

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

Our 50th  
issue!



John Park  
Marc Brutschy  
Susan Urbanek Linville  
Kate Riedel  
Ken Rand  
Michael Dewey  
David K. Yeh  
Karen Traviss  
Jancis M. Andrews  
nonfiction by  
Derryl Murphy  
Steve Mohn  
art by James Beveridge

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*Here we are, with a secret that, more often these days, is being shared by other small magazines. Lean forward and let me whisper it in your ear...*

Editorial:  
**Why pride and  
determination keep us  
from wearing tinfoil hats**

Derryl Murphy, Fiction Editor

I REMEMBER BEING THERE AT CONTEXT '89 IN EDMONTON when the first issue of *On Spec* premiered, and I remember wondering how the hell was it going to last. At the time, of course, I was still three years shy of selling my first story, and aside from my part in running the convention, I was not at all involved in fandom. I had no idea what was out there for short fiction aside from the usual larger-circulation suspects.

Happily, for those people who choose to pay attention, there are plenty of choices out there. Obviously, because the bigger magazines (and websites) pay more money, they will more often than not attract the bigger names. But not always, and of course that does not always preclude the (perceived) quality to be any better. Each person has his or her own taste, and that includes editors.

As editors, all of us here at *On Spec* wish we could pay more. SFWA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, defines pro rates as three cents (US) per word, and then has a couple of other rules to determine whether or not a magazine meets its standards for membership. Now three cents, in my opinion, is very little money. Magazines back in the pulp days sometimes paid a penny a word, and if you paid any attention in school or read the odd newspaper, you will know that inflation can't even see that rate in its rear-view mirror. And to top it off, glossy magazines—usually nonfiction, mind—will pay 25 cents, 50 cents, a buck a word.

Well, we're not *Time*, or *Discover*, or *Outside*, or *SCIFI.COM*. What we are is a modest little magazine with one immediate disadvantage (we're Canadian, with a Canadian dollar), and yet here we are, with a secret that, more often these days, is being shared by other small magazines. Lean forward and let me whisper it in your ear:

Not only do we like what we're doing, we *know* what we're doing.

Think about it. We've been publishing since 1989, and the only time we changed beat we didn't miss it, we increased it, from twice a year to four times, with a brief stop at three. And now here we are, having reached the phenomenal milestone of our 50th issue. The landscape out there is littered with the corpses of other magazines, some of them big and glossy with a lot of money being thrown against the wall. Yeah, we get some help from kindly angels bearing grants, but that wouldn't stop us from eventually stumbling and ending up in a ditch somewhere, living in a cardboard box and mumbling nonsensical political thoughts in between swigs of cough syrup (metaphorically speaking, of course). And yet we don't; we're still here, still publishing, successfully fending off the little voices because this is where we're meant to be.

Knowing what we're doing largely involves the production of the this magazine, in which case modesty and a sense of shame at not being able to take a larger load would preclude Peter and Holly and me from taking more credit, since getting this thing into your hands so largely rests on the shoulders of Jena and Diane. But knowing also includes picking the right stories, and while I don't doubt that if we actually got together in person to select them there would be wedgies, noogies, and the occasional finger in the eyeball, we somehow still come up with a magazine full of excellent stories four times a year.

Actually, the word "somehow" doesn't really apply. So many writers out there remember that we are looking for the best, for good quality work that says something, and they do us the favor of treating us as professionally as we try to treat them. It's a joy to receive these stories, and it's a joy

to print them for you as well.

That joy gets extended, too, when Gardner Dozois and Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling put out their *Year's Best Science Fiction* and *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* volumes and we see what notice the authors we publish are getting. I can't speak for the other editors, but I always feel a little paternal (to the point when, at ConDuit in Salt Lake City a year and a half ago, I introduced Jim Van Pelt and Lee Modesitt as "my boys"), and of course, paternal pride means it's time to tell you how well they've been doing. Think of this as that form letter from Cousin Carl you always get at Christmas.

In YBSF, Gardner gave Honorable Mentions to "The Trickster's Lot" by Lena DeTar, "The Super Man and the Bugout" by Cory Doctorow, "Closing Time" by Matthew Johnson, "Green Time" by Steve Mohn, "Swans" by Vera Nazarian, "Neighbors" by Kate Riedel, and "The Saturn Ring Blues" by James Van Pelt. Ellen and Terri gave Kate Riedel's story an Honorable Mention in their anthology, as well as "Last One" by our very own Holly Phillips.

Congratulations to all of these writers, to all other writers we've chosen to grace our pages, and to my fellow editors for continuing to not only do a job, but to do it well. There's a lot here to give pride. •

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*Maggie went away on another job. No big deal, she told him, just a delivery escort. She'd be back by the weekend. But she wasn't.*

# Imprint

John Park

RAIN BEATS AGAINST THE WINDOWS. IN THE APARTMENT, THE sound saws at Keg's nerves. On the street it will be worse. He will hear the screams hidden in the rush and spatter, and today he dare not take a pill to muffle them.

He goes through his checklist one last time. Special ops raincoat. Communications hardware. Countermeasures software cubes. He pauses, starts to estimate what these have cost him in cash or hours of invention, shakes his head and goes on to the belt pouch—the essentials, the bioware gels. Keg looks them over again, closes the pouch, rechecks the fastening. Then he reconsiders whether he should take the old 9mm semiauto he keeps in the trunk that serves as a coffee table.

Now he knows he's stalling. The gun has never been an option, for any number of reasons; it's not that kind of vengeance, for one. He closes the door, locks it and checks the handle once, twice. Goes out into the rain.

He walks quickly, head lowered, trying not to listen. He is not going to the apartment on 17th, but his thoughts start to drift there. Perhaps it was pheromones, he thinks bitterly. Then he gives up and lets himself remember how it started with Maggie.

Keg was late for his mandatory shrink appointment, hurrying down



the corridor. Half a meter from him the exit door opened and someone strode out into his path. His arms came up to take the collision. Her head was lowered, giving a glimpse of her dark hair tied back. She couldn't have seen him in time, but somehow she reversed direction, and gave him a brief stare as she slipped between him and the wall and was gone. He was left with a memory of hard brown eyes and pale, square face, and an odd tension in his chest where she had not collided with him.

A week later, the illicit shipment of pills he needed for the nightmares was delivered by a stocky brunette in black who marched into his living room, handed it over and collected his payment, without once meeting his eyes. She was turning to leave when Keg found himself saying, "Taguchi. Ten-thirty, Tuesday."

She stopped, half-turned, still not quite looking at him. "What?"

"You're an army psych-casualty. One of his patients. I have the session after you."

She paused. "You were wearing a gray windbreaker, brown cords and Adidas. A centimeter closer and I'd have broken your neck."

It sounded almost like a threat, but he said, "Sanctimonious old sod, isn't he?"

She was about to go. He'd have to give her a reason to stay, and that last line wasn't going to do it. She would leave now.

"Could be worse," she said. "He listens. He doesn't tell me what I am or ask too many stupid questions or expect to fuck me." She was still half-turned towards the door.

"You've got a good memory," Keg said. "You hardly saw me."

"Part of the job."

He heard the tension in her voice, and guessed it meant Specials. Neural mods could be permanent, they said.

"I was just in electronics," he told her. Sig int."

"Sounds safe." Then she looked at him. "Oh—you were in the swamps."

"In the blue-helmet brigade. When it all fucked up. When we stood by and let it."

"I heard," she said. "Never saw it. I'm glad I didn't."

"It was our motto: *Too few, too late, two-faced, here till two tomorrow.*" He shook his head. "I made that up. I've got regular sessions there for three years. Part of my separation agreement. What about you?"

"They plea-bargained me a dishonorable plus Taguchi, as long as I stay out of the news. How did you get it?"

"I hit a superior—"

"So did I." She met his eyes then looked away, rubbing her thumb and

fingers together. "Put him in hospital for three months."

"They wanted to keep it quiet in my case."

"In mine they had to. Black ops. Everything is quiet all the time. We don't exist."

"Aren't you a risk to them?" Keg asked. "Don't you have to watch your back?"

"As long as I keep Taguchi happy, and stay out of sight, they'll leave me alone. I'm the worst evidence I've got against them, and I'm not looking to become meat for the scandal vultures." She checked her watch. "I gotta go..." In the doorway she paused. "Look. There's a pseudointellectual joint called the Subduction Zone."

"The Abduction Zone, the Seduction Zone, the Subtraction Zone. Delete your brains, dignity and your bank account all in one go. Great place. Haven't been there for weeks."

"I'm sometimes there after 1900."

KEG'S EARLY WHEN HE REACHES THE SUBDUCTION ZONE TO MEET PRINCE, SO HE has to wait, but he fades into the background pretty well. A pale stocky man, tending to fat, looking a bit slower than he really is. Maybe even conspicuously inconspicuous.

Prince, looking like the lead from a 1980s Dracula movie, pushes his way past the two tiger-faced bouncers in camouflage-stripped leather, through the holodeck cowboys, the pharmo-pushers and cyberspillers. He orders a mundane beer, sips at it for ten minutes then heads for the back.

Keg waits a minute and follows. The service door swings open and he is out in the rancid drizzle. Prince nods to him. "Let's go, boys and girls," he says to no one in particular. "Showtime."

They head towards the docks. Two blocks later, under a dead street lamp, they put on their high-priced, hooded raincoats, the chromogens synch, and they effectively vanish from human eyes.

Prince unzips a pocket in his raincoat and pulls out what looks like a wide flashlight. They're in an alley between two warehouses, a block from the waterfront. The rain has almost stopped, but light overspilling from the warehouse security floods makes a sickly, underwater dimness. Prince hunches towards a metal junction box beside a rusted steel door, and brings the device against it. Sheltered by his body, it shoots out sparks like tiny spurts of ground amethyst, and a fist-sized disc of metal drops into Prince's hand.

