not looking at me. “At least when I’m home alone, it’s not coming from anyone specific. It’s just sort of ambient, you know?”

“I guess,” I said. I shifted in my seat. Again, I found myself not knowing what to say. I tried to squash the uncomfortable thought that Bob had moved from sounding harassed by some mysterious problem to sounding insane.

He swirled the coffee in his cup. “It’s just so—*ynngla*,” he said. And looked me straight in the eye, as though that explained everything.

“Bob,” I said, “I don’t know what that means.”

“Huh? You don’t know what that means?”

“That word,” I said, as patiently as I could. “You said it was so ‘*ynngla*.’ I don’t know what ‘*ynngla*’ means.”

He got that same surprised, abstracted look I’d seen in so many patients and in Julie. “Oh, *ynngla*,” he said. “I didn’t realize I used the word, but it makes sense, I guess. Well, I just mean that it’s very frustrating, and...” He trailed off, gesturing aimlessly with the coffee cup.

“No, Bob,” I said, leaning forward. “I don’t mean what *you* mean, though I am interested in that too. I want to know what the *word* means. The *word*. Everyone keeps using this damn *word*, and now you’re using it and looking like it should explain everything, two weeks ago you’d never even *heard* it, and I want to know what the hell it *means*.”

Bob really looked at me then, for the first time in our conversation. He gave me a look I'd seen him give before, an old-Bob look—searching, considering, like he was measuring some invisible quality of mine with his eyes and holding it up to a ruler in his head. “No,” he said after a moment, “I guess you don't know what it means.” He sighed. “It means, well, it just sort of means whatever you need it to mean, Jim.”

“Whatever you *need* it to mean?” What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

“That's right,” he said.

“And I suppose you say this word, and everyone just sort of understands whatever it was you needed to mean?” I said sarcastically. “Yeah, right, Bob.”

“That's right,” he said, unruffled. “I'm sorry, Jim. There's really no better way to explain it.”

I pushed away from the table. “You're not making any sense,” I said flatly. “I'm going back to work. Sorry for impinging my pressure on your head space, or whatever.”

BACK UP AT THE OFFICE, I WAS DISMAYED TO DISCOVER THAT MY FIRST PATIENT OF the afternoon was the Palmer kid.

“Doesn't Ingrid usually take him?” I asked Julie.

“Are you kidding? She's out today, don't you remember?” Julie was lifting a significant eyebrow at me, but it took me a moment to remember why. The day before, Ingrid had suddenly blown up at me for no reason at all. Something about picking on her, riding herd on her, something like that. Took me completely by surprise. I figured either it was that time of the month, or I was somehow transmitting my frustrations with Ashley to her, or both. I'd given her the rest of the week off.

“Oh, of course,” I said. “Never mind, Julie.”

I had a couple of minutes to kill before the Palmer kid showed up, so I turned on the radio in my office to distract myself. It didn't help. It seemed like every other sentence had “ynngla” in it. I switched to an easy listening station, and so help me God, the first thing I heard was a singer crooning that word. I turned the radio off and sat in my office in silence until Julie buzzed to let me know the Palmer kid was there.

I hated dealing with the Palmer kid. Rick, I think his name was. He was a couple of years older than Ashley, and he was everything I hoped she wouldn't turn into. This week his hair was bright green and glued into stiff spikes. He had piercings through every flap of skin thin enough to pierce and some that weren't, and he dressed head-to-toe in leather and chains. And it was no secret to anyone but his mother that he smoked,

drank, fucked, and used hard drugs.

At the moment he looked even more emaciated and unhealthy than usual. “How’re you feeling today, Rick?” I asked, trying to be pleasant.

He shrugged. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I repeated. “What seems to be the problem? What’s brought you in here today?”

He shrugged again. “Dunno,” he said. Laconic kid.

I just stood there and stared at him. Two could play at this laconic game. I figured eventually he’d feel uncomfortable enough to elaborate.

After a minute he shifted. “Uh, I think I got an infection, or something,” he muttered.

Hah! Got him to speak. “Oh, an infection,” I said cheerfully. Probably some kind of STD. “Why don’t we just take a look at it, and I’ll see how bad it is?”

“Okay,” he said again. He started peeling off his jacket.

“Why don’t I wait outside while you get undressed,” I said, “and you can put that gown on, and I’ll come back when you’re ready.”

He looked mildly surprised. “It’s just my arm,” he said.

“Oh,” I said stupidly. “Well, then, take off your shirt and I’ll take a look.” He was already taking his shirt off, of course. “Which arm is it?”

“Left,” he said, holding it out.

I took his wrist, looked at his arm, and just about dropped it. Everyone in the office knew he’d been shooting up for a while now. But his left arm was completely covered in needle tracks. The vein, which should have been popping out on a kid that skinny, was flabby and deflated. A couple of the needle marks were infected—I hated to think what must’ve been on the needles he’d been using. He’d be lucky if he didn’t have AIDS.

That wasn’t the worst, though. There was a series of long parallel cuts carved into his forearm. It didn’t look like he’d tried to kill himself, or hurt himself accidentally. It looked like he’d taken a knife and carved up his arm just for the hell of it. There were old, half-healed scars, but the most recent cuts were badly infected. His forearm was swollen and oozing pus from the wounds. If he didn’t already have blood poisoning, he probably soon would.

I let go of his arm. I was shaking. “That’s pretty nasty, Rick,” I said, trying to sound calm. “I’m going to have to drain those and put you on antibiotics.”

He looked about as interested or concerned as a dead fish. “Okay,” he said.

I found myself struggling not to yell at him. “You know, you could lose

your arm from something like that,” I said. “This is serious.”

“Oh,” he said.

That tore it. I threw down his chart. “Why the hell do you kids *do* these things to yourselves?” I asked, exasperated. “I don’t understand the drugs, I don’t understand the hair, and I sure don’t understand the cuts. Honest to God, Rick, I just don’t understand it. You’ve got a caring mother, you’ve got a home and money, you could do just about anything you wanted. But look at you! You’re fucking yourself up. You’re not even just shooting up now, you’re literally tearing yourself apart. And I don’t understand it! Why do you kids *do* this to yourselves? Why do you do this to yourself? Why?”

He’d pulled his arm back to himself protectively. He looked at me.

“*Why?*” I just about shouted.

To my surprise, he spoke. “Do you really want to know?” he said quietly.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I do, Rick.”

He looked me straight in the eye, with eyes that I hadn’t noticed until then were large and soulful and held the ghosts of old hurt. I felt a great calm settle over me. There I was, about to find out why Rick Palmer wanted to spike his hair and skip class and abuse himself, and by extension all kids, and by extension Ashley. He was actually going to tell me.

The moment stretched out between us. For that one second, I believed in him completely.

His lips moved, shaping around a word. I held my breath.

“*Ynn gla,*” he said, softly, intensely. “*Ynn gla.*”

Those great, soft eyes were still locked on mine, his lips still slightly parted, as though he’d just imparted the deepest secret of his soul.

I couldn’t stand it. I left the office and ran out into the street.

OUTSIDE, I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT TO DO. PEOPLE WERE WALKING ALL AROUND ME, talking, using the word. It needled out at me from passing conversations like stabs of light through shuttered windows. *Ynn gla, ynn gla.* I walked rapidly down the block, shouldering past people, trying to shut it out. I wasn’t heading anywhere, just *away*, I had to get away. I spotted a mostly-deserted coffee shop and darted in.

Inside, it was dingy and quiet. There was no radio playing, no TV, and I seemed to be the only customer. I felt myself relax a bit. I bought a cup of coffee and a newspaper and sat down.

That’s it, I thought, I’ll just read the newspaper for a bit and calm myself down. Then I’ll go back and deal with the Palmer kid. Give him his antibiotics, and get him out of my office.

I unfolded the newspaper with a pleasurable little thrill of anticipa-

tion. God, how long had it been since I'd taken the time to sit down and actually read the paper? And this was the *Herald*, the better of our two local dailies—thick, intellectual, subtly opinionated, and written by actual intelligent people who would rather be spitted alive than use “like” or “you know?” in a sentence. I sipped my coffee and settled in for a good read.

The first article, middle of page A1, contained the word.

I couldn't believe it. In the *newspaper*? In *print*? But there it was, in the middle of a key sentence. “Congressman Cussack responded with counter-allegations of ynn gla on the part of House Republican leaders.” The article went on, but I couldn't make any sense out of it without knowing what the Republicans were being accused of. Graft? Porkbarrelling? Vote fixing? It could have been anything.

I scanned the article, then read it again, closely. “House Republican leader Corliss Lamont vigorously denied the allegations, offering to provide evidence that he could not have been present at the alleged meeting.” *What* meeting? “Sources near Cussack, however, have intimated that an anonymous informant provided the Congressman with a hidden-camera video of the meeting in which all three participants' faces are clear.” *What* three participants? I went over the article, word by word. No names but Lamont's and Cussack's. No previous references to a meeting. I'm not stupid; the only word I didn't understand was *that* word. It was as though an entire paragraph had been packed into that one word.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered.

I flipped through the newspaper, skimming the articles. The word popped up in every other article, and half the time the article fell into incomprehensibility after the word. I flipped the pages faster and faster and felt like crying. It just got worse the farther in I got. The “Letters” section contained a letter which consisted solely of the word. “Dear Sir: Ynn gla. Yours, Mr. B. Hart, Chairman, American Dental Association.” A one-word letter. And the truly horrifying part was that the editor had seen fit to write him a lengthy response.

Tears were stinging the back of my eyes now. I couldn't even bring myself to skim the editor's response to ‘Ynn gla. Yours, Mr. B. Hart.’ I turned the page. And that's when I saw the weather report. Gone were the little graphics and icons and temperature symbols. The traditional four-day mid-range forecast had been distilled into four words:

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
YNNGLA	YNNGLA	YNNGLA	YNNGLA

I spilled the coffee and knocked over my chair and made it out into the street, and all around me people were talking and laughing and saying



that word, over and over and over, until it seemed like it was the only thing I could hear; and I ran and I ran and I ran, and there was nowhere, absolutely nowhere, to go.

And then finally some time later, I was collapsed against a building and crying. Strangers crowded around me and patted my shoulders, trying to comfort me, saying *Ynn gla, ynn gla, ynn gla* in soft voices full of concern.

THINGS ONLY GOT WORSE FROM THERE. NEWSPAPERS STARTED RUNNING STORIES with every other word *ynn gla*, and soon all the headlines just read *YNNGLA*, and then every word. For a little while then, the *Herald* kept up a single-sheet newspaper that just said *YNNGLA* in very large type, every day. Finally they stopped publishing altogether.

The same thing happened to radio and TV. For a while you could tune into all the old stations and hear them say the word, over and over, each announcer in his appointed hour. Then station by station, the radio just faded into static and the TV into snow.

“They’re still there,” Bob said to me on the day the last radio station went off the air. “They just don’t need to run the broadcasts any more.”

I gave him a sick look. I’d had a terrible day at work. Half my patients had stopped even saying the word when I asked them what was wrong. They just sat there on the examining table and stared at me. Getting them to use actual words was like getting a cat to fetch. “I suppose they’re just sitting there thinking at each other,” I said. I didn’t even have the heart to make it sound sarcastic.

“*Ynn gla* spread like wildfire,” Bob said, spreading his hands. “Once people started using the word, there was no need for other words. People only needed one word in order to understand each other.”

“And soon,” I said dully, “there was no need for words at all.”

Bob nodded. “You always know what someone else is going to say,” he said. “There’s no need to say it any more.”

I looked around the café. It was full of people sitting in silence, staring at each other. Occasionally one would nod or laugh. Bob had ordered my sandwich and coffee for me, in silence. “Bob,” I said, “why do you still talk to me?”

“Are you kidding?” said Bob. “You’re almost the only person I can still stand to be around, Jim. All these others—” He gestured around us at the café crowd, shaking his head. “Don’t you remember? I told you about the pressure, didn’t I?”

I stared at him. He was scruffy, unshaven, dressed in last week’s smelly clothes. He looked like a homeless man in a doctor’s coat. “You’re about to stop making sense again, Bob,” I told him. As if he’d been making any

sense for the last five minutes.

“Pressure from everyone,” said Bob. “While they were still using the word, I could stand it. But now, I can’t shut it off. It’s all their thoughts, Jim, pressing in on me. I can’t tune any of them out. All of *everybody’s* thoughts, just pouring into my head, all day.”

I shook my head. “Are you trying to tell me you’re some kind of telepath, Bob?”

“Earth to Jim,” he said. “Who isn’t?”

That hurt. I stared into my coffee, swirled it around. It was so quiet in the crowded café I could hear the little sloshing sounds my coffee made in the cup. “*Ynn gla*,” I said softly. But it was still just a sound to me, a nonsense word.

“I’m sorry,” said Bob. “I haven’t been myself lately. Look, Jim, I have to get out of the city.”

I looked back up at him. He couldn’t be serious.

“I’m going into the hills,” he said. “I’m not the only one who’s doing this. There’s a number of people it’s hit this way, and...it’s easier when you’re not around so many people.”

“I need you to run the practice,” I said. “I can’t do it myself, not with things the way they are.”

“Ingrid can handle it,” he said.

“She’s inexperienced. And we can’t just take on all your patients like that.”

“You’ll manage, Jim,” he said.