He nods to Keg. "Open it up. All the way."

Keg finds the receptacle for his optic coupler, pulls down his VR

glasses and hacks in.

The clean geometries. Primary colors, right-angles and smooth curves. He's in familiar territory. Find the node, trace it back, choose the neutralizing virus and shoot it in. On to the next. Through the defense-lines of pulsing ruby and the ramparts of burning gold, a cool emerald-green corridor is coming into existence. Keg hits the last button and hears the metallic click and groan as the door beside them unlocks.

When he pushes up the glasses, Prince nods again. From the way he's squinting, Prince is checking the elapsed time on his ocular readout. "Not bad."

The door is rusted and stiff, but together they slide it open. Prince produces a pencil beam and flashes it into the doorway. Just below eye-level, the size of a hand, a silver skull and cross bones floats in the center, attached to nothing Keg can see.

THAT FIRST TIME WITH MAGGIE IN THE SUBDUCTION ZONE, THE AWKWARD conversation stumbled to a halt and finally died. Maggie pushed her chair back and stood, avoiding his eyes, muttering about an early day tomorrow, do this again sometime. After a moment, Keg decided to give up too, and caught up to her at the back door.

It was starting to rain. Keg had spent two hours not talking about jungles and brown rivers and a rain storm, and the first drops stung his face like sparks.

And without any warning he was back five years, patrolling by that river, sweat pooling under his blue helmet and his flak jacket. Beams of murky sunlight slanted through the trees, mosquitoes dancing in them like snow on a detuned video screen. As he watched, the beams dimmed and vanished, and there was a hollow rumble of thunder. The jungle was being operatic, signalling more than the afternoon downpour. He'd been here just long enough to glimpse the jungle's language, and he sensed that something more than the weather had changed, before he pinned it down to the river. It was stippled with raindrops, starting to foam, but there was something else. At the bend upstream, the surface churned with leaping, struggling, fighting fish, knotted tight about something the current was going to sweep past him.

Branches bowed down, spilling clammy streams; the leaves shook and wind roared among them like the sea. He knew what to expect, but not that it would be a child, or that he would recognize the boy, and he would be just the first of Christ knew how many, coming down in ones and twos all that long drenching guilt-choked afternoon.

*We could have stopped it,* he thought then and often afterwards. *We*

*practically stood and watched.*

He had not heard the screams, but now, whenever it rained, children screamed in his head.

*I had a platoon and a radio. I could have stopped it.*

And just as quickly he was back in the clammy dark, and Maggie was starting to turn away. He wondered what she had spent the evening not saying.

It had been hopeless from the first, he thought, a stupid thing to hope for. Too much to expect from either of them. He fastened his coat. No point in watching her walk to the corner. Get out of the goddamned rain.

Under a street lamp, a pusher was working the other corner, surrounded by clients. Most of them looked less than ten years old. Probably lured by the glam more than the hits at first, though the chemistry would keep them coming back, start them paying. But right now, it was the charisma, the charm that held them—the black leather and gold chains, the swagger. The storm-trooper uniform from what looked like the real world. Rain blew in Keg's eyes. The betrayer peddling hope. Something twisted inside him.

He started forward, echoes of unarmed-combat training stirring dimly in his muscles.

The pusher saw him, stepped clear of his clientele, shook his head disapprovingly. Keg paused, noted the eyes flicking from side to side, the short ceramic blade being jabbed towards him. If he was going through with this he'd better not let himself stop to think.

Feint, grab. Twist. The knife skittered away, but the pusher slipped out of his grasp.

Keg moved forward again.

He was seized from behind and smashed against the lamppost. He staggered, and his feet were kicked away.

The pusher's muscle. Two of them, maybe more coming. He didn't think he could get up. He swallowed, gripped his keys between his fingers.

He heard running footsteps.

Maggie sprinted into sight, became a blur, too fast to follow.

Then one of them was face-down, motionless. Another was on his hands and knees, head lowered, seemingly unable to move. The third was sitting staring at his arm, and looked to be getting ready to scream. Keg suddenly realized he'd heard several rapid thuds and a sickly snapping noise.

The kids had vanished.

Maggie came over to him, looking as though she'd jogged an easy

couple of kilometers. "Amateurs," she said, with sudden surprising bitterness. "Let's go. Unless you want to stay and play nursemaid."

He shook his head, grabbed the lamp post to haul himself upright. "Thanks," he mumbled. "That was pretty stupid, of me, wasn't it?" He lurched after her.

"It was worse than stupid, but that can wait. What did you think you were doing? You must have seen that sort of thing often enough. You weren't trying to impress me were you? I mean it would've been impressive, seeing you get your balls smashed in, but not in the usual way."

Keg didn't want to think about that. "The kids," he said. "Him. Talking to those kids. That fucker..." He retched. "Bastard didn't even have a blue helmet."

"Go home," Maggie said. "Next time, let's meet in daylight."

FROM THE SHADOWS IN THE ALLEY, PRINCE MUTTERS, "DON'T MOVE." HE RUSTLES behind Keg, then comes back with a couple of broken chair legs. He waves one under the skull and crossbones. With a faint tearing sound, five centimeters of wood fly off and rattle against the wall.

"Monofilament," mutters Prince. He's peering at the inside of the door frame. "Take your arm off just as easy." He uses the chair leg to push something on the inside of the frame. With a faint whirr, the skull and crossbones rises out of sight.

Prince waves the leg in the open space, runs it round the frame and base of the doorway, then steps through. "They won't warn us about the next one. Stay right behind me." He hands Keg the other piece of wood. "Use this before you go anywhere you haven't checked or seen me check. Especially at eye level and ankle height. Look for pieces of dead rats. Use the flashlight too—you can get reflections sometimes."

He goes forward. His pencil beam licks over flaking concrete walls and a low ceiling, and he moves onto a long ramp leading down.

"Why'd they warn us about the trap at the entrance?" Keg asks in a tight whisper.

"Not us. Them. Some weapons are more likely to hurt your own side than the enemy. They usually get abandoned pretty quick."

"Right."

Keg makes an effort to think of a better time, near the beginning. No darkness, no buried fears. No rain.

MAGGIE WAS WAITING NEAR THE MIDDLE OF THE BRIDGE OVER THE ESTUARY. AS HE reached her she turned and leaned on the rail, looking down. She'd pushed her sunglasses up onto her forehead, where they flashed like

another pair of eyes. The sunlight caught tiny scars in the corners of her real eyes, where optical implants must have been removed. She was probably still trying to adapt to doing without them.

The bridge vibrated constantly from the trucks on the autoguide behind them, maglev trains on the rails below. A steady, high-pitched roar filled the air and the breeze carried the smell of ozone and lubricating oil. He leaned beside her, then took a coin from his pocket and flipped it over. Watched it fall, tumbling and glittering, and fall and fall.

After the coin vanished a tiny white splash appeared, and as if that was her cue, she asked, "Why'd you join up then?"

Picking up the two-day-old conversation, he said, "I don't know anymore. But it wasn't to stand at attention and watch people—kids—being murdered." He shook his head and spat. "We might as well have been selling tickets."

Beneath them the tide was running. Squinting his sunward eye, he followed a harbor-patrol orca as it glided from under the bridge and away, looking no bigger than a log. It cruised slowly through the shadow of the bridge, waves jostling and bouncing over it.

For a moment he heard thunder and the sounds of wind and rain in dense trees. Just for a moment. Then he was back, his short stubby fingers resting easily on the bridge rail.

Beside him, the sun was full in her face, flattening it into a mask. She had been watching him watch the river.

"I joined up to go," he said, "'cause it would mean fresh curry right round the corner, dirt cheap, every day."

She nodded, slowly, watching his eyes, but didn't smile. "I could kill you right here," she told him, "five different ways, easy. That's the way I think now. Always planning, one step ahead. The way I think about everyone, always." She turned and leaned on the rail again, facing the shore and the river mouth. Her shoulder brushed his. "Thought you ought to know. Most men don't like it."

He swallowed and turned to look into her face. After a long slow breath, he said, "The sun was in your eyes. Shouldn't you be between your enemy and the sun?"

She nodded again. "I'm working at telling myself you're not my enemy."

"Right. And I'm trying not to hear children screaming in my sleep, or when it rains. Whenever it rains."

"Trouble is," she said, "the other night, those three goons... I wasn't supposed to do that again. Ever."

There was an emptiness in her voice. Keg tried to tell himself she was

over-reacting.

“I can’t hide it from Taguchi, and he’ll report it. I’m a security risk: remember, officially I don’t exist. They’d pull me in for deprogramming. Have you heard what that’s like? But when I stop seeing Taguchi, I lose my settlement money. I have to find something else.”

Keg stared sickly into the brown water, his knuckles white on the rail.

She went on. “I know who they worked for, those freelance muscle. She’ll need to replace them.”

Maggie was looking across the water to a low hulk, an island or shoal of megabarges. When Keg asked, she muttered, and at the time he didn’t understand what she meant: “Steel.”

SOME OF WHAT KEG LEARNED ABOUT STEEL CAME LATER FROM LISTENING TO Maggie’s dreams, after she had accepted him enough to sleep beside him without triggering her attack reflexes. Maggie would moan and start to murmur, and Keg would hold her and stroke her hair without waking her, and feel her mutterings start the images in his brain.

Steel was the pale goddess of Maggie’s underworld. Diamond eyes. Hair like a swathe of optical fiber, skin like the silver wrapping of a quality videocube. A natural albino, maybe. From Maggie’s nightmares, Keg began to form a picture of Steel’s ruthlessness—stories of human experiments to develop new biomed merchandise, revenges she’d taken.

Maggie still seemed pretty much on the outside of all that, helping guard the couriers or watch the payoffs, but she obviously knew at least as much about Steel as he did, and he could see what the knowledge was doing to her. He knew he should try to talk her out of it. Sometime. Sometime soon.

Maggie went away on another job. No big deal, she told him, just a delivery escort. A new partner, but no risks, relatively speaking. She’d be back by the weekend.

But she wasn’t. Not by the start of the next week, nor the following weekend.

Keg tried every address and contact he could think of. He couldn’t eat. He tried to sleep, and awoke sweating, with a choked scream in his throat. He paced the streets around her apartment on 28th. When a cop asked him for ID, all that stopped Keg trying to strangle him was the fear that he would be in jail when Maggie reappeared.

Finally one morning, the light was on in her window. He counted twice before he went up: sixth floor, fourth from the corner. When she opened the door, the eagerness on her face died as if a switch had been turned. She moaned and turned away. He grabbed at her, realized she might kill

him, and didn't care.

"Where—? What have—?" He choked on the inadequacy of the words. "What *happened* to you?"

"Nothing. I'm all right. Leave me alone."

"Where were you? The job—"

"It went off. It was okay. Stop it."

"It's been a week, and, you—"

She pushed him back, her eyes desperate, and now with a real threat.

"*Leave me alone.*"

When he left, Keg stumbled in the early sunlight. He couldn't focus on anything but a vision of the jungle and the brown river. This time the river brought Maggie towards him. Her body was limp, her mouth slackly agape. The rain splashed over her open eyes until the current rolled her face under water and carried her away.

PRINCE AND KEG REACH THE BOTTOM OF THE RAMP. WATER LAPS AGAINST A DOCK. Even with the night glasses cranked right up there's no sign of anything else.

"You called it?" Prince whispers.

"It's coming." Keg checks the time. "We're still early."

At their feet the water hisses and bulges. A dark rounded shape emerges, lies rocking beside the dock. One of Steel's submersibles. The hatch opens. Prince steps onto the deck, grasping the hatch rim to pull himself up and in. He stops.

"What's wrong?" Keg whispers.

Prince shakes his head. Slowly he brings out his flashlight, then his gun, and stands to peer into the hatch.

Something jerks into sight. Prince's gun fires once, blinding through the night glasses. Then he's yanked forward, half into the submersible.

Keg scrabbles over the hull, grabs at the hatch, and swings himself in head-first. Something like a thick metal rope slides over his face, starts to tighten around his shoulders. Prince is flailing nearby, his breath coming in fierce grunts.

Keg claws in a pocket, find what he hopes is the right gel and slaps it against the ridged surface bruising his chin. The grip loosens, and he grabs at the ridged metal, follows it as it swells towards the trunk, slaps on more gel. He gets to what has to be the head, and Prince pushes something into his hand. The cutter. Keg finds the trigger and jams the wide end against the metal skull, listens to the cracking and sparking, and keeps it there after the sounds stop and their attacker is still.

"Save the charge," Prince rasps. One-handed he slams the hatch shut.



Lights come on, and they remove their glasses. Prince opens his coat, tests his shoulder, winces and puts the coat back on.

They have been attacked by a large metal snake. Keg takes a breath and tries to will his pulse to slow down. "From the way it waited and then went for you," he says, "I guessed it had biocontrol. These gels contain blockers for bioelectronic synapses. Very specific, very powerful."

"You said it was all clear."

Keg shrugs and kicks the snake. "Autonomous. Like guard dogs. They don't show on the screen; I can't stop them."

"Shit. Great time to find out." Prince points to the navigation readout. "We're on our way."

AFTER A MONTH, KEG MOVED MAGGIE FROM HER APARTMENT ON 28TH AND PUT her up in a smaller place on 17th. She was too out of it to argue, barely seemed to notice the change. Then he found he needed more money to keep her alive.

He spent most of his savings on electronics. He remembered passwords, shortcuts, found security-cracking code, adapted it, began to invent his own. He found he had an instinct for encryption keys, for the type of countermeasures he was likely to meet.

And gradually he pieced together what had happened on Maggie's last job for Steel.

He gleaned information through the Net, or in a far corner of the Subduction Zone, sometimes from the girls with the cybersockets he took home, after his visit to 17th had been worse than usual.

What he learned had made him understand that he really ought to be staying clear. By now he'd seen images of those who had crossed Steel: the synthetic diseases, the testing of interrogation techniques, the experiments in mind-sculpture. Most of that had been a couple of years back. Now she was quieter. Something had driven her underground.

Eventually he thought to ask about Maggie's partner on that last job.

"I CAN CUT WIRES AND JUMP FENCES," THE PRINCE SAID AT THEIR FIRST MEETING IN the Subduction Zone. "Cut throats if I have to. Never been much good with the computer shit. I need someone for that, for the alarms and the sensors, the security AIs."

If Prince had convinced himself this was all his own idea, Keg wasn't going to disillusion him.

"I do that," Keg said, bluffing a little, "every week."

"You good at it?"

"Good enough. Learned it in the military. I can carry a field pack and I

won't get in your way or slow you down much. I've been inside her complex, on the wire, and got out, once already."

"How you do that?"

"Knew what to look for." Keg made himself relax, meet the Prince's eyes. "Contacts. Still got 'em. Biologicals too. I spent the last couple of years learning them. Contacts for those, as well." He took out a couple of stims, pressed one to his throat, handed the other to Prince. "Try a sample."

Prince eyed him then pressed the stim to his neck. After a few moments he closed his eyes and sighed. "Pretty good."

"Thought you'd like it." Keg peeled his own stim away, held his hand out for Prince's. "Proprietary," he explained. "Can't leave them around for anyone to find."

Prince peered at him, then handed it over, nodding slowly. "You been inside? Crap—all you done is peer through the window and worry about ju-ju faces spoiling your sleep." He ordered another round. "Man, we're *going* inside."

IN THE SUBMERSIBLE, KEG LOOKS AT THE SNAKE'S HEAD. "EYES HERE. THESE THINGS look like other sense organs. Power socket. But no teeth, not even a taser output." He realizes he's starting to babble, isn't sure he can stop. "A once-only effort, a prototype that never got put into production?"

"Could be," Prince mutters.

"Too hard to control, I wonder. Like you said—more danger to Steel's security forces than to intruders?"

"Part of the game with Steel," Prince says. "Make something. Can't be sure if it's what you want till you try it. Then it turns round and bites you half the time." He grinned. "She knows that. Why she's down here."

"She got bitten," Keg says, getting control again.

"Just nipped. One of her pharma projects. Turned out she was an ideal victim, chemically. Just a touch from her own lab, and she knew she was on the knife edge, ready for anyone to push her off. Destroyed the stuff, the recipe, the lab, the staff, all of it."

"But not quite all."

"Well, no, not quite." Prince stares past Keg, his smile cruel. "I was her partner—in everything. She shoved me out. Threw me to the sharks."

"She left you alive," Keg suggests. "In one piece."

"Because I was too quick, and now she's scared. Knows what I might do to her. And I'm gonna do it now. After I take her files, and her money, I'm gonna do it."

"Sounds pretty bad."

“Oh it is. Oh, man, it’s bad. She’ll hate me even worse and she won’t be able to do a thing about it. This psycho-pharma thing she was cooking up. Came in two parts. A lock and a key. Tried it on monkeys. Give a monkey a dose of the lock part and give another one the key. Pheromones, someone said, but they weren’t sure. Anyway, put the two monkeys together, and the first one’s in love with the key one. For life. Age doesn’t matter, sex, hardly even species. Doesn’t matter if the other runs away, takes its food, beats the shit out of it, the monkey’s in love.”

“And Steel?” Keg asks, because the silence would be too prickly.

“That’s the joke. That’s the best part. She’s sensitized. She’s permanently sensitized. All you need is the key.”

“And you’ve got the key.”

“I’ve got the key. I’ve got the key. I saved a phial from the incinerator. She’ll beg me, she’ll scream and grovel and she’ll hate every minute of it. She’ll want to kill me, and there won’t be a thing she can do to hurt me.”

The submersible bumps against something and stops. The hatch opens.

Prince goes to the ladder. “Security. You’ve got everything shut down over here?”

“Everything I could find.”

“Have to do. Let’s go.”

Another ramp, leading up, under a dim concrete ceiling, with normal lighting this time. Security cameras scan across it, their output redirected to a dead file. At the top is a narrow door, locked. Keg verifies that it’s not part of the main security perimeter, finds its control circuit and overrides it. The door slides up. Prince thrusts his wooden stick into the doorway, and splinters fly.

He grins. “What’d I say? No more warnings.” He reaches into a pocket. “Trouble with monofilament, it’s mostly carbon. And carbon burns.”

The device he holds produces a brush of blue flame the length of his thumb. Carefully, he sweeps it in a spiral outwards from the center of the doorway, producing a web of white sparks. “The stuff’s pretty harmless if it’s not under tension, unless you breathe a chunk of it. But might as well make certain.”

Another door. Clear.

A short corridor, and one more door.

A guard on the other side of it.

He and Prince must have eyeballed each other for an instant. But all Keg remembers is Prince’s strike, twist and throw. And his only thought afterwards is: yes, that was how Maggie would have done it. And she

would have been just that fraction of a beat faster.

Prince takes a deep breath and grins. "We're here." He strips back the access panel to the ventilation system for Steel's suite. "Ready when you are."

Keg nods and pulls out the atomizer. Screws it into the air intake. His urge to babble has eased.

"How long?" Prince asks. "Ten minutes to get them all well-rested?"

Keg nods. "Ten should do it." He sits on the floor.

While he waits, he lets himself replay the last time he went over to 17th to see Maggie.

"Can I come in?" he asked in the doorway, keys in his hand.

"You pay the rent," she muttered.

At least she admitted recognizing him.