I clenched the styrofoam cup in my hands. *Who will I talk to if you leave?* But I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“I have to do this, Jim,” he said. He stood. “I’ll see you some time, okay? I’ll visit.”

And he left, just like that.

When I got back up to the office, everyone already knew he was gone. Of course.

CORA STILL LIVES WITH ME, FIXES US DINNER EVERY NIGHT. SHE SITS AND EATS WITH me, but I can hardly get her to talk. When she does, half the time she slips and uses the word.

“Cora, please. I don’t know what you mean.”

She blinks and looks absent. “Sorry, Dad. It’s just hard to remember, you know?”

Mostly we just sit in silence. She’s hardly in the room. Her eyes flicker, expressions flit across her face, but not for me. For whoever she’s talking to, wherever they are.

She still goes to school, though not as often. I guess there's not that much to teach any more. I picture a classful of students filtering silently into the classroom. They look at the teacher, the teacher looks back, they know whatever it was they needed to learn. On to the next class.

Sometimes Cora sings softly to herself while she's cooking. Mouth open, lips pursed around a vowel. No words. I don't recognize the tunes. Current songs, apparently, from the same radio stations that give me only static.

Ashley's gone for good. She came back shortly after Bob left to pick up her things. I followed her up to her room and stood behind her, hovering in her door, as she crammed stuff willy-nilly into the large red dufflebag Jessie had bought her years ago, for sleepovers.

"Ashley, talk to me," I said. "You don't have to do this. Maybe we can work this out. Whatever it is you want, just tell me, and we'll work it out."

She turned and looked at me. I couldn't read her expression. Mad? Frustrated? Fatalistic? Contemptuous? It could've been anything. She went back to her packing.

"I really mean *tell* me, Ashley," I said. I hated the tinge of desperation that was creeping into my voice. "I mean *tell* me, with words, it's clearer for me that way."

She zipped up her dufflebag and heaved it onto one shoulder. She looked at me again for a long moment, locking eyes with me the way Rick Palmer had. Such pretty eyes, my Ashley had, clear and green and wide-set. Even with the ragged purple hair, she was such a pretty girl. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but couldn't find the words.

She broke eye contact with a little shake of her head—disgust? resignation?—and shouldered past me, out of her room.

I ran down the stairs after her. "Ashley, wait," I was calling. "Ashley, please, wait!" I caught up with her at the front door. "*Please*," I begged her. "Ashley, *please*."

One hand on the lock, she turned a last time to look at me.

"Ashley, *please*, just tell me in words," I said, the words all spilling out in a rush. "I don't know what you're saying when you look at me like that, I really don't. I'm not just being difficult. I know we haven't had the greatest time lately, I know I could've done a lot better, but please, you have to believe me when I say I just don't know what's going on. Just tell me, please, Ashley, I won't stand in your way, but won't you just tell me what this is about? Won't you at least tell me why you're leaving?"

She looked at me for a moment, and then nodded slightly. "Ynn gla," she said flatly. And then the door banged behind her and she was gone.

I ran outside after her, but she was already disappearing into someone's car and they were driving off God knows where, gone before I could even fumble out my car keys.

*Ynn gla.* I never even got the chance to tell her I didn't understand.

I haven't seen her since. Cora grows more and more distant each day, wrapped up in the same silent world that holds all my patients, my fellow doctors, everybody I pass on the street. Everybody's getting more and more reluctant to talk. I stopped even going in to work a couple of weeks ago, because I literally couldn't get my patients to tell me what was wrong with them. When it got to the point where I was calling in Ingrid for almost every patient, I left.

I sit around home now, mostly, so I don't have to see the silent people in the street. I read books, watch videotapes, put old records on the stereo and sing along to the words. I wrote Bob a letter, and then Ashley and Jessie and Cora, then tore them all up and burned them.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO DO. I'M SURE THERE MUST BE OTHERS LIKE ME, IN A CITY THIS size, but I don't know how to find them. There are no newspapers to put ads in any more. I put a few signs up downtown, but no one has come to my door—and that's what they'd have to do; the mail's not running and the phones are all down. The grocery stores are still open, cars still rush through the streets with purpose, people go to work and shop and have parties where, I imagine, everyone drinks and is silent except for the occasional burst of laughter, or sometimes tears. Everything's still going on, but I'm as shut out as if someone had slammed a door and locked it, shutting me alone on the other side of a thick wall of glass. I think I might go into the hills after Bob, in a while. I don't have any way to find him; I'll just drive. He said there are others like him out there. I might find someone willing to talk.

But for now, I just stay in the house and sit. Sometimes, when Cora's out and the house is as silent as the downtown streets, I sit in my chair and say the word to myself, over and over. *Ynn gla, ynn gla, ynn gla.* My whisper fills the house, the only voice probably for blocks. And I try, God knows I try. I squeeze my eyes shut and strain my mind and I *try*.

But it's still, and always, just a word. •



Tom Miller — Dreaming of Miro, 36" x 36" acrylic on canvas



Tom Miller — Light in the Garden  
30" x 30" acrylic on linen

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*...while he was willing to admit that he would leap at the chance to go home, he still wasn't sure where that was...*

# Home

Paul E. Martens

HE'D JUST PUT THE MONEY IN THE CASH REGISTER AND WAS posing with the junketing bridge club when his brother-in-law burst into the Aley Inn with news of the invasion.

"What are you doing getting your picture taken when there's flying saucers popping up everywhere?" Sandy Stankiewicz, Blettenburg's police chief, wasn't a big man, but there was something about him that chased the bridge club through the door without causing them to panic. One lady did pause long enough to grab her souvenir beer mug, but she scampered at Sandy's glare.

Eyul blinked once, his silver lids dipping slowly across his huge eyes like glossy tarps drawn over black ball fields.

"Flying saucers?" His high, thin voice was a whisper of wonder and disbelief, fear and hope. "Everywhere?"

The chief went around the end of the old mahogany bar where plaid-shirted regulars Bob, Larry and Dave nursed their all-day beers, all their pensions and Social Security afforded them. He reached up and turned on the TV, saying, "Well, maybe not 'everywhere.' I guess there's maybe two or three of them. Or maybe just one. And there hasn't actually been any shooting or anything yet, but the way it's been hovering sure makes it

*seem* threatening. I heard they're in contact with the president and some other heads of state but nobody's saying what they're talking about. Man, it's just like a movie." He sounded almost like the teenaged science fiction fan Eyul used to know.

The television screen warmed up and filled with a still picture of a spidery-limbed humanoid creature while the voice over said, "Older viewers will remember our last alien visitors, some twenty eight years ago. A craft much like the ones now filling the skies of Earth crashed in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, killing all aboard, except for one survivor, a cook's assistant named Eyul Eyuleyul.

"Eyul, as he became know to the world, seen here in file footage, was examined and questioned for over a year before a lawsuit by attorney Anthony Cirincione forced his release. A subsequent suit by Cirincione to have the contents of the alien ship turned over to Eyul by right of survivorship failed.

"After a brief period in the limelight, with a series of lecture tours and television and motion picture appearances, Eyul retired from public view. It is certain that the government will be attempting to re-establish contact with him, whether as a source of information, a negotiator, or as a hostage, remains to be seen."

"Okay, I've heard about all I need to hear of this," Eyul said as he reached for the remote.

"Leave it on!" sang the chorus at the end of the bar.

"You know, E, you were a lot shinier in those days," observed Dave.

It was true. Age had dulled his skin to gray. Eyul wondered how many years had passed on his own planet. He'd lost track. He turned to Dave. "Yeah, and you were probably a lot *less* shiny back then. Or were you born bald?" Even after all this time, bantering with older people made him uncomfortable, but it was expected.

Bob and Larry guffawed and added a few comments of their own, while Dave racked his brain for a suitable comeback.

Sandy stood with his arms apart, fingers spread tensely as if he was trying to fit the whole bar in his hands to squeeze some sense into it. "E, don't you understand what this means? Didn't you hear what they said on TV? People are going to remember you're here. They're going to be coming after you. What are you going to do?"

Eyul thought briefly. "Well, right now I'm going to start making the pizzas for the concession stand for tonight's Little League game."

"Little League! There's been an alien invasion! Do you think people are going to watch their kids play baseball with flying saucers ready to blast us all to atoms?"

“Sandy, you’re still watching too many bad science fiction movies. Remember how you tried to shoot me with your dad’s shotgun when I first started dating your sister? *I’m* not a bug-eyed monster and the guys in the space ships aren’t bug-eyed monsters, either. We’re just people and I’m sure everybody will realize that.” His thoughts elsewhere, he absentmindedly started filling the mugs of a surprised Bob, Larry and Dave. “You want a beer?”

“As chief of police,” Sandy said officially, “I’ve got to keep the peace around here. People are going to be scared, and some ignorant fool might get it into his head to come after you as a way to fight the invaders. Or maybe your outer space pals are going to come looking for you. Or maybe the Army will try to kidnap you for their own purposes. Even if you’re not going to take this seriously, it’s my job to.”

Retired Chief Bob nodded in approval of his replacement. “You’re absolutely right, Sandy. What can I do to help?” He made no attempt to hide his eagerness.

“I’ve got it covered, Bob.” Sandy didn’t notice Bob’s disappointment, but Larry and Dave did.

“Sandy, you little snot, Bob was taking care of Blettenburg when you were still trying to figure out what hole to shove your strained peas and carrots into.” Larry spoke with the camaraderie of the abandoned. His son now ran his hardware store.

“Damn right,” added Dave, former high school science teacher.

Eyul silently rooted them on.

“You three concentrate on what goes on in front of your bar stools and I’ll worry about the rest of the town,” Sandy said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got plans to make.”

He paused at the door to let in Jenny, the Aley Inn’s waitress and Eyul’s daughter-in-law, but left without more than a quick, distracted hello.

Jenny looked after him and called, “Nice talking to you, too, Sandy.” She gave Eyul a peck on his sunken cheek. “Hi, Dad, what’s up with him?”

“Haven’t you heard, Jen?” piped up Larry. “The chief’s got to save Eyul, Blettenburg and the entire US of A this afternoon.”

“Yeah,” added Bob. “He’s real busy right now making the world safe for Democracy.”

“Didn’t even have time for a beer,” pointed out Dave.

She waited for Eyul’s answer.

His sigh sounded like the wheeze of someone who had just inhaled helium. “More people from my planet have arrived.”

“That’s wonderful! Isn’t it?”



Eyul moved his chin in a circle, his version of a shrug. "How can I know? It may be a rescue mission, a diplomatic mission or an invasion. Nobody knows anything yet. There's no reason to get excited. They might just be passing through on their way somewhere else. They probably don't even know I'm here." He stopped drumming his six long fingers on the bar to pour yet another round of beers for the delightedly astonished Bob, Larry and Dave. "Watch the bar. I'm going in the back to start the stitzzs."

"The what?"

"Pizzas. I said pizzas." He hadn't thought of stitzzs, or tss, or any of the foods he used to like, in years. He pushed through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Would he even want a tss now? No, he decided, he'd probably rather have a pizza or a cheeseburger. But his mothers used to make a tss that would turn your eyes blue. He would hang around while it was being prepared and his Eldest Mother would slip him a little piece, then the Lesser Mothers would sneak him some, and his Sister Mothers would "accidentally" let a little fall near him. Sometimes he'd be too full to eat his share when it was served.

He started as someone touched his arm. "Eyul?"

Tony Cirincione was looking at him, his gray caterpillar eyebrows creeping together with concern.

"You're not in some kind of psychic contact with those other Tethys, are you?"

"Huh? No, of course not. There is no such thing. I was just... thinking." He got himself together with a shudder. "What are you doing here during office hours?" A thought occurred to him. "Am I going to be charged for this?"

Tony airily waved his hand. "Forget about that for now. Sandy called me and we both figure you're going to be needing all the help you can get. I'm not sure where we stand if the government wants to take you into 'protective custody,' what with you being from another planet and not being human and all. And I sure don't know any Tethys law to try and stop *them* if they want to repossess you or something." He gave Eyul a stern look. "You never did let me push that Citizenship case through."

"I was barely able to pay you for those other cases. And I never asked you to file them, anyway. Not that I'm not grateful, but this place isn't exactly a gold mine, you know."

"Okay, okay. Anyway, like I said, the law isn't clear on all this, but I've been reading a lot of Perry Mason books recently, and he always smuggled his clients into motels where the police couldn't find them. Well, most of the time, anyway. That Lt. Tragg was pretty sharp. And that's what

Sandy and I decided to do with you. For now. Until I come up with something better.”

“No.” Eyul’s answer was as firm as his reedy voice would allow. “I’ve got pizza to make for the Little League. Yuli’s school play is tomorrow night. The Lion’s Club Yard Sale is this weekend. There’s too much going on. I can’t just leave. And what about Donna?”

“E,” Tony’s voice was less professional, more familiar, “This is bigger than the Lions or the Little League.” He hesitated, then asked, “How do you feel about all this? Don’t you miss Tethy? You must want to see somebody who looks like you again.”

Eyul’s answer didn’t come immediately. “I don’t know, Tony. I’ve lived on Earth longer than I did on Tethy. Do you know I jump sometimes when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror? I can’t believe I’m not human. I keep expecting to see a person; a businessman, a husband, a grandfather. I probably don’t remember more than a handful of words in my own language.” He shook his head. “This is home, Tony. Nobody’s making me leave without a fight.”