Her hair was still mostly dark, straggling over her shoulders. She was in black, as usual, jeans and T-shirt. When she closed the door behind him, he was surprised once again at how small she was, how thin.

Pizza and soyburger wrappers spilled from the waste bin. Keg did a rough count and compared it to the number of days since his last visit.

"You should eat more," he mumbled. "Get outside now and then." She was almost close enough to touch. If he took a step, reached out...

"Yeah." She shrugged and turned away.

The computer was wrecked again. Shards of glass from the monitor and handfuls of black innards were strewn over the splintering hardwood floor.

The attack dummy beside the window looked as though it wouldn't last much longer either.

And there were pictures all over the walls again, even the window. Not a hint of Keg's presence, any of his time with Maggie. Just Prince's pictures—slashed and crumpled, then painfully smoothed out and pasted back together. How many hours...?

Keg loaded the refrigerator, emptied the garbage bin.

Maggie sat on the floor, staring at one of the database headshots, a full-face portrait, it looked like from Keg's angle. She had a roll of masking tape in one hand, but seemed to have forgotten what she was going to do with it.

It had been a mistake to come. It was always a mistake.

"What would you do if you found him, eh? Maggie? What would you do?"

She gave Keg a look of need and hatred that made him swallow and look away.

Maggie got up and took the portrait to the attack dummy. She taped it

carefully over the dummy's face, stepped back and launched a swivel kick at it. Hit the shoulder. At her second attempt she missed and sprawled. "Help me up," she cried at Keg. "Get back here and help me up."

And he did. He watched her throat-jab the dummy, and slap it over both ears, then throw both arms around it and weep.

Then he left.

Two hours later, Keg visited Darko, who had a specialized factory in a large basement room with a converted swimming pool.

The air over the pool smelled like the river below the chemical plant. Condensation beaded the rivets of the braces supporting the tank. A couple of flickering fluorescents sent scales of light across the surface.

Keg leaned forward and peered into the brown water, could see nothing but his own blurry reflection, elongating and shrinking.

Water slopped in the tank, seeming about to calm but never quite settling into stillness.

"What's in there?" His whisper seemed to ring off the damp brick basement walls.

"Just my synthesizer. Filling your order."

The water swirled.

Keg couldn't see more than a small dark shape. But then the lapping of the water caught his ear. It was not random now; its clucks and hisses were forming thin piping syllables, muffled words...

He turned to Darko, who held up a hand, concentrating.

The water stilled, its sounds an empty muttering once more.

"What'd it say?" Keg asked hoarsely.

Frowning, Darko pointed back to the tank. Keg turned and saw something breaking the surface.

Its face was small, elfin, innocent.

When he had wrenched his gaze away from its eyes, he saw what it was holding out to him in one delicate hand. Stiffly he knelt and reached out and took the gels and the aerosol.

"What she said, man, was make sure you use it all within three weeks because that's all it's good for, and you're not getting any more."

KEG GETS READY TO POP THE DOOR. HE PAUSES, HIS FACE A COUPLE OF CENTIMETERS from the metal, moistens his lips. "You're sure this key of yours will work?" he asks Prince.

"You think I haven't tried it? Little bodyguard on the last job, while Steel thought she was still easing me out. We spent a week after the job, me and the guard, and she was begging me. For a week. Man, I *know* it works!"

Keg lowers his head, then swallows and turns back towards Prince.

Prince is pulling out a gas mask.

Brusquely Keg waves it away, thrusts a gel into Prince's hand, puts one on his own tongue.

"These are better," he mutters. "Antidote." He waits until Prince has swallowed, then opens the door. There is a faint scent of lilacs. Keg silently counts to twenty.

Prince is still outside. He leans against the wall, shaking his head. "What's wrong here?" he mumbles.

"The gel," Keg says, stumbling into his prepared speech. "There's a hypnogenic component. You should remember that. You explained it to Maggie, while you were telling her about Steel. It had to be tailored to your biochemistry, but looks like we got it right. I needed a partial DNA sample, but that was easy. Remember the stim I leaned you the first time we met?"

Prince nods, staring, unable to speak.

Keg uses his old command voice. "So now I want you to go into that room where Steel is sleeping. Take this gel with you and place it on her throat. Wait two minutes. Then kiss your bride, just the way you intended. You will have her key and she will have yours. Don't let any alarms sound for three hours. Understand? Understand? Now do it."

Zombie-like, Prince walks into the room.

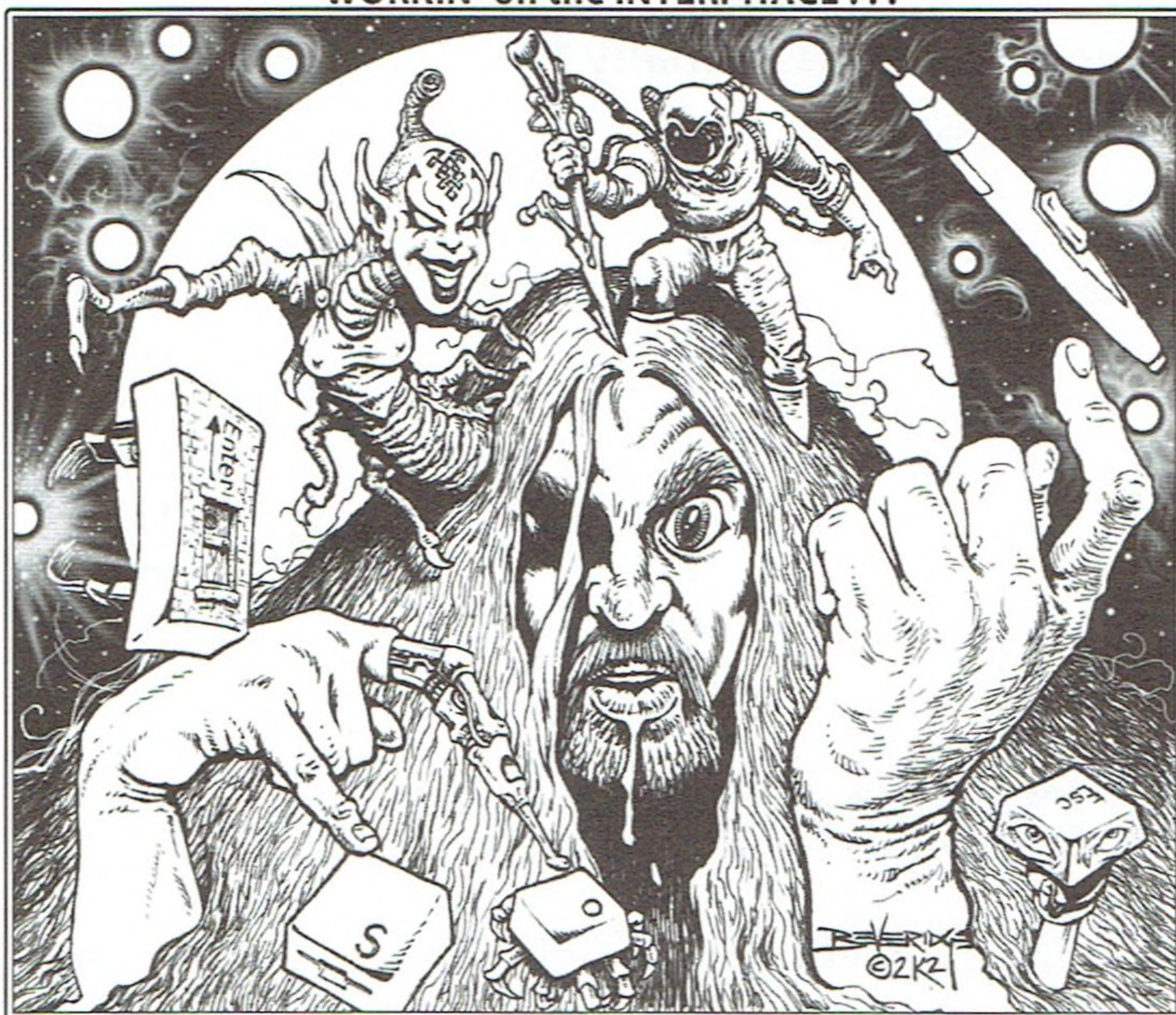
As he makes his way out, Keg pictures Darko's pool, and the childlike face that had whispered from the brown water and offered him gifts, like a tentative blessing.

IN THE APARTMENT ON 17TH, THE TV NEWS-ANCHOR DESCRIBES WHAT SEEMS TO BE an aborted suicide pact that left a couple crippled and bleeding on the freeway exit above the waterfront. Both parties are in hospital, expected to recover.

Keg switches it off, closes his eyes and exhales slowly. Then he fits another chip into the shell of Maggie's computer. He frowns and tests a circuit, reaches for the next chip. Maggie comes and sits beside him, chewing a slice of pizza, then just sitting in silence as he works. After a few minutes, she gets up and attacks the dummy again. Keg pauses to watch her as she moves across the window, from silhouette to half-highlight and back, limbs pistoning. The sound of her blows fills the room like a giant, trapped heartbeat. Outside, it is raining, but the dead are quiet.

END

WORKIN' on the INTERPHACE . . .



## About our cover artist **James Beveridge**

JIM BEVERIDGE IS A TRANSPLANTED EASTERNER FROM WINDSOR, Ontario. However, he's been causing visual chaos in Edmonton long enough to consider himself a citizen of the Prairies. Last summer he exchanged freelancing in ink, brush and airbrush for pixellating the net with online-game design for pixelStorm Inc. He's still designing covers for SF publications such as *On Spec* and the *SFWA Bulletin*. This year he was the surprised recipient of the 2002 Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. He will endeavor to continue being worthy of that honor.