Tony nodded and pursed his lips. “Okay, E. We’ll see what happens.”

JENNY POKED HER HEAD INTO THE KITCHEN. “TWO MORE BURGERS, ONE WITH fries. A large sausage and a medium with extra cheese. I called Octavius and he’s coming over to help after he gets Mrs. Monsees to babysit. And Mom’s here. I asked her to watch the bar.” She turned her head to shout into the other room. “Hold on, Mary, it’s coming.” Then she disappeared, only to be replaced by a short, soft, happy woman, Eyul’s wife, Donna.

“Greetings, husband.” She smiled at him and, as always, the smile filled him with a warmth more necessary to his survival than food or drink or air. She still carried herself with the grace that had fleetingly made her the almost-a-movie-star she’d been when they’d met. Her career ended as she got older, baffling Eyul, for whom her aging only made her more beautiful.

“Greetings, wife.” Their fingers brushed briefly, tenderly, a small, intimate gesture. “It’s a little crazy tonight.”

“No kidding. You’d better get out there, E. I’ll take over in here. Those people came to see you, not me.”

“But why?”

She gave him a look of wifely affectionate exasperation. “Because they’re your friends.” She pushed him gently out the door. “Go.”

Over the course of the night, it seemed that everyone in Blettenburg stopped in for something to eat or a drink or two. No one said anything

about flying saucers, or aliens, or invasions or protective custody, but everybody found an opportunity to shake Eyul's hand, or give his shoulder a neighborly squeeze, or just have a word about the weather, or the yard sale, or nothing much at all. Bob and Larry and Dave even washed a few dishes, arguing over who would wash and who would dry and who was responsible for the plates that got broken.

Eventually, the customers were gone. After they helped clean up, Jenny and Octavius left, too.

Eyul and Donna locked up and went out the back door into the clear, black night to walk to their house next door. Holding hands, they stopped and looked up at the stars.

After a while Donna asked softly, "What are you thinking about, E?"

Eyul kept his eyes on the sky. "I don't know where my home is, Donna." He spoke as if he were far away, with just a hint of the tears his eyes were not capable of producing in his voice. "I look at the stars and that's all they are to me, just lights spilled across the night. I've never been able to pick out the one that was the sun, *my* sun." He squeezed her hand with frustration. "I... I'm not even sure I can remember the word for sun."

Donna stayed silent, but kept close to him as they resumed their journey.

He stopped suddenly. "Hass! That was it. The sun was Hass." He felt no satisfaction at remembering, just a sadness that he'd lost so much of who he had been.

EYUL LAY AWAKE, TRYING TO ENVISION WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT AND TRYING TO guess how he would react in each situation, then trying to come up with scenarios he hadn't thought of.

He looked at Donna sleeping next to him. The moonlight gave her a silvery sheen and he could almost imagine her a Tethys. Her eyes were too small, of course, but tiny laugh lines spread out from them, as if larger orbs were trying to break through. Her hair, too, soft and brown and gray and white, denied him the illusion that she could be other than human. He studied her full, pink lips and rounded chin and wondered how he could have ever thought humans grotesque. Would the sight of his own kind now repulse him?

*He* was grotesque. A big-headed, spindly, unearthly abomination that didn't belong among humans. Yet he was married to a human, a beautiful human who loved him. He was the only father her son had ever known, and her grandchildren considered him their grandfather as much as they did Jenny's father. Impossibly, he had a whole community of friends who accepted him completely.

Didn't they? Or was he a monster, tolerated as some sort of mascot? He had no place on this blue, green, red, brown planet, among these pink, brown, yellow, red people with their fleshy limbs.

But his memories of Tethy were dim, and the Tethys he remembered best were dead, either because he'd left them behind so long ago, or because they died in the crash that spared only the most insignificant member of the ship's crew.

He should have died, too. He would have been better off.

Except, he *was* happy, had *been* happy. And loved. And he didn't want anyone to take that away from him. What could Tethy offer that could replace what he'd found on Earth?

MOONLIGHT HAD GIVEN WAY TO SUNLIGHT BEFORE HE FELL ASLEEP, AND THERE hadn't been sunlight for very long before Sandy was shaking Eyul awake.

"Come on, E. They're here."

"What? Who? Where?" He sat up, thinking himself on Tethy, on his ship and on Earth all at once. He made himself focus on his brother-in-law who, if he had no business being in Eyul's bedroom, at least, had to mean he was in Blettenburg. "What are you doing here?"

"It's the Army, E. They've come for you." He struggled to keep the excitement out of his voice but couldn't stand still. "There's a Captain Dooley and eight others. They want to take you to Washington. Tony's arguing with them. He told them it was the job of the civil authorities (that's me) to bring you in. What do you want to do? We can stall them for a while if you want to make a run for it?"

"And go where? Disguised as what? Go get a cup of coffee and I'll be ready in ten minutes." He lay back in bed, gathering his strength, wondering what it was he was supposed to get ready *for*.

Donna insisted on going, too, and the three of them got in Sandy's four wheel drive to go to the police station.

Bob, Larry and Dave, carrying shotguns, flagged them down at the end of the driveway.

Sandy rolled down his window. "What do you boys think you're up to?"

Eyul winced inwardly at their being called boys.

"We're going to do whatever it takes to help Eyul," said Bob.

"That's right," said Larry. "He's practically the only one in this whole town that treats us like we were still members of society."

"Yep," agreed Dave. "To everyone else, we're kind of like Styrofoam in a landfill, all used up but not going away."

“Well, actually,” said Larry thoughtfully, “We’re a lot more biodegradable than Styrofoam. But it was a nice metaphor.”

“Simile.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quit it!” barked Sandy. “I told you before to stay out of the way. I don’t need any old fools with shotguns making my job harder than it already is.”

Eyul held his breath as he struggled to stay silent, but Donna said, “Alexander Stankiewicz, you apologize right now. These are our friends and they’re as worried about Eyul as you are.” She leaned across Sandy and said, “Thank you very much, Bob, Larry and Dave. We’ll be sure to let you know if there’s anything you can do.”

Eyul, voice filled with emotion, started to say, “Thank you, my friends...” but swallowed the rest of his words when Sandy stomped on the accelerator and sped them off to the station.

They were met by a baby-faced corporal and four privates, none of whom had even been born when Eyul crashed and had had his moment of fame. They didn’t actually level their weapons at him, but seemed to be struggling with the guns, as if they were divining rods and Eyul a prime spot for a well. Fear and awe did their best to peek through bland, doing-their-duty faces, until replaced by surprise and a little disgust when they learned Donna was Eyul’s wife.

Captain Dooley was of the pencil-pushing variety of career soldier. His hair had long ago quit the field, except for a few short, gray outposts near his ears. The thin Maginot line of his mustache did little more than outline his flabby lips.

“Mr. Eyul.” He marched toward Eyul, obviously acting the part of the bluff man-at-arms. After shaking hands, somewhat gingerly, he said, “Mr. Eyul, your country needs you.”

Before Eyul could speak, Tony asked, “The country that wouldn’t grant him citizenship, you mean?”

“Well, the country that has sheltered you and given you a home.”

“Are you referring to the country that seized everything he owned and everything that belonged to his crewmates? Everything that gave him a connection to his own world? The country that gave him his freedom, and *only* his freedom, only after being forced to do so by legal action, and only after it was determined that he knew nothing useful?” Tony’s eyebrows crawled up his forehead in innocent inquiry.

Lieutenant Dodson, a younger man whose granite chin and steely eyes made him look like he’d been assembled by the Pentagon from a kit, leaned across the desk. “Let us put it this way, gentlemen. We’ve been

ordered to bring in the alien. We obey orders. Clear?"

Just then, Bob, Larry and Dave wandered in, negligently displaying their well-used shotguns.

"Mornin', everybody." said Larry.

"Say, Chief," said Bob, "We were figuring on going out to the landfill to shoot rats. You have the key?"

"Yeah," said Dave. "Funny thing is, a whole bunch of folks figured on doing the same thing." He jerked his head to indicate the window through which much of the population of Blettenburg could be seen loitering.

Tony smiled at the Army, then replied to the trio, "The chief's kind of busy right now, guys. Maybe you could just have a seat and wait for a few minutes while we finish up."

Dodson gulped apoplectically. "Are you threatening the United States Army?"

Tony gave indications of being about to say what he was willing to do with the United States Army, but Eyul cut him off.

"Stop." He turned to the Blettenburgers. "Thank you, thank all of you, for everything. It means a lot to me. But I'm going with them." He spoke above a swelling hubbub. "I *want* to go with them. I've been with humans for so long I've forgotten who, or what, I am. Maybe I'll feel even more alien among my own kind than I do here. Maybe I'll find that I have to go back to Tethy to be who I am. Maybe I'll find out that I *can't* go back. Maybe they *are* planning an invasion and something I do or say can save Earth. Maybe, maybe, maybe." He spoke directly to Donna. "I've got to go. I've got to find out. You understand, don't you?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip. "Will you be back?"

A hundred possible futures flitted through his mind. Their fingers touched. "I don't know." His voice was gentle.

"Do you *want* to want to come back?" she asked softly and held her breath.

"A part of me will always want to come back. A part of me will always *be* here. But I don't know what part. I don't know what's going to happen and I've got to find out."

EVEN IN HIS OWN OFFICE, SURROUNDED BY REMINDERS OF HIS POSITION, THE president was more uncomfortable than Eyul. Eyul, after all, had met presidents before, albeit before the current incumbent had ever run for even local office. The only other aliens with whom the president had had contact were hovering over his head in a space ship he had to assume could blast the White House to dust, and his only communications had

been computer translated messages into which is was all too easy to read threats.

“They want you, Mr. Eyuleyul. They’ve made it clear that they’ve come light years for you, and I don’t know of any way we could stop them from getting you. If we wanted to. They’re sending a ship to pick you up as soon as I send the signal that you’re here.”

“But why?” blurted Eyul. He could not conceive of any circumstance that would make him that important to anyone on Tethy. “Why after all these years? Why me?”

The president shrugged. “They didn’t say.” A thought occurred to him. “You’ll go, won’t you? I mean, they seemed friendly enough, but that might be because they think they’re going to get what they want. I just assumed you’d leap at the chance to go home. Right?”

Eyul didn’t say anything. He was trying to come up with a reason the Tethys would travel all that distance for him. And, while he was willing to admit that he would leap at the chance to go home, he still wasn’t sure where that was.

“Right?” the president asked again, his voice rising half an octave above presidential.

“Yes, I’ll go. That’s why I’m here.” He was looking off into space and wasn’t aware of the president’s relief.

THE REMOTELY PILOTED SHUTTLE DEPOSITED EYUL ON THE SHIP AND HE WAS transported back in time. It was not exactly like the one he remembered. Then again, he reminded himself, look how much simple cars had changed in the twenty-eight years he’d been on Earth.

The light was strange at first, but his eyes adjusted quickly and he could see more clearly than he had in years. The air had a slightly metallic tang and it was drier than Earthly air. He filled his lungs eagerly, feeling almost intoxicated as he absorbed elements his body had gone without.

Someone behind him spoke, the words tantalizingly, frustratingly close to being understandable, as if in a dream, where meaning vanishes upon examination.

He turned slowly, bracing himself for first contact. Suddenly he was looking at himself, his brother, his father, his son, his world. Words gushed from him, his own language, words of home. His legs refused to hold him up while he babbled, “Greetings, Eldest Captain. Welcome to Earth. Why have you come? Why have you taken so long? Tell me of Tethy. Everything. Do you know any of my family? Do you have any word from them? Is Anit Anittrel still Eldest of Eldest? Tell me about my city,

Preth. Is it still beautiful? Does the gold water still glow with the sun's reflection, doubling its splendor?"

The other laughed, a high, bird-like piping. "Stop. Or at least slow down." He bowed, hands extended in front of him, fingertips touching. "I am Kren Krenulul, 11 5 7251."

Eyul got himself together. "Forgive me," he said, duplicating the Captain's gesture. "I am Eyulu Eyuleyul, 9 41 70— What? Did you say 7251? But that's... Can that much time have passed? That means..."

Kren was bobbing in affirmation. "Yes. It is true. You are Eldest. When we return to Tethy you will be Eldest of Eldest." He spread his long thin arms submissively. "How can I serve you, Eldest?"

Eyul blinked slowly, absorbing the information. He was Eldest. Eldest of Eldest. It made sense, now that he thought of it, from the little he understood of relativity. But he, Eyul Eyuleyul, was Eldest. All of Tethy would defer to him, seek his wisdom. Do anything for him.

He looked at Kren. "Do you have any tss?"

AS A BARTENDER, HE WAS USED TO HEARING PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS. AS ELDEST, though, he was expected to do something about them.

The tss *was* good, though not as good as the tss of his memory. And not as good as Donna's apple pie of much more recent memory.

On the other hand, the penz, which he'd been too young to drink before, was even better than the best beer he'd ever had on Earth. He took another gulp and tried to pay attention to the officer sitting before him.

"Thank you for seeing me, Eldest. Imagine, me, young as I am, being able to seek the wisdom of the Eldest of Eldest. At home, my Eldest Father would not have enough status to see you. It doesn't seem right somehow. Of course, my Eldest Father died with the rest, but..."