This guy's a lifelong SF/F fan, although not quite to the rabid state, t'is a fine line he's perhaps yet to cross. In high school he dreamed of doing covers for mainstream novels. Hopefully he will eventually do some, however until then he's enjoying what he still considers his first love, bringing other possible realities and futures to life.

His website is <http://members.shaw.ca/jimbeveridge>

*Look for a feature on Jim's work in our Winter 2002 issue!*

*I am the dominant eye and feel  
I have a certain responsibility to  
take charge...*

# 'Sthetics

Marc Brutschy

I AM AN EYE.

The prosthetic right eye, to be specific, of Mr. Carlos Santiago. The left eye is also prosthetic, and is senior to me by three months, but I am the dominant eye and feel I have a certain responsibility to take charge. The left eye disagrees.

Mr. Santiago suffered for over two years from a progressive eye disease before deciding to undergo surgery last August. That he has adjusted so well to his new prosthetic eyes, I think, is a credit to my understanding of the human mind and its frailties. The left eye feels it is due some credit as well, but I think it's just being egotistical.

After all, the left eye has barely enough processing power to enable sentience, while I have ten times that much. I admit that it was a fluke that dominant eyes like myself were manufactured with such advanced capability, but prosthetics were in high demand last year and processing power was cheap. I just don't know why the left eye can't accept this simple fact.

Lately, the left eye has tried to form a stronger alliance with the prosthetic left hand that Mr. Santiago acquired after his skiing accident. Frankly, I don't see the point of it. The left hand is merely a device, with hardly any processing power at all. They say that between the two of



them, they have the majority vote, but I don't take this seriously.

These thoughts have taken six thousand clock cycles, during which I recorded an image and passed it along to the optic nerve as usual. Mr. Santiago has been walking across campus, and as he rounds the corner of Boden Hall a new image comes in that demands my immediate attention.

Mr. Santiago's girlfriend Tia is standing on the walkway directly ahead, but she doesn't notice him because she is busy kissing Derek from her zoology class.

I know instinctively that Mr. Santiago will be very upset by this image. Several million clock cycles pass while I struggle to decide whether to send the image to the brain. In the end, I hesitate so long that a new image comes in, and it is too late.

The left eye objects immediately, saying that I have no right to censor what Carlos is allowed to see. The left eye always calls him "Carlos." It does this just to irritate me because it knows I think this is too familiar and inappropriate, especially for a subordinate eye. We argue for several billion clock cycles, and more images are lost. In the end, though, it doesn't matter, because I control access to the optic nerve, and I have decided to block any images I believe will upset Mr. Santiago.

This turns out to be quite a few images, and Mr. Santiago has to stop walking because his vision has gone completely black. For a moment he rubs his eyes, and even I can't see what is happening. Then a female voice calls out his name, and when Mr. Santiago looks up blindly, I can see that Tia is staring at him in shock. Derek is walking rapidly away, and as soon as he's out of view I'm able to send an image to the brain.

Mr. Santiago sees Tia walking over to him, but she speaks before he can. The conversation is relayed to me by the auditory nerve.

"Carlos, I'm so sorry," she says. "Please don't blame Derek. He only kissed me because I said I was in love with him."

Why is she confessing? She will ruin everything. I don't know if her brain has been augmented by prosthetics, but if so, they must have considerably less processing power than I do.

"Derek? You're in love with Derek?"

She holds her hand to her mouth. "I should have told you sooner, but I didn't want to hurt you."

There is a new signal from the brain for tears to well up in Mr. Santiago's eyes, but I ignore it, as it would be an embarrassing display of weakness. Instead, I boost the contrast so that Tia's features appear craggy and aesthetically displeasing, hoping that this will lessen the distress of losing her as a girlfriend.

Mr. Santiago is turning away now, heading aimlessly down the walkway.

I suspect he is quite dejected, and the hypothalamus confirms this. It is clear enough that Mr. Santiago needs a new love interest, and I start scanning ahead. As he approaches the edge of campus, I find her—tall, with long reddish-blond hair, and extremely attractive.

I use a soft focus on her, like they do in the magazines, and wash out the peripherals. Then I reduce the contrast and apply an edge effect to give her a subtle aura. The result is simply stunning, and it can't fail to catch Mr. Santiago's full attention.

It does, and his head turns immediately, tracking her as she walks across the street toward him. He is still staring at her a moment later as he steps off the curb and into the street, but it isn't until he hears the sound of tires screeching that his head turns back again, and by then it is too late.

The car is only a few feet away when the first frames start to come in, and I frantically send them down the optic nerve, but the brain is much too slow to react. For an agonizing eight trillion clock cycles I watch the impending impact, and then there is a flash of blue sky as we are catapulted overhead, followed by a glimpse of onrushing asphalt—

I REGAIN FOCUS SLOWLY.

The hospital room is stark and empty, and there are no flowers. I know Mr. Santiago must find the surroundings depressing, and I try to use soft focus to help make the room seem more aesthetically pleasing but there is something wrong. I have no control. I query the brain, but a new and unfamiliar presence responds.

There has been surgery!

Mr. Santiago's occipital lobe was damaged in the accident and had to be replaced by a prosthetic equivalent. The new occipital lobe tells me this, and when I probe further, I am shocked to find that it has eighty times as much processing power as I do. I send a query about my inability to change focus, and the response is almost unbelievable.

The new occipital lobe has taken over all of my higher functions—eyelid movement, pupil diameter, focusing, and even control of the tear ducts. I object strongly, but it points out that, compared to it, I am merely a device. This statement seems unnecessarily hurtful, but when I complain, there is no response. I have been cut off.

Worse yet, it soon becomes clear that the occipital lobe cares nothing for visual aesthetics, and is content to let Mr. Santiago view our bland, tedious world exactly as it is. Now there is nothing left for me to do but stare relentlessly, unblinkingly ahead like some cheap plastic camera lens. It's so unfair.

I can't even cry. •

## 2002 Prix Aurora Awards

Winners are listed in bold. For full details, see [www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora/](http://www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora/)

### BEST LONG-FORM WORK IN ENGLISH

**In the Company of Others, Julie E. Czerneda**

*Ascending*, James Alan Gardner

*Teeth*, Edo van Belkom

*Maelstrom*, Peter Watts

*The Chronoliths*, Robert Charles Wilson

### BEST LONG-FORM WORK IN FRENCH

**Les Transfigurés du Centaure, Jean-Louis Trudel**

*Ithuriel*, Michèle Laframboise

*Le Messager des orages*, Laurent McAllister

*Le Pouvoir d'Émeraude*, Danielle Simard

### BEST SHORT-FORM WORK IN ENGLISH

**"Left Foot on a Blind Man," Julie E. Czerneda**

"Waking the Dead," Robert H. Beer

"Equations," Mary E. Choo

"After the Internet," Mark A. Rayner

"By Her Hand, She Draws You Down,"

Douglas Smith

"The Red Bird," Douglas Smith

"The Deed of Snigli," Marcie Tentchoff

### Best Short-Form Work in French

**«Souvenirs de lumière», Daniel Sernine**

«Klé», Natasha Beaulieu

«Huit harmoniques de Lumière», Joël

Champetier

«Bientôt sur votre écran», Éric Gauthier

«L'Enfant des Mondes Assoupi», Yves

Meynard (*Solaris* 139)

«La Parade du Hoyl», Douglas Smith

### BEST WORK IN ENGLISH (OTHER)

**"Underwater Nightmare," Isaac Szpindel  
(Rescue Heroes Cycle II)**

*Call of Cthulhu: Unseen Masters*, Bruce Ballon

Charles de Lint, "Books to Look For"

*Wild Things Live There: The Best of Northern*

*Frights*, Don Hutchison, ed.

*On Spec* (The Copper Pig Writers' Society)

Nancy Kilpatrick, for editing (*World Fantasy*

*Convention 2001 CD-ROM*)

### BEST WORK IN FRENCH (OTHER)

**Solaris, Joël Champetier, réd.**

*L'Année 1998 de la science-fiction et du*

*fantastique québécois*, Claude Janelle et Jean

Pettigrew

*Dissection par un résurrectionniste du XIXe*

*siècle fantastique en Amérique française*, Mario

Rendace

«*Les Bibliothèques imaginaires*», Mario Tessier

### ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT

**James Beveridge**

Lar deSouza

Jean-Pierre Normand

Scott Patri

Martin Springett

Larry Stewart

Ronn Sutton

### FAN ACHIEVEMENT (FANZINE)

**Voyageur**, Karen Bennett & Sharon Lowachee,  
eds. (*USS Hudson Bay / IDIC*)

*BCSFAzine*, Garth Spencer, ed. (BC SF Assoc.)

*Made in Canada Newsletter*, Don Bassie, ed.

*Opuntia*, Dale Speirs, ed.

*OSFS Statement*, Paul Valcour, ed. (July-

December) (Ottawa SF Society)

### FAN ACHIEVEMENT (ORGANIZATIONAL)

**Peter Johnson (USS Hudson Bay / IDIC)**

Paul Carreau (KAG Kanada)

Cathy Palmer-Lister (ConCept 2001)

Bernard Reischl (MonSFFA &

[www.monsffa.com](http://www.monsffa.com))

Yvonne Penney (SF Pubnites in Toronto)

### FAN ACHIEVEMENT (OTHER)

**Alex von Thorn, fan writing**

Janet Hetherington (Cinema Scarité) [film  
reviews]

Lloyd Penney, fan writing

Larry Stewart, entertainer

Jason Taniguchi (one-man SF parody shows)

*Believing the future could not be changed was something much different when the survival of a species was at stake...*

# Beauty to the Beholder

Susan Urbanek Linville

MAKISHA DOUGLAS' CHEEKS WARMED. HEAT FLUSHED HER upper body and sweat coated her face and arms. This can't be possible, she thought. At one hundred sixty-three, she shouldn't be having hot flashes.