Eyul, his head buzzing with penz, wished he would get on with it.

Eventually, the officer came to the end of his petition and was waiting for Eyul's counsel. Perhaps it was the penz, but Eyul didn't have a clue what the guy's problem was, so he said, "Two Our Fathers and a Hail Mary. Go and sin no more." He waved his thin hand in a vaguely cross-like pattern.

Since he'd said it in English, the officer was slightly more baffled than he would have been if Eyul had spoken in Tethy.

Eyul was immediately embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he said, this time so he could be understood. "I just don't know enough about being a Tethys to understand your problems. I wish I could help, but I'm just not qualified. I'm not old enough or wise enough." And he was much too drunk enough, he thought. "Please just leave me alone."

The bewildered officer left, but his place was soon taken by the Captain.



Eyul squirmed under Kren's calm gaze, like a schoolboy who knows he's done something stupid facing the principal.

"Did Iral do something to annoy you, Eldest?"

"No Eldest Captain," Eyul said meekly, knowing that, as Eldest of Eldest, he should only refer to the other as Captain. "Please, I have no business giving advice to anybody. I can't be Eldest of Eldest. I've had no preparation, no training."

"But you *are* Eldest. That is the way of the Tethys. Those born first help those who come after."

"But why seek me out? Surely there are others on Tethy, even if they were born after me, who can guide you. The year in which I was born doesn't make me old. You understand relativity better than I do, you must know that."

"All the Elders are dead." The Captain let the bald statement sink in before continuing. "For the first time since Tethy held conscious life, there is chaos. There is no one old enough to claim the respect of all Tethy. You must have known that I am too young to be Eldest Captain on a ship like this. Some of us have taken on roles we have not earned. We are trying to hold our civilization together."

"Dead? How?" Eyul wished again that he hadn't drunk so much penz.

"A virus. It affected all those old enough to hold any position of authority. You must understand now why we need you. Surely you are enough of a Tethys to realize the effect on those of us still living."

Eyul wanted to deny it. "But I've been living on a planet where people try to delay getting older. Where they're taken less seriously if they're old. They...we...cling to our youth long after it becomes ridiculous. You can't want me. I have no wisdom to offer you."

"If you lack wisdom, you have age. You can be a symbol, you can reunite us."

"I can't! I have a life here. A family. Responsibilities."

For the first time Kren let his anger show through his professional demeanor. "Responsibilities? A world in turmoil waits for you. Millions of people are lost without your guidance. The planet that gave you birth is seething with unrest, to which you can put an end. What is there on Earth that can compete with that?"

"I don't know." Eyul's confusion didn't stem merely from the penz. *Did* anything compete with all of that? Did the fact that he needed Donna, that Donna and Octavius and Jennifer and Yuli loved him, matter? "Please let me think. Come back later and I promise you I will have an answer."

The Captain swallowed his arguments and bowed and left.

KREN WAS NOT WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING FOR EYUL'S FEELINGS. HE AGREED TO LET Eyul shuttle back down to Blettenburg to say his goodbyes.

"But there is a launch window closing very soon. Please return quickly, Eldest. We will have to take off as soon as you dock." The Captain obviously didn't like giving instructions to the Eldest of Eldest, but these were special circumstances.

Eyul landed in the street in front of the Aley Inn and, within minutes, the town had assembled there with him.

He wanted to make a speech. He wanted to tell each individual what he or she meant to him. That he appreciated Louise Pelkey's soups when he was feeling under the weather. That Len Rabidoux's company on a small fishing boat out on the lake gave him comfort when he was feeling lost.

He couldn't tell Donna how much he loved her. He couldn't tell Octavius how glad he was that he was his son. He couldn't tell Yuli how sorry he was he wouldn't be around to watch her grow up. He just didn't know how to put all of that into words.

Instead he tried to explain what the Eldest meant to the Tethys. He told them what had happened and what effect it had had on the people of his planet and why he had to return there.

"I know I don't have the knowledge or experience to make things right," he said. "They need someone like Bob here, to keep order. Or someone like Larry, who's run a business. Or Dave, who's taught young people and had their respect." The trio beamed proudly. "In fact, they'd... be... perfect... for... the... job." Eyul's mouth formed a surprised O.

They didn't take much convincing. Larry was the only one with any close family living nearby, and he wasn't all that fond of his son after the little bastard had taken away his business. The idea of giving up their bar stools for the seat of power, even on another planet, appealed to them.

Eyul guessed that the plan might go over better with Kren if he didn't have much of an opportunity to say no, so he loaded Bob, Larry and Dave onto the shuttle at the last moment. They'd gotten a few belongings together and said their own goodbyes. Eyul taught them a message for the Captain phonetically. They had a long trip ahead of them to learn the language and prepare for their new jobs.

They had a few beers, on the house, and then they were gone.

"I'm glad you're home, husband," Donna said later when she and Eyul were alone.

Eyul hugged her tightly and told himself he was, too. •

*Stars are born as a fixed point  
where darkness rotates  
and coalesces in light...*

# Orion

Zoë Landale

MOONLIGHT IN MILKY SQUARES  
on the kitchen floor  
though it's morning now.  
The dog thumps her tail,  
follows me upstairs,  
an adoring red satellite  
who revolves around house and family.

Stars are born  
as a fixed point  
where darkness rotates  
and coalesces  
in light.

*(continues...)*

I try to understand  
the Trapezium, four suns  
that form stars in the nursery of Orion—  
they enlarge the nebulae  
when ultra-violet                      tickles hydrogen  
in the surrounding dark molecular cloud.  
Eventually hydrogen laughs, turns luminous,  
escapes.  
It's the old *Let there be light* trick;  
still a marvel.  
Thirty-five trillion miles of nebulae.

Outside, morning swims in, a gray horse,  
disperses the stars,  
except for a final three stragglers,  
deep in the night side.  
On the bright rag rug at the threshold  
my dog waits so I do not float out with them;  
two watchful eyes.

In Orion, Theta 1 C, brightest star in the Trapezium,  
burns so fast, sends so much hydrogen flying  
it bores a visible hole in the molecular cloud.  
I like the Bright Bar, a luminous  
shock front that eddies mysteriously out,  
a spilled river of illumination.  
Who knows, in this violent nursery,  
what the Bright Bar's message is?  
A hieroglyph, bold in its beautiful orange stroke  
against green-stirred gases, the blues and darks  
of space.  
Theta 1 C and its cohorts are the blazing anchors,  
a rectangle  
in a bowl of light.

A dense neighborhood, Orion.  
Twenty thousand times more suns  
than our Milky Way.  
Proto-suns and planets  
coalesce in disks. Gravity squeezes them,  
sets them spinning.  
The Trapezium stars blow away dust  
in a great stellar wind.

Love's tug has brought the dog  
to mutter and sleep with front paws touching  
my chair.  
The moon slips away into the west,  
morning tosses its soft nose  
the color of sky.

In Orion, light  
bubbles new star systems  
like oatmeal, thickening,  
sets the condensing suns a-whirl, first one  
and then another, seed pearls      adrift  
in the deep. •

*...I suppose that if you never have to bear the consequences of your injuries, it isn't idiocy. Just callousness...*

# Taking Pains

Julia Helen Watts

“MISSY,” SAID THE KING’S MINISTER OF HEALERS, WHO’D NEVER learned Kaiyla’s name.

Kaiyla ignored him. She had little need to feign care anymore, not after she’d watched her replacement simper on the king’s dais last night, a graceful little jewel who’d soon be Arvon’s healer-girl and queen. Northern-born, the child was, not an awkward, angry Southern foreigner too scared, too choked on rage to curtsy. Kaiyla gave the blankets a good shake, then tossed them back onto her pallet.

Arvon would make the child his queen for sure. Adelana dan Kiretha, daughter of Baron Kiretha, and just as spineless as the rest of them. With the council grumbling louder every day about a consort, for a woman’s touch to turn this kingdom full around, the time was right. The king was a fool about many things, but survival and comfort were not among them. Nor was managing his council. Kaiyla had noted, of course, that the councilors were concerned about the kingdom’s coffers. They hadn’t actually mentioned the ruthlessness with which Arvon had crushed the Southlands. Unlikely that it occurred to them.

“Missy?”

At the tone, because she hadn’t yet been tossed out on her ear, Kaiyla

looked up.

“Missy, the king needs you,” the small man repeated. Kaiyla swore under her breath. She stretched a sore arm with a grimace, wondering where the princess had spent the night. Not on a lumpy mattress, for sure. Then she followed him down the hall, through the antechambers, into the king’s bedroom.

“What has he done?” Kaiyla asked. The last time she had taken his wounds, she had been abed for several days. The mundane healers swarmed through the royal palace in droves, but no one touched the king’s healing-girl. She shrugged the bitterness away. No time now.

“A disagreement with the Lady Esmerla,” the man said obliquely.

Kaiyla grimaced. The last spat with his concubine had left Arvon with a fractured wrist that still pained her when the storms of this cursed country rose. She examined the body—a temple was already turning purple and swollen to the size of a peach pit, a deep cut across the cheek, a bruised eye. Judging by the state of his bedclothes, Kaiyla would soon be suffering from at least three broken ribs. On top of everything else, one of his legs had cracked against the bedpost in the struggle, and the knee looked badly abused.

“Lift him up,” she commanded, and two of the attendants rushed to do her bidding. The king moaned in anguish. Had Kaiyla any say, she would have recommended that Arvon either find less spirited bed companions or improve his manners. Not to mention that the Lady Esmerla be trained as an assassin.

Regardless. There would be enough time for woolgathering while she healed. She eased herself up on the bed and kneeled before the king, wrapped her arms around him, and felt her sense of the present fade. She dipped the fingers of her spirit-self into the wellspring of her own Gift, her vision careening as she stretched the boundaries of her self to include both their bodies, healing the injuries of his body by inflicting them on her own. The familiar knives of pain licked at her consciousness, leaving her sprawled on the Royal bed until the servants took her body back to her own room.

MUCH LATER, KAIYLA OPENED HER BETTER EYE GINGERLY. A KING, AT LEAST, SHOULD have better sense than to get into a fight with a concubine who could best him in her sleep. *Though I suppose that if you never have to bear the consequences of your injuries, it isn't idiocy. Just callousness.* Her head was still pounding and, as she moved slightly, a quiet moan escaped from her mouth. A soft sound in reply told her she was not alone. Kaiyla stiffened, then regretted it. She forced the muscles in her chest to relax, one by

one, as she turned her head to get a better look at the visitor.

It was the girl. Here, in the tiny little room of the king's old healer, who had obviously not been thrown out into the street the instant her replacement had taken up residence. She sighed. *I suppose that bitterness is unbecoming.*

"What are you doing, Adelana?"

The child looked startled. She couldn't have been more than fifteen. "I heard you," she began softly. "I wanted to come see—"

"—your future?" As the girl turned away, Kaiyla almost regretted the words. *Well, it's the truth.* She heard the sounds of crying and swore silently.

"Hush, child," she said. "I'm just a bitter old woman, not minding my tongue. It won't be like this for you." Kaiyla closed her eyes, forcing away the images that came unbidden. *It won't be like that. If she's the queen, they'll have to take care of her.* But she would still be the King's healer. She would still bear his wounds.

"It doesn't hurt that much," Kaiyla said, shushing the girl's offers to make the pain go away. She wouldn't thrust Arvon's carelessness on a child. "They'll care for you better than they do for me." They would, Kaiyla told herself. Adelana was beautiful, Northern-born, and noble, everything that Kaiyla was not. *Silk sheets instead of rough weave, at least.* She cursed herself, silently. *Aye, I am a bitter old woman indeed.*

"Listen Adelana, don't cry. It isn't any good." She took the girl's hand and squeezed it. "Go get me a mug of herbs from one of the healers and then get some sleep." She almost added *pray that they don't call for you*, but managed to clamp her teeth down on the words. No use in undoing everything.

A FEW DAYS AFTER, KAIYLA STRETCHED, FEELING THE MUSCLES IN HER BACK EXTEND with pleasing strength. She bound her hair back in a working knot and dressed herself in a new set of tunics, resolving to take her other clothes to the washerwoman to remove the bloodstains. As she stepped out of the little room, she nearly collided with the Minister of Health.

The little man bobbed his head anxiously as he saw her. "Good morning, missy. How are you feeling?"

"Well enough," she responded tartly.

"Good, good," he said, rubbing his hands together and then laying them self-consciously behind his back. "About the king," he began.

Her eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

The minister danced nervously. "He has the pains, missy, and it aches him terribly. So I was thinking, since you are better, that you could help



him. It hurts him, you see, and drains his strength.” He paused. “Ever since his last injuries, we have been most anxious over his health.”

“His health,” she said icily, “is fine.”

The minister looked at the Southerner curiously. “But if you took the pains—” he protested.

She regarded him with a steely look. “During the past moon, Lord Minister, I have endured no less than seven broken ribs and a head wound, with thanks to the Royal riding mount; a sword wound in the cheek, attributed to the Royal sparring partner; a scalding burn across my chest, since the Royal personage cannot properly boil water; a broken wrist, due to His Majesty’s undisclosed disagreement with the Royal concubine; a series of bruises on both shins, due to the Royal clumsiness at the banquet table; and three sets of hound bites in the posterior, thanks to His Majesty’s most honored desire to subdue untamed beasts.” She paused in the litany and decided to leave unspoken the concubine’s most recent retaliations. She met the minister’s gaze squarely. “And so, my good sir, if you cannot counsel His Most Royal Highness against catching the night breeze in his bedclothes and coming down with the pains, perhaps a fortnight of sweats and aches would prevent such occurrences in the future.”