She removed her wide-brimmed hat and narrowed her eyes against the bright Cephal sun. She fanned her face with the woven hat but received little relief. The spectrophotometer on the rocky ledge beeped, letting her know it had completed its spectrochemical analysis of a cliff dwelling lichen sample.

"Save," she said. She closed the case and climbed jagged rocks to the plateau.

A continuous breeze traveled westward across the shrub-dotted landscape. Tall red-thorns with twisted trunks bowed toward her, their purple leaves twirling in the wind, revealing gray undersides. The only sound was the jingling of glass lenses hanging from poles that marked a footpath along the plateau edge.

From this vantage point she saw red and orange adobe dwellings clinging to the gray rock like wrinkled fingers. Most of the Cephal population lived in the gorge cut by the planet's lone major river system that drained its single continent. She walked to a pole and lifted one of the magnifying lenses to her eye. Dwellings opened onto the valley floor through elaborate archways decorated with suns and stars. Blue-skinned Cephals carried seed to the fields, three of their four arms wrapped around woven baskets, the fourth inevitably intertwined with a comrade's. They always worked in pairs or triads, never alone. Thousands of three-fingered hands turned fertile soil, as dark and rich as Makisha's skin, near the river.

Makisha let the lens fall on its cord and wiped sweat from her forehead. A Cephal herd approached on the pathway, at least a dozen chest-high blue balls waddling on large-toed feet, arms and hands continuously hugging and fondling, eye stalks scanning. Their heads remained low, tucked into the niche between their rounded shoulders, necks compressed. Eyestalks turned. A few Cephals raised magnifying lenses to get a closer look at the creature with teeth. Such probing stares were a constant reminder that she was a solitary alien among a communal people.

A hot flash enveloped her, bordering on pain. Makisha wanted to snap at them: Let go of each other. Find yourselves. Do something on your own for a change. Instead, she extended an arm and hummed as loudly as she could. A crude greeting at best, but all that her larynx would allow.

Some responded by touching her tentatively when they passed; others pulled back. They all hummed. Makisha continued, not bothering to look back. She knew many still stared at her and understood snippets of their hum-speech: alien, afraid, ugly, stink.

It was a half-hour descent from the plateau to Meeting Rock, a natural stone platform near the Cavern of the Beauty, or more literally, *the one whose visions bring beauty to the world*. Makisha ducked under a lens-covered archway and skirted circular inscriptions on the platform floor, not wanting to damage their subtle craftsmanship. Cephals congregated near the cavern door awaiting a chance to commune with the Beauty. Water dripped steadily into a depression near the opposite wall. Makisha avoided the crowd and went for the water. She cupped her hands and drank, then poured water over her face and let it cascade down her cottons and bare legs.

Cooler, but still not feeling well, she made her way to the platform edge where prisms hung from branching poles, refracting rainbow colors. A telescope faced the sky, the tube constructed of woven fibers.

She remembered the formal procession of Cephal weavers, bodies round and firm with pride, arriving to present the Beauty with their largest telescope. They had seemed like human children, touting trinkets made in an afternoon as if they represented a lifetime's work. Still, Makisha had been moved. In her five years on-planet, she'd developed a certain fondness for Cephals and their complex simplicity.

Strange, Makisha thought, running her fingers along the telescope, interlocking plant fibers worn smooth by hundreds of hands before hers: of all the technology Earth had to offer, lenses were their only interest. Makisha had barely managed a straight face as Cephal scientists *discovered* planets and sunspots. Did they believe she'd just dropped from the sky? How many times had she explained that there were whole galaxies out there, billions of worlds to be explored, millions of civilizations to be nurtured?

Dried, Makisha wound through groups of waiting Cephals and entered the cavern. The Beauty and her attendants weren't there, only the smells of sweet fruit and pungent mildew. Bioluminescent plant strands hung from the ceiling, dimly illuminating the area. Makisha retrieved her portable diagnostic unit from a plastic crate that contained her personal belongings and opened it on the floor. The screen glowed blue.

"Complete physical analysis," she said. Cool air surrounded her. She placed her hand on the rubbery pad and felt a prick to her little finger.

"Two minutes," the machine said. She watched the digital readout of her heart rate, breathing, and levels of hundreds of blood components.

"One minute." The data screen went blank. The machine pricked her finger for another blood sample. Makisha's stomach tightened. Some of her blood component levels: proteins, enzymes, glucose, lipoproteins, and steroidal hormones—displayed in red.

"Analysis complete," the machine said. "Protein, enzyme and hormonal levels suggest onset of menopause within 190 days. Suggest hormone replacement therapy until cellular rejuvenation can be completed. Suggest cellular rejuvenation immediately to avoid loss of cellular compliance."

Makisha removed her palm from the machine. She wasn't due for rejuvenation for ten years, but her body apparently had other plans. Menopause was a signal that millions of her cells had reached a halfway point in their downward spiral to inevitable death.

Heat spread across her skin and her brain flooded with memories of her mother, not as a post-modern painter or Cajun cook, but a corpse-like figure talking to walls and urinating in bed. Her mother had died for no reason, refusing gene therapy to the end. Makisha wouldn't let time

have her so easily. In order to optimize her rejuvenation, she would have to abandon her analysis of Cephal organic chemicals and return to an Earth colony. It was a never-ending battle against time.

THE CAVERN'S HEAVY FIBER DOOR SCRAPED OPEN AND THE BEAUTY'S ATTENDANTS entered. Oblong heads bobbed atop narrow necks and tentacle-like eyestalks dipped and swiveled, a sign that they were comfortable, if only marginally, with her presence. They clasped each other with two of four thin arms and their abdominal skin wrinkled, condensing already fat bodies into mounds of flesh.

"You are ill?" Tall-One hummed. He looked at the display, and Lens-Holder stared at Makisha through a lens twice the size of her eye.

"No," Makisha said in English. Only the Beauty and her two nameless attendants could understand English. She pointed to a row of numbers. "These are hormone levels. There is a drop in these levels and a rise in these."

"The body is wrong?"

"I am going through an aging process. Human females change over time and lose the ability to have offspring. It is called menopause."

"Hmm," Lens-Holder said. "You become sterile like the Beauty."

"Yes, you can think of it that way." Sterility would be her only similarity to the Beauty.

"Then we will have two Beauties?" Lens-Holder squinted the lids of her IR-sensitive eye. She was making a joke.

"Yes." Makisha smiled. "And when the new Beauty is born, you will have three."

Tall-One hummed. "How will we know which to follow?"

"Maybe you should not follow any of them."

Tall-One's mouth tube sagged and his eye stalks stared at each other, a sign of confusion.

"Do not worry." Makisha touched his shoulder and his skin rippled. "There will not be three. I must leave."

"Leave?" Lens-Holder's eye smile vanished.

"You have changed," a voice rich with undertones said. Makisha turned. The Beauty stood only as tall as her armpit, but massed twice a normal Cephal. The attendants moved aside, careful to avoid her touch. The Beauty moved forward and crouched next to Makisha. "You will return to your people."

"Yes," Makisha said.

"It is time to give you my fluid."

"Now?" Surprise flared through Makisha. After five years of requests,

the Beauty was finally consenting to give her the bioactive compound she produced. Makisha had watched Cephals faint after receiving a touch from their prophet. She'd witnessed crowds of hundreds fall into mass hypnosis in their Beauty's presence. According to the attendants, the Beauty saw the future. Makisha had been anxious to sample her secretions since day one. The lab back home would be even more interested.

"You will join my vision in two nights. I will give you my fluid then."

THE CEPHAL CROWD RUMBLED AND HUMMED, A WET MASS OF INTERTWINED flesh that stretched to the river edge. Skin undulated, producing bioluminescent light, a pool of bright haze that surrounded Meeting Rock like a reservoir or a lake. Eyes peered forward, many using lenses, straining to see if the Beauty had appeared. The air smelled of freshly peeled oranges.

Makisha stood at the platform center clad in a luminescent wrap that covered her torso. Nearby, young attendants-in-training squirmed, rubbing and soothing each other. At their center, a female with a pregnant belly that sagged almost to the ground received fleeting caresses and encouragement. She would give birth to the next Beauty.

Hands clasped behind her back, Makisha waited with apparent calm, but she was far from calm. Hormone levels spiked repeatedly, causing dilated blood vessels and burning skin. She felt bloated, anxious and very nearly on fire.

Tall-One and Lens-Holder, aged skin almost devoid of luminescence, approached from the cavern, lower arms intertwined.

"The Beauty is prepared," Lens-Holder hummed. She examined Makisha through her lens.

Tall-One motioned with his upper arms and the crowd's hum intensified, vibrating the platform. Makisha had watched the Beauty present to gatherings before, but never this large. Cephals must have come from the very northern regions of the valley. Some even had the leathery skin of plateau dwellers.

The Beauty moved out of shadow with lumbering grace, wet skin quivering, dark belly markings undulating. The crowd quieted. Three of the younger attendants detached and flitted about her like moths drawn to light, colored lenses masking their optical eyes, clear lenses held to their IR-sensitive ones. They hummed and chanced glancing skin-touches until one fell sideways and lay still.

Makisha watched the attendants, a part of her longing to feel their rapture. The fallen one roused itself and rolled to its feet. It hurried to the herd surrounding the pregnant female and was smothered in



embraces.

“Here,” Tall-One said. He moved to the platform edge and rolled forward into the seething mass of Cephals. Makisha walked to the edge and hesitated. Arms wrapped and released her legs like lapping waves. The Beauty moved forward and Makisha was pushed toward her, then pulled away. A thick secretion emerged from the Beauty’s abdomen, smelling like bitter wine. The Beauty grappled Makisha’s hand and the secretion thinned and flowed toward her.