Kaiyla stalked towards the end of the hallway. *Just one day. Is that too much to ask for? One day without His Royal Foolishness demanding something of me.* She deposited her clothes in the wash room and scurried up the servant’s stairs, not of a mind to exchange pleasantries with courtiers. Not that they expected much of her, Southblood as she was, but at least this way she could escape their patronizing eyes. *I suppose it will be a blessing to be free of this place, after all.*

She shivered and hurried up the last flight. Better not to think of it. Years ago, years that seemed so distant that her mind could scarcely call them forth from shadowed memory, she had pined for a chance to live outside these walls. But there was nothing for her outside, not anymore. She shook her head as she lit a small taper candle, replaced the glass cover, and closed the door to her room. *Now this is my sanctuary.* She curled back beneath the blankets and retrieved the worn copies of her favorite books. *Fairy tales are enough excitement now, enough thrill of beautiful freedom without the truth.*

She let the words swirl around her, allowing the story take her far from this place, a comforting, vicarious living. Beyond the room where she sat, beyond the castle in which she lived, she forgot herself and forgot her hurts, her angers, her worries. There was only the story, rich and well-worn, familiar and somehow still new.

The scream shook her from her reverie, shattering the peace she had woven around herself. Kaiyla ignored it. She tried to let the words carry her away. But then the weeping started, and realization struck her stomach with heavy certainty. She was in the hallway before she realized that she didn't know where they were keeping the girl, but a quick question to one of the servants solved her problem. She didn't bother to knock. If Adelana was awake—

*Good lord, woman, how could you let them do this to her?* She made her way to the bedside, eyes fixed on the child's face. The girl was delirious at best, deranged at worst. This was how they trained healer-girls, through fear and pain and panic, with never a thought that someone who *understood* might be of help. Kaiyla swore a curse that included Arvon, the Lord Minister, her own self, and several small gods. Then she took hold of Adelana's hand and extended a tendril of healing, wanting to wake her.

The girl's body arced, stiffening as her eyes snapped open, and she would have screamed again had her mouth not frozen. *Blight them all.* Kaiyla leaned forward and caught the girl's shoulder. "Adelana." There was no response, not until she teased the child's mind again and this time held firm. "Adelana," she repeated, her voice softer this time. "Look at me." Eventually, the eyes crept toward her face. "Put your other hand over mine." Moments later, Kaiyla felt cold fingers touch hers.

"Now listen to me," she began, every word commanding attention but low enough not to startle. Kaiyla looked back into those eyes and tried to make her voice gentle. "I am going to help you, do you understand?"

Adelana nodded, but then the shaking started. "No," Kaiyla warned, "you have to stay with me." She felt a bead of sweat trail across the side of her face and resisted the urge to wipe it away. "I've been his healing-girl for thrice over the years you've been alive. I know this."

The child let forth a soft, keening wail. "Don't hurt me."

Kaiyla's intake of breath was sharp. "Of course I won't hurt you."

*Good lord Kaiyla, don't get attached. This is your replacement, the one who is throwing you out into the street. Try to maintain some perspective.* But it was no good. "Adelana, listen. I want you to watch what I do, to understand, so that when I'm gone—"

She made herself go on. "—so that you'll know what to do." She forced those frightened eyes to see her. "So you can control it." The Trainer of Healers might have mentioned this to his newest charge had he cared to recall that healer-girls did not come to their post with a deep working knowledge of their Gift.

She tried to put it into words, then, the feeling of her self within

another body, the stretching and reaching of her spirit, the tingling sensation of contact, warm, then cool as her perspective shifted and twisted—that was the wonder of the Gift. And the fear.

“Please,” Adelana breathed, “don’t hurt me.”

*Blight you, Arvon. A thousand times.* “I won’t.” Kaiyla lay down and held the child close, feeling the cold flesh stiffen. It was like trying to heal the dead. The very land itself, with all the murders it had borne, might have been gentler in her arms. Kaiyla shivered. Then she let her spirit-self sink down out of her body, a tendril traveling through the bed, through the floor, through the rest of the palace, through the ground, and then tying itself to the very core, curling there and holding her steady. Another tendril lashed around her own body as a life-line home. The rest of her spirit-self was ready, waiting.

“At least breathe,” she told Adelana. “Don’t be scared.” Then quickly, she let her spirit-self settle inside the girl. Kaiyla’s vision shimmered and twisted as the boundaries of her self extended to include Adelana, permeating the flesh, sinking deep.

Kaiyla saw both the young woman’s body and her own older body inside her now, felt the ripple of otherness like a wave of prickles catching her mind, passing through her skin. The blend of color, shape, and texture was rich, a splash of red purple that she could taste, overlaid with grays and yellows, greens, a pulsing scarlet. Every time the colors were new. The emotion that overlaid the hue changed each color, brought a new vision with each glimpse. Perhaps that was the allure of healing. Despite the pain, it was so very beautiful.

“Now,” Kaiyla said, “to take away the hurt I am going to let my spirit-self feel more like it belongs to your body. Since your spirit-self is there, I am going to ask you to move aside—”

“How?” came the frantic voice.

“Easy, child.” Kaiyla’s voice was soothing. “Here, let me help—” She guided Adelana upward, Kaiyla’s spirit-fingers like wind that rose toward the sky. Snatches of thought passed through her. *Like floating. Letting everything be so light that it could fly away. Fly. Yes.*

“—good. Be careful, now. Leave a bit of your self behind so that you don’t get lost.”

*Visit Kaiyla. Fly. Free. I could.*

A sudden shiver passed through Kaiyla at the child’s words. She shook herself slightly. Time to focus on the healing at hand. “Now my spirit-self is in your body, taking away the hurt from what is you and drawing it back to what is Kaiyla. I wrap it in a little ball of spirit and tell your body not to be afraid and not to grieve for what it has lost. What I have taken is

only hurt and pain, and it does not need to remember the wounds. Do you see?"

"Yes." The voice was full of awe.

"Now I let my spirit-self brush over your body once, saying goodbye and letting it forget. Take your self and bring it back home, like this." She helped Adelana guide her self back to her body, felt the child stiffen—

*Don't want to. Free.*

"Time to go back," Kaiyla said firmly. "There is no hurt there now." Once Adelana had returned, Kaiyla let her own self return to the body, recalling the tendrils of spirit she had used as a guide and anchor, gently releasing the bundle of pain and letting the hurt seep through her body. For a moment she fought it instinctively; she made herself relax, taking it in. She stretched each of her muscles slowly, letting the hurt she had taken find its place and letting her body accept the newness of it all. *Yes, the pains. Just a fire in the muscles and a shivering. Hurts a little, but it will pass soon.* She could hear Adelana crying, but the sound was far away. There was more hurt. She could feel now what her eyes hadn't seen. Not just the pains from Arvon, but something else. *Oh good lord—*

She pushed the pain away and turned to Adelana, trying to see clearly. "He hurt you, didn't he? He lay with you." *While she had healed him.* Kaiyla shook with fury and grief. Her arms were close around the girl's body again, comforting her weeping, murmuring soft things that streamed from her mouth without form. *Just a child.* Her own eyes were damp, her body protesting. She paid it no mind.

"I didn't want to—"

Her voice was choked, again. "Of course not, Adelana. Of course not." Something deep inside her froze, cold and terrible, something that wanted Arvon cursed with such ferocity that she would have given her own life and soul to do it.

"Kaiyla," she sobbed, "they're going to make me his queen."

"Oh child," she whispered. There was nothing she could say to make the misery abate. This was a pain she could not touch, a hurt she could not heal. She could not even tell her it would never happen again. *How convenient, Arvon.* Her limbs were numb and her head was spinning. There was nothing she could do.

Arvon had seen the threat to his power, to his precious domain of control and then found a way to neutralize it. *Just like you did with the Southlands. Crushed my people and took what you wanted, then left the rest for dead or worse.* That the Southerners had been strong enough to put their country back together again, to gather the scattered survivors, to mourn their dead, and to move on from destruction, was little of Arvon's concern. He

had what he wanted. *And he had me. Raging, furious, but with that rare and precious healing gift intact.* How easy it must have been. *Drugged and brutalized at first, until my hate seethed away beneath powerlessness, and I learned it was better just to do what he wanted.* It was the same game. Arvon always took whatever he pleased and then did whatever he must to keep it. *And blight the innocents who get in the way.* She kept murmuring soft words to Adelana and let her weep. She held the child close, wishing she had better solace to offer. *Blight anyone who gets in your way.*

KAIYLA LISTENED TO THE SOUNDS OF WEDDING PREPARATIONS IN SILENT MISERY. Tomorrow the girl would become Arvon's bride, and tomorrow Kaiyla would be sent away. Kaiyla had tried to teach her, tried to comfort her. She had tried to explain the importance of the consort's position, tried to impart bits of wisdom and palace politics, but it was no use. Already Adelana had learned that it was better not to disagree.

"Kaiyla?" The old woman looked up, shaken out of her reverie by Adelana's voice. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. She had taken Arvon's wounds again today against the wishes of the Lord Minister. He had wanted Adelana to do it, but Kaiyla reminded him pointedly of the wedding. It wasn't bad. A wound to the knee, which might make walking uncomfortable, but the day would be difficult regardless. Physical pain was almost be a relief.

The small voice tugged again at her thoughts. "Kaiyla, don't you *want* to leave?"

She made a harsh sound. "Once," she said. "For so many years, I dreamed of nothing else. I would have given anything to be free, to never have to endure his presence." She wiped her eyes, roughly. "Now, child, I'm frightened of it." It was a dream once, treasured and precious, but faded now. "I want sanctuary, not adventure."

Adelana's eyes were wide, trying to make sense of Kaiyla's words. *Hard to believe, Kaiyla thought, but true.* She took a sip of the healing draught Adelana had brought for her. She had left it alone before, not wanting to fall asleep, but her knee was beginning to pain her. Perhaps if she nursed it long enough, the sleep would come slowly.

"Do you hate him?" Adelana asked, out of nowhere.

Kaiyla let the breath rush through her teeth in a hiss. "Enough that I will never be afraid of him. Enough that I want vengeance I will never get." She took another swig from her mug and felt the maze of weariness coming on. *Ah well, I never liked goodbyes anyway.*

"Kaiyla, could I—" Her voice broke off, as though she were going to say something and thought better of it. Then she drew herself up and

smiled. "Could I heal your knee?"

"Adelana, don't."

The child's eyes flashed with hurt. "But I want to, Kaiyla. To thank you!" She choked on the words. "You've got all that way to walk, and all I have to do is walk down an aisle, and—" She was sobbing in earnest now, and Kaiyla, trying to hush her, finally consented.

She let Adelana cradle her body, as she had done for the girl, felt the child's spirit-self extend and engulf her. She felt her head swimming and wondered if it was the result of the healing or herbs. Snatches of thought, patternless, were running through her mind, and then Adelana's voice came through the foggy maze, clear and precise.

"Kaiyla, will you take your spirit-self and hold on to my body?" She could feel the child's fear, remembered that this was the first time she had done a healing since Arvon's. "I don't want to feel my body without anyone in it."

"Careful, Adelana." It was hard to phrase the thoughts with the weariness threatening to sweep away her consciousness.

"I will. Just please. I don't want to be scared."

Kaiyla did as she asked, but a worry she couldn't place gnawed in the pit of her stomach. She watched the colors of the healing layer one over the other, enveloping her, washing over her mind, and numbing her fears. It was a strange feeling. No one had ever healed her. Her thoughts fogged. She clung to Adelana's body, trusting that she had taught her well.

*Good night, Kaiyla. Goodbye,* she heard, just at the edge of awareness, so very far away. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, but the weariness was taking over. She felt her vision turn to murky blackness and tried to fight the exhaustion, but in the end, the healing and the herbs carried her into sleep.

Kaiyla woke the next morning to find someone shaking her insistently. *Now they will throw me out.* The realization didn't even manage to shock her into feeling.

"M'lady, you must dress."

Good lord, politeness now?

M'lady?

Dress?

*Oh good lord—*

Her body was not right. She stretched carefully, moved it gently. It was hers, and it was not. "The wedding," she whispered. The woman at her side laughed, a sound that shook a whirlwind of thoughts free in her

mind. Her body was young. Adelana's. *Good lord.* It was young. The sensation startled her at first, then settled over her like a numbness and thankfulness that enlivened her and terrified her all at once.

"M'lady, I will help you dress, but you must get up."

Yes. Get up. Put on that blue monstrosity of a dress. *Blue. To match her eyes.* She made it out of bed. *Are my eyes blue?* Her vision spun, threatening to make her sick. But the woman was helping her, helping her stand. Taking off her clothes. Getting the dress.

*The body is so young. How could she give this up?* Kaiyla leaned against the wall for a moment and closed her eyes briefly, trying to pull comprehension from the muddled confusion of her mind. A deep shame and unworthiness threatened to squelch her breathing but from another corner of her mind came a perverse laughter at Adelana's own fulfillment of her wish.

"Are you all right, M'lady?"

"I'm all right, Mayrie."

"Just a little nervous, aren't you, poor thing?" the woman continued, chattering on in that vein. Kaiyla barely heard. The woman's name was Mayrie dan Layfaire. She was the daughter of a Northern baron, second cousin to the king. Names, provinces, family trees unfolded in her mind. Kaiyla had never known that, never understood the intricacies of Arvon's court. Now she could produce a wellspring of useless facts about this woman, who she had never before met.

She had Adelana's memories. *Good lord.* She searched her mind for a moment and reassured herself that her own memories were still intact. Then the transfer had not taken hers away, and Adelana must have kept her own as well. *She just switched our selves. That's why she wanted me to sit in her body.* The simplicity of the girl's actions stunned her. Of course it couldn't have been done unless both of them had had the healing gift, if both of them hadn't been familiar with the workings of the spirit-self and the expanding and contracting of self.

Mayrie had moved on to her hair, keeping up a cheerful conversation and hardly noticing that Kaiyla barely spoke. Kaiyla discovered that when she veiled herself in Adelana's memories, the voice that came from her lips was Adelana's, a light Northern tongue that was nothing like her own. Strange, that. She puzzled over it for a long time, long enough that she was being shepherded downstairs.

*Good lord, I don't know what to do at a formal court wedding! I don't—* She forced herself to be calm. She would do what she always did—pay enough mind to her surroundings to look as though she cared and remain shrouded in her own thoughts. Only this time, it would be Adelana's thoughts.

The girl's memories carried her through the charade of preparations, through the waiting, the ceremony itself, even the entire court chamber filled to bursting. She actually welcomed the endlessness of the ceremony for the chance it gave her to get her bearings. *There is still a small tendril of her self here. She left it—like I taught her*

She said the vows, still wrapped in her reverie. She became his wife, his consort, his queen. Arvon kissed her and she let him. This was her victory. Her victory. Adelana had asked if she hated him and what had she answered? *"Enough that I will never be afraid of him. Enough that I want vengeance I will never get."*

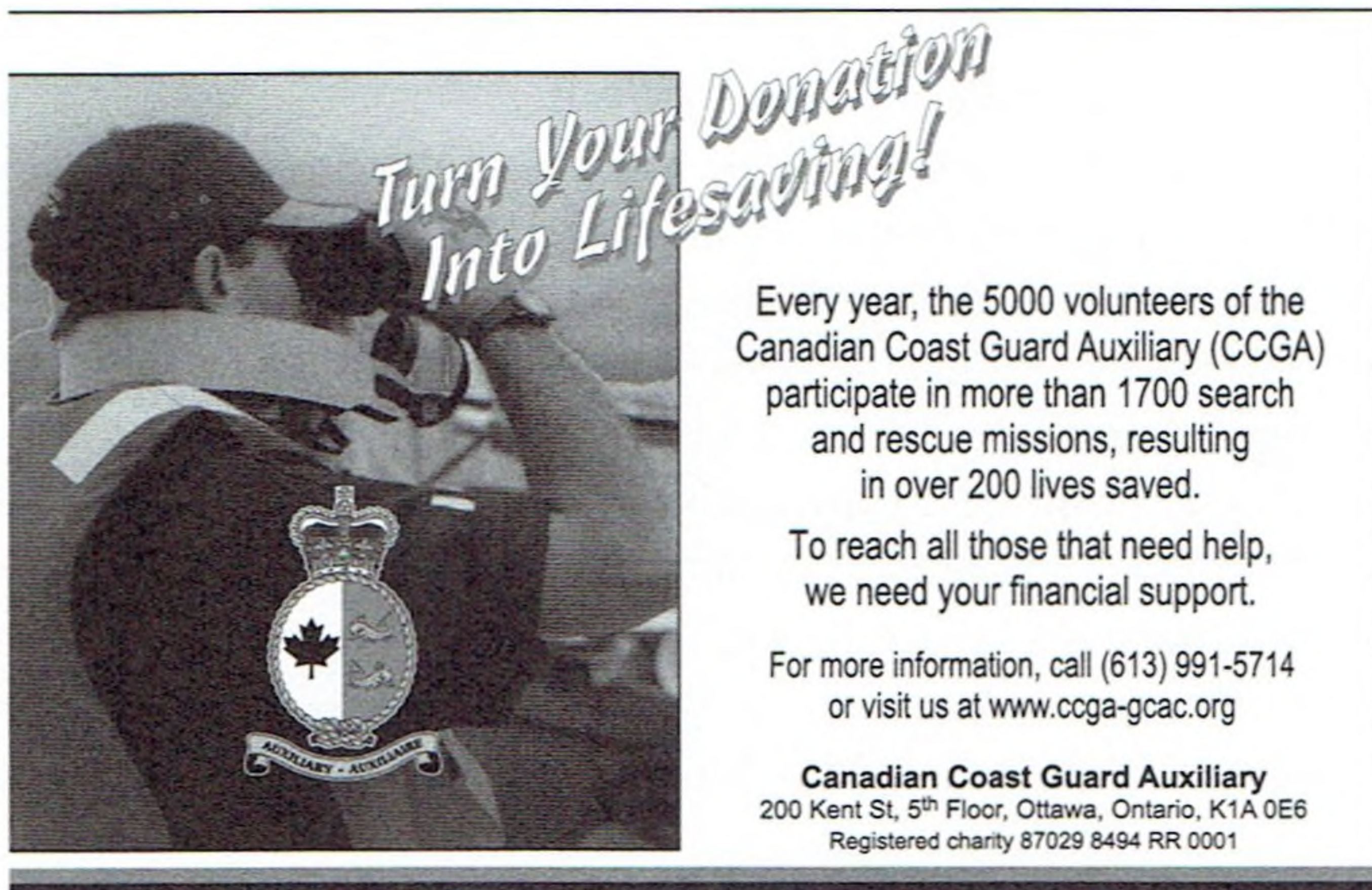
Arvon lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the court chamber towards the bedroom. The sweet Northern voice had consented to their union. She was his queen. He lay her on the bed, away from the people, away from the court, away from the witnesses.

"My dearest," he said in the rich voice that she hated, the rich voice that had ordered the murder of her people, brought the destruction of so much. "Now you are my queen and it shall all be as you wish."

She breathed in the sweetness. "As I wish?" she asked, in that beautiful voice of the North that would bring her some justice at last.

"Of course, my dearest. You are my queen."

Kaiyla met Arvon's eyes and then she smiled. *Oh Adelana, I will take pains to use this Gift well.* "As I wish," she whispered. •



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*Julia Sinstadt had proved death was avoidable but she was still struggling a little with the taxes...*

# Death, Taxes, and Mackerel

Karen Traviss

DEATH WASN'T ALL IT WAS CRACKED UP TO BE FOR JULIA.

THE FIRST THING SHE SAW WHEN SHE OPENED HER EYES WAS AN UNIMAGINATIVE bouquet on the table at her hospital bedside. Yellow chrysanthemums: God, she really hated chrysanthemums and their musty wet scent. She made a grab for the small card propped against the vase, and missed. A nurse rushed in to her field of vision.

"The card," Julia said, still hoarse from revival. Chrysanthemums had been banned from the house when she was a girl: her mother claimed they were bad luck, funeral flowers. "Who sent that?"

"The International Revenue, ma'am," said the nurse. "Shall I read the card? It says, *Nice try, welcome back, love from all at District 6A, Appeal Court ruled you were temporarily non-resident, not dead.*"

"Bastards," said Julia.

JULIA SINSTADT HAD PROVED DEATH WAS AVOIDABLE BUT SHE WAS STILL STRUGGLING a little with the taxes. Her fight with taxation was the last frontier in a

long life built on winning battles. She won at business and she won in the divorce courts and she won on property deals, and she went on winning until the winning was all that she had left. She was 120. She wanted to win the last game of all.

“You have to view it like joy-riding,” said the taxation lawyer. He was Gascoyne, or Hatton or King: she had trouble caring which of the firm’s partners he was. She settled on Hatton. “For example, taking a car isn’t the same as stealing it. In law, the prosecution has to prove you intended to permanently deprive the owner of their vehicle, or you’re just a joy-rider. So if you want to take advantage of the tax benefits in death, you can’t intend to resurrect yourself. You have to mean to be really, really dead. That’s the legal argument they used on appeal.”

“Then,” said Julia Sinstadt, “find another way to get round the International Revenue.” She smoothed her well-kept hands down her well-cut suit. Age didn’t excuse a sloppy appearance: she was sharp and chic. “I will *not* have my money go to the government. I’ll decide where it’s spent—every last penny.”

Cryo-suspension had been her accountant’s idea. Die intestate by your own hand, chill down for four months, then come back to life before the deadline and claim the estate before it went to the government. Only beneficiaries had to pay inheritance tax. You couldn’t inherit from yourself, so you didn’t pay a penny. It was a test case.

And, medically, Julia really had been dead: no cardiac, respiratory or higher brain activity had been detectable. But she hadn’t been dead enough for the taxman.

“They did allow you a small rebate, though,” said Hatton.

They were getting sharp, the International Revenue. But she would be sharper.

HATTON HAD ASSEMBLED A RETINUE OF SCIENTISTS AND TECHNICIANS, EACH WITH a novel idea to get round a stranglehold-tight universal tax system on Julia’s behalf. Their ingenuity bordered on the fantastic.

“If you’re prepared to risk it, we can get you off the planet, whiz you a few light years away at 90 per cent of light speed and bring you back,” he said, performing rough calculations as he talked. “Time dilation means you’ll be a year older but a hundred years will have passed on Earth, you can qualify for full non-residency, your investments will have grown fantastically, and—”

Julia fixed him with an unemotional eye. “Financial regulations might be even harsher next century. My stock might have plummeted. And besides, you won’t be around for me to sue the pants off you if anything

goes wrong.”

“Okay.” He tapped up another bright idea from the inlaid surface of his desk. “There’s this chap who has a genetically-enhanced dolphin. It’s currently bringing a test case in the courts to prove it’s smart enough to be classed as a minor in law.”

He switched the video playback from his desk-top onto the display wall, where a sleek and shiny bottle-nose suddenly arched out of a pool. A technician held out an extra-large keypad and the dolphin tapped diligently with its beak. *I’m as smart as you, chimp-face* flashed up on a panel, one letter at a time.

Hatton beamed. “If the dolphin’s action is successful, you can give it your fortune on paper and then it can give you it all back as a gift. Gifts from minors don’t attract tax.”

“What if it’s smart enough to keep it all?” Julia asked.

“What’s it going to spend it on, mackerel?”

“Not being able to *spend* it all doesn’t mean you don’t *want* it all.” She leaned forward, her suspicion honed by years of wrangling with the legal profession. “And is it a client of yours, by the way?”

He froze for just the merest split of a second.

“Yes,” he said. “There’s nothing in the bar association rules precluding it—”

“Next,” Julia said.

The ideas went on. They were mostly crazy or dangerous or both. Julia found she had started to chip away the real platinum polish on her manicured thumb-nail in frustration.

“Is that the best you can do for the retainer I pay you?” she asked.

“Well, there’s always cloning,” said the lawyer. “I know it takes a few years to grow an adult body—and it’s only legal in Paraguay—but it’s worth a look.”

Julia was nothing if not thorough. She hadn’t made billions by ignoring possibilities. She had imagined a few brief years on her retirement atoll savoring her greatest defeat of authority before finally accepting the time’s impersonal victory over her. Cheating death on a grander scale had not been part of the plan. It intrigued her. “Go on.”

“We create a clone from you and you give her—yourself—your cash as a gift. Provided we do it a year before you die, no gift or inheritance tax is payable. The clone needs to have only a few genetic differences from your own genome to make her a separate person in law. If it’s a straight cloning job, you’re back with the problem of not really being seriously dead, you see.”

Julia had died before. She had faced that moment when she pressed

the button to administer the drugs and the bright beam of light drew her in. She knew what lay on at least one of its many sides. And, at 120, she was a little less afraid of it than she had imagined she could be. Death for her was now an administrative detail like registering patents.

“I’ll take it,” she said. “Can I be a blonde this time round?”

THE TECHNICIANS AND GENETICISTS, WHO DIDN’T COME ANY CHEAPER THAN THE lawyers, explained to her how the process was almost foolproof. They spoke to her of accelerated growth and memory transfers and other ways to create a new Julia Sinstadt. They also told her they put her current life expectancy at two years. It was a good and wise time to start cloning.

Just to ensure the law didn’t get too picky, they gave Julia II an assortment of distinctive but trivial single-gene variations, including the ability to curl her tongue lengthways—as well as blonde hair.

“And narrower hips,” said Julia the Original. “If we’re going to make me different, let’s do it right.”

“I can’t see how that’ll do any harm,” said the geneticist. “We don’t always know how altering some clusters of genes will affect others, but if you don’t like the result we can always wipe the board clean and start again, if you know what I mean. Before the memory transfer.”

“Will I have to go through childhood again?”

“No, we skip that.”

“And I can stay sedated so I don’t have to meet me, can’t I? I don’t think I could cope with that.”

“You can afford to have anything you want done, Ms. Sinstadt.”

“Then take it away, professor,” said Julia, and laughed.