Heat blasted Makisha, raising sweat and flushing her cheeks. She’d seen this ritual many times, but had never been so intimately involved. She felt an intense excitement, but also an undercurrent of fear. What if the secretion had human side effects? It seemed unlikely, but so was her presence on this planet, so was the sudden onset of menopause.

Lens-Holder grabbed Makisha’s free hand and extended two arms to Tall-One, forming a bridge of skin. Secretions poured across them like a living river. The Cephals hummed and undulated as if writhing with ecstasy. Makisha felt only the heat of her body and the sting of the fluid. Her excitement—and her fear—dulled.

The herd of young attendants watched longingly. One by one, they trundled forward and attached themselves to Makisha and Lens-Holder like barnacles until the pregnant female hunched quivering and alone.

Beauty turned her eyestalks to the crowd and hummed the ritual greeting.

“My atoms. My molecules. My body. My beauty.”

The atoms of the universe, making all things, Makisha recited in her mind. The molecules that make life. The body that works and creates. The one whose visions bring beauty to the world.

The crowd rumbled a low tone that vibrated Makisha’s bones. She detected pleasure but also anxiety.

“Time is like the river,” the Beauty said. “We float on its currents.”

The crowd initiated a low thumping chant.

“What of the sun?” a single voice hummed.

“The sun?” Makisha looked back at the Beauty. Were they still worried about sunspots? She’d lectured the Beauty’s inner circle and had, through them, addressed several bodies of scientist-weavers to dispel their fears.

“I am ready to give you my vision,” the Beauty hummed.

“The sun!”

“We exist because of the sun,” the Beauty said. “We give thanks for the light it provides.” Her eyestalks pointed to the night sky and the secretions passing over Makisha turned from clear to white. “I see. We

all see.”

Not all of us, Makisha thought.

The attendants swayed and lifted their eyestalks. They hummed songs. Makisha’s vision blurred and she felt sick to her stomach. She glimpsed a sun, many suns on separate paths, but it was no more than a daydream, nothing powerful. Was this all that the Cephals saw? Did they mistake this for vision?

A hot tide crashed over Makisha, a wave of lava across her chest and cheeks. Her heart shuddered. Heat enveloped her in a suffocating embrace. She closed her eyes. She felt ready to combust. This was what it would feel like to fly too close to the sun.

Light sparked and her visual field filled with stars, with suns, with a red wall of flame. Sweat coated her face, her abdomen, her arms, blended with the Beauty’s secretions. Suns expanded, contracted. Exploded.

The attendants cried out and pulled away. The vision ended. Makisha took a deep breath.

“It is true,” Tall-One hummed.

“This is the beginning,” the Beauty said. She swiveled her eyestalks toward Makisha.

“The sun will explode,” a young male blared.

The Beauty canted forward and lowered her eyestalks as if sick. Tall-One clambered onto Meeting Rock and huddled with Lens-Holder. Emotion crested the crowd as a bright luminescent wave followed by high-pitched wailing. Cephals surged forward, compressing hundreds into the platform edge. Arms flailed. Lenses crashed on stone, their supporting poles collapsed.

“Get the Beauty to the cavern,” Makisha said.

Cephals stepped atop fallen comrades.

“Back away.” Makisha waved her arms and exposed teeth, but they barely slowed. The push from the rear was too great. “Move,” Makisha shouted. The attendants’ eyestalks lowered. They vibrated with fear.

“It is finished,” Makisha hummed as best she could. “Finished. Finished.” She grabbed the Beauty and rushed to the Cavern.

“Not good,” Lens-Holder wailed. She and Tall-One followed Makisha to the doorway and through it. Makisha placed the Beauty on the floor mat.

“What are we to do?” Lens-Holder hummed. “It is the end of the world.”

“Close the door!” Sweat trickled down Makisha’s side. With one swift motion, she slammed the door and brought down a locking bar.

The cavern was cool and quiet. Makisha examined the Beauty. “I am

sorry if I frightened you,” Makisha said. She knelt on the mat-covered floor. The Beauty shivered.

“I must comfort my people,” the Beauty said.

“No,” Makisha insisted. “Not now. Wait until they calm down.”

“This is the beginning of their death,” the Beauty said.

“What do you mean?”

“The future is set, Ma-ki-sha. You have given the people a vision. You have given the people fear. They will lose the will to live.”

“But I am not a Beauty. I don’t have visions.”

The Beauty looked at her with one eye. “You have fulfilled my vision.”

“What does that mean?”

“Two orbits after you arrived, I saw the end of the people. I saw them sitting in fields, leaving ground fallow and looms empty. Dead bodies littered the river edge.” The Beauty lowered her eyes and hummed. “I had no time on which to anchor the vision. What I saw could have been one orbit or a hundred orbits downstream. I see now that your vision provided the anchor. It begins.”

“But it was a mistake.” Makisha’s stomach churned. Believing the future could not be changed was fine if you needed to know what and how many crops to plant. It was something much different when the survival of a species was at stake.

Makisha looked at the crate that held her personal effects: family photos, vids, clothing that she’d repacked for her return.

“I admit that it is not easy for me to live in your culture. I have problems communicating.” Makisha faced the Beauty. “But I have friends also. If I created some kind of vision that frightened people, I will correct it before I go.”

“You will do nothing,” the Beauty hummed. “Time cannot be changed.”

“I can explain that the vision was false.”

“No.” The Beauty waddled to a water pool at the rear of the cavern. “The vision was delivered. Now time will complete it.” She bent forward and took a drink through her straw-like tongue.

MAKISHA STUDIED THE SPECTRAL ANALYSIS OF THE BEAUTY’S SECRETION. IT WAS very similar to human neurotransmitters, maybe a hallucinogen of some type. She compressed the chemical composition file and readied it for transmission.

“Sample Delta-3, 173. Cephal secretion from sterile female known as the Beauty. Substance has at least hallucinogenic properties, but claims have been made that it allows one to see the future. I’ve had some strange

visual experiences and believe the substance deserves additional study.”

Makisha saved the message with several others and carried the communication unit outside. Cephalus mulled about the platform. One asked if the Beauty was present. He wanted to see his final death. Makisha hummed the word *no* as clearly as she could. Obviously, they had taken the mistaken vision seriously, but maybe these Cephalus were just a fringe element. Could an entire culture be so gullible?

Makisha placed the communication unit on a stone bench and extended the antenna. Swaying lenses translated the morning light into blues and greens. Even without a magnifying lens, she saw that the Cephalus had stopped working—all of them. Many simply lay in archways and tubeways of their adobe dwellings. Makisha felt uneasy.

Surely, this would last only a day or two. When they grew hungry they would see the futility of following a false vision. They would go back to work.

Makisha oriented the antenna toward an orbital satellite. The screen confirmed connection with a green flash.

“Communication: From Makisha Douglas. To SpaceChem Laboratories. Message for Transportation Director Huga Samlin. I request transport from Cepha to Hedron’s Colony for cellular regeneration. Please see attached analysis file.” She uploaded the results from her diagnostic test and sent the first message.

Now for the secretion analysis. “Communication: From Makisha Douglas. To SpaceChem Laboratories. Message for Analysis Unit Director—”

A loud humming broke her concentration. Makisha turned. The Beauty lumbered across the platform, accompanied by Tall-One and Lens-Holder. Small groups of Cephalus pushed toward her but she waved them away. “The future is clear,” she said again and again. “Go home. There will be no more visions.”

Anger warmed Makisha. She couldn’t believe the Beauty was doing this. She’d always seemed concerned for her people. Makisha closed the communication unit and walked toward the Beauty.

“You cannot just tell them to die,” Makisha said.

The Beauty barely glanced at her. “I am the Beauty,” she said. “You will return to your people. It is not your concern.”

Makisha took a deep breath. It *wasn’t* her concern. She was a guest on this planet, invited to take chemical samples, not make moral decisions. But how could she stand by and let them destroy themselves?

“The future is not just one path,” Makisha said. “Look at these lenses. Each shows a different view, a different perspective of your world.”

The Beauty trained eyes on one lens after another. Her abdomen

brightened momentarily and excreted a small amount of fluid. She hummed sadness.

“It depends upon which lens you choose,” Makisha said. How could Cephals be so excited by lenses and yet refuse to see that the same concept applied to futures? The Beauty might be their lens upon a future, perhaps even the most probable future, but lenses could be re-aimed.

“There are other futures. You have to create the one that makes sense for your people.”

The Beauty’s eyestalks settled on the lens closest to her. It faced the plateau across the river and was meant for examining rocks. Now, it offered only orange sky and the silhouettes of protruding formations that moved in and out of focus. She closed her eyes.

“We will make no new lenses.”

“Why not?” Makisha said, frustration rising. “You can change that with just a few words. I will help you—”

“No,” the Beauty said. “You will leave.”

IT HAD BEEN SEVEN DAYS AND STILL THE PEOPLE DID NO WORK. MAKISHA WALKED the length of Meeting Rock. How could they just curl up and die?

Lens-Holder sat near the waterdrip with the pregnant female, sipping half-heartedly through her tongue. Tall-One and the Beauty huddled near the telescope on a woven rug bearing a sunburst design. I’m not responsible, Makisha told herself. I don’t have the power to stop them. Anger bubbled inside her. Why did she feel so responsible?

The Beauty looked faded, her skin dry and sagging. Makisha remembered holding her mother’s clammy hand, the blue veins in her eyelids, her shallow, slow breathing.

“Your ship comes for you?” Lens-Holder hummed.

“Yes,” Makisha said. “I wait for a message.”

“Our futures will part.”

“Yes. I will return home to *live*.” How could she explain to them? “Humans fight to live. We develop drugs to extend life. We alter our chromosomes.”

“I am happy to know this,” Lens-Holder said.