They promised her that she wouldn’t dream during the process. But somewhere in the not-quite-waking stages, she—or one of her, she thought—began seeing dolphins.

JULIA II GREW RAPIDLY INTO BLONDE AND PERFECT HEALTH INSIDE FOUR YEARS, AND inherited a hundred billion and a lifetime of second-hand memories. She didn’t go to see herself held on life support, and she didn’t attend her own funeral. She had been 123 when the nursing home finally ended life support and now she was more or less 35. She had liked being 35 before.

One trait that had survived intact was a briskly competitive attitude towards the International Revenue: theirs didn’t seem to have diminished with time either. This time they were challenging the use of non-medical cloning with prior intent to avoid lawful taxation.

It was worth their while: she was big revenue to them if they could pin

her down. They were not about to give up. And neither was she.

She hired more of the brightest and most bloody-minded lawyers to support Hatton, who was not getting any younger. It was the sort of battle which normally got her adrenaline pumping and swept everything else from the table.

But not this time.

Things felt somehow different, like tasting a favorite childhood treat in later life and wondering what had happened to the flavor. She took a soul-searching trip to Tibet and came back laden with souvenir prayer-flags and model temples.

“For you,” she said, and dumped a carrier bag marked I LOVE LHASA on Hatton’s desk. “That’s the first holiday I’ve had in twenty years in either body. God, it’s so touristy there now. Have you been?”

He appeared to duck the question. “You’ve changed, Ms. Sinstadt.”

“Yes, I’m a blonde. I’m supposed to have more fun.” She considered the recurring dreams of a frustrated intellectual dolphin, and the nagging urge to give money away to good causes. “I’m getting generous to charity even without the tax breaks. Do you think it’s something to do with the cloning?”

THE GENETICIST SHOWED JULIA THE RESULTS OF TEST AFTER TEST. “YOU’RE NOT sick, Ms. Sinstadt.”

“I didn’t think I was. I just wondered how much I changed in the process.”

“Well, some altruistic behavior in organisms is related to distinct genes, just as some genes predispose to violence. But we did warn you we couldn’t predict the expression of every single gene before you signed the waiver. It’s not like you grew an extra leg or anything.”

“No, you’re right,” she said, and was amazed she felt no hunger for litigation. “Do you think we could patent that gene cluster and sell it to law enforcement agencies?”

“Somebody already has,” he said. “And as soon as we settle the legal arguments against using it, I’m sure it’ll be a boon to mankind.”

That night, she dreamed of the dolphin again. He was a highly intrusive dolphin considering she had only seen him once in a video.

HATTON POINTED OUT TO HER AT THEIR MONTHLY CONFERENCE THAT SHE HAD given away more to good causes that month than she would have paid in tax.

“I know,” Julia II said. “I can’t help it. It just seemed so—necessary. Look, what happened to that dolphin you represented? The one with the

status case?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I keep dreaming about the damn thing. And I never even saw him. Is he still around? It’s just something I want to explore. Indulge me.”

“I’ll get my secretary to look him up,” said Hatton.

She dreamed of the dolphin again that night. Usually he appeared in inappropriate places in her dreams: she would be standing in her office, and turn to see her carpet rippling like water and the dolphin rising from it in an arc of foam. He would emerge from cupboards, from parted grass, from between curtains. He seemed to spend a lot of time out of water. He broke all the dolphin rules. He was not the cute, squeaking friend of mankind: he was a wild dolphin, smart and savage, fighting in gangs and brokering alliances.

When she woke, the dream was still vivid. She wrote it down and saved the details for later study. What was she telling herself? She pondered and wondered for a few days, and then gave up and rang a therapist.

“The dolphin is your creative side,” said the therapist, at \$1,000 a half hour. “He is telling you that you can solve your conflicts through unconventional routes. He is telling you that you that you must use your inner dolphin.”

“Really?” she said, and although \$1,000 was small change to her she made a note to cancel the fool’s contract. Her limo took her back to her office and as she watched the silenced press of people she swept past, a thought struck her.

It wasn’t the inner dolphin who would give her a creative solution to her feud with the taxman. It was the outer one. The *real* one.

JULIA II SAT DRINKING JUICE AT AN OPEN-AIR BAR IN A SEASIDE RESORT WATCHING kids frolicking in the shallows. In the mid-distance, she saw a fin slicing through the water and for an instant she pictured screaming carnage. But it was just a dolphin. She watched it swim up to the small pier nearby. It whacked a bell with its beak and brought the bar owner running with a bucket of mackerel.

“Go on, get out,” he yelled. “That’s the fifth bucket today. No show, no tips, okay?” As he passed Julia, he paused, looking a little embarrassed. “I know he’s cute, but he’s really unreliable. Doesn’t always show up, you know? He used to do quizzes.”

“Quizzes?”

“He spells on that big keyboard thing over there.”

At the end of the owner’s pointing arm was indeed an oversize keyboard, lashed to one leg of the pier. Julia followed the rest of the gesture

to a display board, encrusted with seagull droppings. “Thanks,” she said. “Can I call him?”

“Sure. Here, you might need this keypad for him to understand some of the complex stuff. Make sure you’ve got a mackerel with you. He don’t do nothin’ without gettin’ paid.”

Julia sat on the edge of the pier and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hey! Over here!” The sea broke and foamed and a blue-gray polished dome rose from it in an arc that jogged something way back in a memory. She had a sudden and overwhelming urge to donate all her money to charity.

“It’s you,” she said to the dolphin. “The enhanced dolphin. The court case. Archie?”

The dolphin flipped to the oversize keyboard and tapped furiously.

*Damn useless shysters*

“Yes, he’s my lawyer too,” she said. “But you won the case.”

*Yes but no more free fish. They can’t keep a sentient being in captivity. Gotta work.*

“The price of freedom, eh?”

*I prefer mackerel. Looking for an accountant? I’m good with figures.*

“Maybe not, but I might have an attractive offer for you. How would you like to head up an educational foundation for non-human citizens?”

*What’s in it for me?*

“Mackerel, a secure home, that sort of thing.”

*And you?*

“Winning. I want to win.”

*Let’s talk,* said Archie, in a shimmering sequence of LEDs. *Who are we fighting?*

“Do you feel oppressed? Do you think you’re being discriminated against because you’re of cetacean extraction?”

*They never let you forget it.*

“And you would like the barriers that prevent you from achieving your full potential to be removed?”

*I have a right to my cultural diversity. Is that a mackerel you have there?*

“Indeed it is, Archie,” she said, and lobbed it towards him. “I think we have the makings of a deal.”

THE BEST THING ABOUT NON-CRIMINAL COURT ACTIONS WAS THAT YOU COULD conduct them by video-link. Julia was happy. She had no money to her name, on paper at least, and she felt good. She was at her financial adviser’s side, by the pool with a pile of shrimp, and watching the proceedings.

The International Revenue's counsel was on his feet a hundred kilometers away and wearing the expression of a man who was losing his case and didn't think it was fair.

"I submit, your honor, that the status of the director of a company is irrelevant," said counsel. "It's the organization that is liable. The director has a duty in law to accept the prevailing customs of the business world and pay his taxes in the appropriate manner."

The image split. Counsel for the Cetacean Advancement Foundation stood up in another remote office.

"Your honor, insisting on payment in the human fashion offends my client's cultural and ethnic values. But he is more than willing to pay." Julia thought the lawyer was laying the equality stuff on a tad too thickly. "My client—Mr. Bottlenose, as he prefers to be called—has achieved accountancy success through his own efforts and the generous support of the Foundation, which I would remind you is the recipient of Julia Sinstadt II's entire fortune. He wishes to make the tax payment and claim the reduced rate for educational organizations."

"Oh well, if payment has been offered, then I find for the defendant," the judge said. "Mr. Bottlenose may make arrangements to pay sums due to the International Revenue in a manner appropriate to his, er, ethnicity."

"We intend to appeal," said the International Revenue's counsel.

The judge was halfway out of his seat and looked irked to be interrupted in mid-flight. "I wouldn't be of a mind to grant leave for further appeal unless there's new evidence. You might want to think about that before filing those papers." The judge pressed the button on his console and the judgement was downloaded simultaneously to all parties. "Court is now dismissed."

Poolside, Julia applauded and Archie Bottlenose executed a series of triumphant leaps from the water, chittering wildly.

*Way to go,* he typed.

She switched off the video link. "So how do you want to pay?" she asked him.

*Mackerel. A nice big pile of mackerel. Have it delivered to their office.*

"That's my boy," Julia II beamed, and lobbed a cupful of shrimp into the pool.

AFTER THE ELATION OF THE MACKEREL RULING, JULIA EXPERIENCED A SENSE OF disappointing peace: all her giants were slain. She stood on the white sand of her atoll and stared out into the hard bright turquoise horizon, longing for the boardroom.

"Now I'm really dead," she said aloud.



And she was. Without her company and her battles, she might as well have traded places with her decomposed self. Her goal had been the journey. The destination was a pretty dull place to spend another seventy years.

Archie, busy with accounts, was in his office pool, tapping at his over-size calculator. Julia sat down on the mosaic edge and dangled her feet in the water.

*Be bored somewhere else, doll.*

“Sorry, Archie. Is it that obvious?”

*You rust quicker than you wear out. Gotta stay busy.*

The empty day stretched before her. She could hear the *fut-fut-fut* of a small boat in the distance, reminding her that everyone but her had a job to do. “Maybe I could start over,” she said.

*Yeah. Great idea. Now I’ve lost my place and I’ve got to start this again.*

She took the hint. She walked back down the beach to the jetty. The tang of the sea was a little tangier then, and she thought for a moment that the tide was a long way out: but no, she was on the atoll, and the tide didn’t drop that far. She sniffed the air and walked on.

*Fut-fut-fut.* It was louder now.

The small boat chugged past the end of the jetty and swung round to tie up. She thought it was supplies. She ran to the end of the planking and stared down at the boat, which was towing a smaller tender.

It stank to high heaven and beyond. She stared at the pile of ripe mackerel. The skipper—a frowning man with a handkerchief knotted over his nose and mouth—silently handed her a delivery note, swung a line onto the pier, secured the tender and then cast off again even before she had opened the envelope.

It was from the International Revenue. The note said they were pleased to be able to forward Mr A. Bottlenose’s rebate for the previous tax year.

Julia stared at the pile of rotting fish and felt her throat tighten. Her mouth began to fill with unwanted saliva. She was angry and upset and close to vomiting.

But slowly, very slowly, a grin made its way across her face.

Now she had something to live for again. •

*When I slept, I dreamed myself cresting  
a black tide of clerks and judges, Mr.  
Crowe standing firm as we crashed  
down upon him...*

# **A Stone for Mr. Crowe**

James Allison

THE RAIN WILL ALWAYS MAKE ME THINK OF MR. CROWE. ONE would think that it would clean things, purify them. Instead, it uncovers old wounds, bringing to the surface things best left buried.

Nature's fouled design.

Our Procurator is gathering the last of his personal effects from his desk. He's preparing to leave us, to depart this sorry, mud-slicked moon. The rain on our office window might be applause, or it might be a funeral volley. Either way, there's no charm to it.

He'll be missed, no question. We all thought him a good man. Perhaps not "good"—"politic" is better. "Charitable" would be better yet but he fell before that hurdle. Hindsight is a cruel harpy.

For myself, I'm simply a notary. A small man, you might say; a man raised above the primordial soil by grace of a neatly printed letterhead. There lies my absolution.

Our Procurator, unfortunately, has no such refuge. To see him now, one would think him beyond commune. He is as gray as stone, a golem official. He tidies his desk slowly, with boulder hands, his suit crumpling

like disturbed subterranean strata. The small round eyeglasses are calcite blinds, obscuring the soul beneath. When he clears his throat, as he does now, with a small *harrumph*, it means “business is finished.”

Storm clouds billow outside. I see Mr. Crowe’s face in all of them.

I recall the first time we encountered him. The Procurator had just concluded a lengthy judgment on a divorce settlement and Mr. Crowe’s case was next. The Procurator was irritable; I could tell by the rapid flick of his jeweled wrists. Mr. Crowe sat in the outside corridor awaiting his call. I remember him as he entered; it was as if all hope had been sucked from within him and his skin had vacuumed inward to fill the loss. He walked unsteadily, his long fingers nervously maneuvering a frayed blue cap. He was tall, and I thought at first there might have been a slight stoop. But of course, he bore the weight of the world.

When he approached the Procurator’s desk he paused, unsure of his place, and I signaled for him to be seated, while the rain outside chattered like a legion of stenographers.

The Procurator held his silence for a moment, the desk monitor’s glow making neon of his skin. “My sincere condolences, Mr. Crowe. A terrible and tragic accident. If this office can assist in any way?”

“I’d like a place for my wife. A grave. A plaque with names. To remember her by.” Mr. Crowe’s voice sounded dry. Too much dust and crying, one supposed.

Our Procurator sighed, a weary exhumation of dead air. “Mr. Crowe, you’re aware of our statutes, I’m sure. I’ve no doubt your wife was a very dear lady but she was not an eminent citizen. Unfortunately, by the criteria I must bring to bear, she was not “of note.””

I remember how steady Mr. Crowe’s voice was, how instant his reply. “She was my wife. She kept my house. She was of note to me.”

He had pride. It hummed about him like an energy.

We already knew the story. Everybody did. News of the event had been broadcast throughout the station. His spouse had been working in the reservoirs of the primary drill cores when the accident had happened. Every awful detail had been relayed; how the drills had unexpectedly spun in their mountings, churning the black oil that Ishael Crowe bobbed upon in her small craft. She’d been dredging strips of scored metal, drawing the scrap into her vessel with pneumatic clamps, and it had only taken a quick whirl of gears for the life to be threshed from her. We had all endured the same shameful thought on hearing of it: *How glad I am that this terrible thing did not happen to one of my own.*

Nobody could find her husband when it had happened. He’d been working inside the stamping mill doing maintenance work on one of the

conveyor engines. Only later had he learned of his loss, whereupon he'd gone immediately to the dredge tanks, hunched down and waited. Over six hours he'd stayed there. Beyond hope. Beyond miracles.

Our Procurator is well versed in matters of diplomacy, and so he was able to clothe his denial with some garb of decency. "I understand your feelings. But you appreciate the reasons: we grant one memorial and we must grant them all. Space is at a premium here, Mr. Crowe. Practicality denies us the luxury of remembrance."

A politic man.

Mr. Crowe remained implacable. "We've remembered others. Made spaces before."

"My apologies. I can't authorize it. *Harrumph.*"

Mr. Crowe made no move to leave. Instead, he leaned closer to our Procurator, as if to give weight to his words. "I want a tribunal. I'll challenge your judgment."

"That is your right, of course. My notary will help you prepare the documents."

Mr. Crowe placed his cap defiantly upon his head, as if the garment's purpose had just occurred to him. Perhaps there was a slight tremor as he rose. He'd already turned to leave when the Procurator called his attention once more.

"A small matter, Mr. Crowe. You said 'names' on the plaque?"

"My wife was five months pregnant. She carried our son."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Mr. Crowe closed the door quietly behind him.

I looked at our Procurator, examining the features of his face, the incline of his frame, for any regret.

"A sad business," I said.

"Indeed. He'll lose the judgment." The Procurator tapped his keyboard for the next file, the screen shifting its cold hue to his jowls. Compassionless men are strongest. I'd always thought so.

Delivering the petition documents was my responsibility. Mr. Crowe was out on the surface at the time, working on one of the drill housings. He seemed no more significant than the rest of the workers that milled about the bases of the huge cylinders, scuttling and inspecting like drones born of the mud, their weather coat wings flapping in the rain.

I watched him as he operated with blackened fingers. He'd caressed his wife's belly with those hands, touched the pulse of his child's heart. How small, by comparison, the creation that he cared for now. It stretched upwards like a crooked monument, doomed to skewer into the mud.

As I offered him the papers, he looked up at me, his eyes red and

watered. I was somewhat taken aback that a man should wear his grief so publicly. “Your application,” I said. “You’ll need to sign it.”

He took the documents and nodded. I waited but he said nothing.

“You’ll need to return the papers after you’ve signed,” I told him. “That’s all there is.”

He had no questions for me so I left him to labor on amongst the cacophony of whining gears.

I thought of him the same evening, lay awake in my bed even. I have no wife, you see. I have no one beside me to ask, “Is something wrong?” or “Are you troubled?” I’d always believed my heart to be a good engine, red and sturdy; I’d never wished it a thing of glass like Mr. Crowe’s, to be easily looked into.

When I slept, I dreamed myself cresting a black tide of clerks and judges, Mr. Crowe standing firm as we crashed down upon him. Even as we eddied around his waist he remained solid, a noble impediment to the flow.

I wondered where he drew his strength.

THE TRIBUNAL WAS CONVENED WITHIN TWO WEEKS OF THE APPLICATION. I accompanied the Procurator to the hearing. We sat on the benches to the left while the Adjudicates took center stage on a raised plinth. Mr. Crowe was seated to the right, a tall man made small by the burden of expectation. I noticed the steadiness of his hands, in which he held a trivinium ingot. He watched keenly as each of the Adjudicates took their places.

The Primary Adjudicate commenced proceedings. “Ezeriah Crowe, we are gathered here to make a determination in respect of your claim to Eminent Status in the community, and consequently whether to officially recognize and record the deaths of your wife and child. Mr. Crowe, please state your case.”

Mr. Crowe stood and walked to the center of the room where a clear plastic lectern awaited. Perhaps it was the longest walk of his life.

He paused before speaking. “I hold here the smallest thing of value on this world. A bar of metal so important that we give up our lives for it. But this bar is no different from any other. They are all of the same dimensions, the same weight. They shine equally in the light as this one does. Yet we put a name upon each bar. Each ingot is stamped with two lines of script. Two lines, and the universe knows where this metal came from. For my wife, who labored to make my life better, and for the son I never knew, I ask for a plaque with two lines. Two lines, to mark their value.”

I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks. Mr. Crowe was no ordinary man.

He was a poet. This beaten fellow with his toolbox hands had spoken so eloquently that the Adjudicates were thrown into a burble of confused whispers.

They quizzed, cross-examined and interrogated him. *What did your father achieve here?* they demanded. *How did your wife influence the administration of the colony?*

The outcome was never in doubt.

The Primary Adjudicate was assigned the duty of announcing judgment. "Ezeriah Crowe: in respect of your claim for Eminent Status on behalf of your deceased spouse, I regret to inform you that after careful consideration of the circumstances, we rule that there can be no memorial erected, nor any plaque mounted. While she was no doubt a worthy citizen, we find no reason to elevate her in rank. This is our judgment. Let it be noted."

The hearing was dissolved, the Adjudicates dismounting the plinth in silence. Mr. Crowe returned to his seat, the ingot still in his hand. I looked at the Procurator's face, but saw nothing that betokened sympathy or charity. As we left the room together, I looked back. Mr. Crowe was sitting alone, perfectly still, a fallen monument.

From the tubecar that carried us back to the office, I watched the men laboring out on the mud flats. Does that man have a wife? I asked myself. And that one too? I wondered how many were content to slide with the soil.

This is no world for a poet to make his mark.

Our last encounter with Mr. Crowe came scarcely a week later. It happened in the middle of a violent thunderstorm, the rain frenziedly scourging the complex.

"He's out of his mind!" announced the Procurator. "Completely insane!" He came tumbling into the office with a slick of sweat on his forehead, shirt collar yanked free of his neck. "Look what he's doing—he must have re-synchronized them all!"

He swung his desk-mounted monitor around for me to see, and switched it to broadcast. The pictures I saw caused me to rise in astonishment.

The camera was fixed upon a phalanx of drills near the stamping mill. Normally, the huge cylinders would only fire in alternate sequence for fear of breaking the crust. Now, all of the colossal units were surging in unison, firing back and forth like creation's troopers, relentlessly pummeling the deep strata. I'd never imagined all of the drills firing as one. The sight filled me with a strange elation.

The camera zoomed in, bringing a small, wind-blasted figure into focus.

Mr. Crowe.

He stood with his arms raised as if in tribute to some fearful deity, while the elements tossed him like an unwanted doll.

The Procurator mopped at his forehead. "He'll break the crust! Everything will sink!"

I hardly heard what he said. My attention was fixed upon the wild gesturing of that tormented man and his gargantuan allies as they punished the ground beneath. Flares rocketed overhead, flashing vivid maroon snapshots. It was as if Mr. Crowe had managed to harness nature itself in the cause of his grief.

"He's done it! He's really done it!"

I'd never before seen our Procurator in such an agitated state. For myself, I saw a poetry in it. Even as the ground broke into mammoth shards of rock, spraying geysers of mud into the air, I knew that Mr. Crowe had exercised his will.

The drills groaned and toppled in a slow skittling collapse, the housing nearest to our failed petitioner falling sideways, blotting him out in a thunder of rock and shrapnel.

*I want a grave,* he had demanded.

The entire stamping mill folded neatly into sharp corners and slipped from view, blowing only a few scant bubbles of protest in its wake.

The Procurator and I watched as the livelihood of the colony slipped away. We sat in silence; the Procurator had nothing to confess, and I had no accusations. We'd done wrong and Mr. Crowe had judged us.

As a colony, we endure. The warehouses were stockpiled high with ingots prior to the disaster, and we depend upon those stocks now.

One of the bars sits upon the Procurator's desk. He takes it into his big hand and turns it over, reading the inscription once more. I wondered if he secretly admired Mr. Crowe, as I did, for having covertly reprogrammed the mill's laser stamp. The final batches had never been inspected; no one had noticed the new scripting until a consignee had queried it.

I imagined how our bereaved petitioner might have leaned over the console like an expectant father. How he'd picked the words as eternal gifts.

*My wife. My son.*

*My compass and my map.*

*My beautiful journey.*

*Ishael Crowe 2206-2240    Tomas Crowe 2240*

The Procurator places the ingot back upon the desk. He has no need to take it as reminder. The bars have already been circulated throughout the Company Network, to every station and colony, to the farthest out-

posts. There will no place the Procurator can travel where the elegy of Mr. Crowe will not be known.

He collects his briefcase and pushes his chair under his desk. When he reaches the door, he pauses to speak to me. "I wish you well," he says.

"And you also," I tell him.

He looks at me for a moment then turns to leave.

I want to stop him. I have questions for him: I want to know if he has children, if he has known great grief or happiness. I want to know what his greatest hopes are, his dearest dreams, this man I've known so long.

But instead, the rain fills the silence.

The Procurator closes the door after him.

He'd have been shocked, I think. Such sentiments are not expected of me. After all, I'm simply a notary.

Nature's fouled design. •

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## about our contributors

JAMES ALLISON hails from the industrial hinterland of England's West Yorkshire, though he has since been successfully transplanted into the dwindling greenbelt of North London. Previously engaged as a music magazine reviewer and theatre director, he now runs a DVD distribution company. His fiction has appeared in *Frighteners* (alongside Graham Master-ton, whose story resulted in bookstores banning the magazine—an auspicious debut!), *Altair*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Ideomancer*. He is currently busy with field research for a forthcoming novel.

SIOBHAN CARROLL lives in Vancouver, where she has recently completed an English degree at the University of British Columbia. Her work has previously appeared in *On Spec* (“A Killer of Men” Fall 2000) and *Room of One's Own*.

IAN CREASEY was born in Lancashire, England, in 1969. He has held a number of boring office jobs and currently works in the financial services industry. He sold his first story in 1999.

DAVID BARR KIRTELY's short fiction appears in *Weird Tales*, *Cicada*, *READ*, *Gothic.net*, and in the anthology *Dead But Dreaming*:

*New Excursions into the Lovecraftian Universe* from DarkTales Publications. He is a graduate of the Clarion and Odyssey writing workshops and has received the Asimov Award and the Phobos Award for his work. See [www.sff.net/people/davekirtley/](http://www.sff.net/people/davekirtley/)

ZOË LANDALE has published five books. Her most recent ones are *Blue in this Country*, poetry from Ronsdale Press, and *The Rain is Full of Ghosts*, a novel from River Books. Most recently, she's had work accepted by *Matrix*, *The Windsor Review*, and *Reader's Digest*. Her fiction and poetry has been published in over thirty anthologies in Canada and the US.

PAUL E. MARTENS says, “Unlike the characters in my story, I know where my home is. It's where my heart is, specifically, in a box at the back of my wife's underwear drawer. I am a son, husband, and father, trying to be a cynical curmudgeon while battling the demon of a natural optimism. My story ‘Your Own Hope’ was a first-place winner in the 1999 Writers of the Future Contest.”

ANGUS PECOVER (please see “Mindscapes: about our cover artist,” page 33).

NATALKA ROSHAK was born in Edmonton, grew up in Calgary, and is currently living and working in Boston, Massachusetts. She works as a database analyst/administrator to pay the bills, makes things in her workshop when she's not writing, and hopes to be able some day to "retire" into writing full time! She lives with two wonderful, lovable roommates, her fiance, and an affectionate miniature cat. This is her first story for *On Spec*.

GORDON SNYDER lives and works in Burnaby, British Columbia. He produces paintings and drawings using an "all pencil," which draws onto the wet surface of printmaking paper, and finishes the work using acrylic washes when the drawing is dry. An independent curator and consultant, Snyder is an authority on Western Canadian art and has owned and operated galleries and consulting firms in Canada since the late seventies. His artwork and his philosophy of life reflect the folly and the contradictory nature of the human condition.

KAREN TRAVISS is a journalist and public relations director living on England's south coast with two rats. She's a graduate of Clarion, the SF and fantasy writers' workshop, and believes that writing about aliens and bizarre fantasy worlds is a natural progression for a writer who

has spent much of her career working with politicians. This is her first story for *On Spec* (the second, "Chocolate Kings," will appear in a later issue) and her work will appear shortly in *Asimov's* and *Scheherazade*.

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, among other places, *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Weird Tales*. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling have twice included his stories in the honorable mention list of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Upcoming work is scheduled to appear in *Asimov's* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. When he's not teaching, writing or raising kids, he hunts for an agent to represent his first novel. His wife and three sons think he tells a pretty good bed-time story.

JULIA HELEN WATTS is a freelance writer, poet, and seminary student in Berkeley, California. An avid reader and writer of fantasy literature and creative non-fiction, her work has been published in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, the *Ithaca Journal*, and various other publications. She also teaches writing workshops and classes on speculative fiction. •

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