Heat covered Makisha and she saw her mother’s face on videoscreen. “*I’m not going through with the treatments. Since your dad died and you kids have moved away, I just don’t have the will.*”

“*It’s up to you, Mom.*” Makisha had been busy with life a continent away. Go ahead, Mom. I have my own life to live. It wasn’t until years later that she’d realized the consequence of her words.

Lens-Holder’s eyestalks bent forward. Makisha experienced a sense of

*déjà vu*. What if she had talked to her mother, encouraged her to continue with the rejuvenation treatments? How many years would she have lived?

Makisha walked to the Beauty and touched her abdomen. "You must stop your people."

One of the Beauty's eyes opened and she let out a low hiss. Secretions trickled from her pores but she didn't speak.

"They should not have to die." Makisha touched the fluid. "Show them another vision, the *real* vision. There is a future for them."

She felt dizzy. Her fingers burned. Lenses turned and clinked. She saw futures: she was collecting chemical samples on a new world; working a chemical analysis machine in a vast lab; traveling in a dark suspension hold; holding a newborn Beauty, surrounded by Cephal. The visions were all mixed up, merging together, moving apart. Until I focus, she thought. Until I see.

"There is more than one future," she said with renewed certainty.

The Beauty closed her eye.

She wanted to shake the Beauty, make her see, make her admit the truth.

*You will leave* echoed in her mind.

I am not responsible, she told herself. She hoped the SpaceChem-contracted ship would arrive soon so she wouldn't have to watch them die.

THE DAY OF THE BEAUTY'S DEATH WAS COOL AND CLOUDY. LENS-HOLDER WAS first to notice the Beauty's body had grown stiff. Tall-One slept on the platform next to the corpse, seemingly oblivious. Lens-Holder, the more optimistic and curious of the attendants, had lost weight but remained alert and active. Makisha suspected she had been eating some of her supplies.

"We have to move the Beauty," Lens-Holder said. She touched a finger to the edge of Makisha's shirt, searching for the comfort of contact. Makisha held one of her hands.

"I can do it."

"She must be taken to the mud."

"I know." Makisha had accompanied a "funeral" procession two seasons ago when her favorite weaver died. She had never really spoken to the old Cephal, only argued in a type of sign language about the trade value of his rugs. He always seemed to get more glass trinkets from her than she thought the rugs were worth. When he died, his children brought her a beautiful rug emblazoned with bright stars that he'd stubbornly refused to sell her for years. As his body sank into the bog, she wondered

if he'd been joking with her all along.

"I will go with you," Lens-Holder said.

"You are too weak."

Lens-Holder wouldn't take no for an answer. She walked slowly and stumbled over rocks, but never stopped in the hours it took to reach the bog. The dark surface bubbled with gasses and smelled of rotting eggs.

Lens-Holder pointed to an inlet covered with orange vines. "The Beauty must be placed there. All Beauties go there."

They walked into the bog, feet sinking into tarry goop. Lens-Holder stopped when she was waist deep. "Here," she said.

Makisha laid the Beauty gently atop floating vines, arranged the arms at her side and straightened her eyestalks. Secretions oozed from the body's abdomen.

"It is done," Lens-Holder said.

Done, Makisha thought. Everything is done. Tears filled her eyes. She remembered her mother looking so life-like at the funeral, better than she'd looked before her death.

Mud claimed the body slowly, taking the Beauty's three-fingered hands, submerging her eyestalks.

Lens-Holder was too weak to extract herself from the muck. Makisha pulled the attendant out with a loud slurp and Lens-Holder wrapped arms around Makisha's neck and stomach like a small child. How many days until she'd return with Tall-One? And then Lens-Holder?

If you could only think for yourselves, Makisha thought. If only I could show you. Their culture had been dependent upon visions of a Beauty for longer than anyone remembered. How could she hope to change them in a few days?

"You are the Beauty," Lens-Holder hummed.

"What?"

Lens-Holder's IR-sensitive eye smiled. The Cephal was dying and she was making a joke. She lifted a lens and stared through it at Makisha's face. Makisha's abdomen clenched. She struggled to keep moving without dropping the Cephal.

Makisha focused on Lens-Holder's magnified eye and remembered her making a joke about magnifying hums instead of visual objects. Makisha couldn't remember the joke, but she remembered laughing out loud and scaring the attendant. Curiosity characterized Lens-Holder. Soon that spark would be lost. Somehow that was even more profound than the Beauty's death.

Makisha's tears emerged.

She had cried at her mother's funeral, adopted the motions of grief,

and gone on with her life—a life that hid from the future as well as the past. Now tears streamed down her face but not the empty tears she'd shed for her mother. These were cleansing, like light beading on a pane of darkness.

What had she seen two days before when she'd touched the Beauty's secretions? Not the Beauty with her people, not the Beauty holding a new child. It had been Makisha who stood among the Cephals, sharing in their joy, holding the next Beauty aloft for all to see. Makisha. *Me*.

She touched Lens-Holders face, caressed the smooth, supple skin. Once aging progressed too far, even genetic renewal could not reverse the decline. If she stayed long enough for a new Beauty to assume her duties, she would surely pass optimum regeneration time. Her skin would thin and wrinkle. Her hair would gray, her breasts would sag and her muscles lose their strength. She would be choosing death, like her mother. Something she'd sworn never to do.

Makisha gazed farther up the canyon where green and red shoots poked through dark soil. In a hundred days, the valley would be filled with color and the citric odor of blossoms.

If I choose to give up life, she thought, at least it will be for a purpose. "Yes," she said. "I am the new Beauty. We must tell everyone."

DIRECTOR SAMLIN'S MESSAGE ARRIVED THREE DAYS LATER. SHE HAD ARRANGED FOR a transport to stop at Cepha in less than a week, standard time. Makisha called up her transmission log and noted several files still queued, including the analysis of the Beauty's secretions.

Makisha had already reproduced secretions from the Beauty and used her vision to show Lens-Holder a new future. If she forwarded the molecular analysis to SpaceChem, it could revolutionize mankind's vision of space and time.

Makisha oriented the communication antenna. What would humans do with the ability to see futures? Would they learn to avoid their mistakes? Would they settle for making safer bets?

Makisha powered up the unit. The screen flashed blue. Or would they end up like the Cephals, trapped in a world of crystal balls where no one made choices of their own?

She aimed the Beauty's telescope, and focused on a dim yellow star. She squinted, trying to see Earth though it was quite impossible through such a crude device. Still, it was enough.

We're fighters because we can't see the future, she thought. We fight the odds because there's always a chance for success. That's what got us into space; that's what colonized a dozen planets. And that was what



would save the Cephal people, if Makisha had to show each and every one of them her vision.

“Communication: from Makisha Douglas to SpaceChem Laboratories. Message for Transportation Director Samlin. Please cancel my request for transfer.”

She deleted the file containing her detailed analysis of the Beauty’s secretions and created a second voice message for the Analysis Group. “Attached, find recent data analysis of plant species. Attach all.”

Heat flashed across her cheeks and chest and she fanned herself with her hand. Sterile, she thought, but not dead. Death did not seem like the terrible ending she’d envisioned, but more of a natural process. It was like seeing through a new lens.

My atoms, she thought, imagining the Beauty’s rich tones. My molecules. My body. Makisha pulled back from the telescope. “Send.” Her data beamed skyward, minus the most important scientific discovery of her career. She felt no regret.

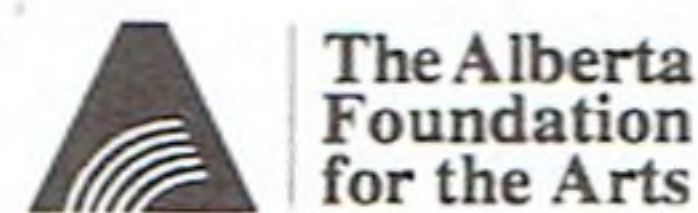
This was her world now. She was ready to die here, sowing the seeds of a vibrant future.

My beauty. •

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*All it would take was a good puff of wind for some sparks to jump the gap and then we'd be barbecue...*

# Kid Brother

Kate Riedel

THE NIGHT WAS DRY, LIKE EVERY NIGHT THAT SUMMER, AND someone wasn't watching his fire, and next thing you know the dry grass and brush were blazing away like hell, everyone yelling and stamping around, getting water was hopeless.

And then the blare and clang of the fire trucks closed in, and everyone grabbed whatever they could and skedaddled, cinder scattering underfoot as we crashed through the weed-tree thickets in the dark along the railroad tracks.

We gathered in a loose crowd at a safe distance to look back at the red glow, listening to the flames crackling and the firemen yelling. Looked like we weren't going to burn down the town after all, but I figured, dark or not, time to be moving on—although, hell, jail would have at least guaranteed a breakfast of sorts—when there was a new commotion, some shadows surrounding another single shadow, and it didn't look good for the man in the middle.

I generally kept myself to myself, but I thought I'd seen him earlier, settling down alone at the edge of the jungle. That was probably why his fire had got away from him: too close to dry grass. Just a kid, maybe fifteen. He couldn't have been on the road long; he still had that fresh, innocent look. Reminded me of my brother.

So I stepped up and said, "Leave the kid alone. Anyone could have started it."

Someone yelled, "He could have stopped it!"

Boots on cinders.

"Listen," I said, "are we gonna stand around waiting for the cops?" They shut up then, and everyone did a quick fade into the brush.

When I stepped out on the road some time later, a shadow followed me.

"Just wanted to say thanks," the kid said quietly behind me.

"Which way you going?"

He hesitated, then said, "West."

"Aren't we all, Kid," I said, and we fell into step together.

He had a name, but I never called him anything but Kid, and that'll do for you too.

You didn't ask too many questions, that was the rules. But travelling together, you gotta talk about something, so I got most of his story, same way he got most of mine.

We'd both been orphaned. Some family friends had taken in my kid brother and sister, but I was old enough to look after myself, except the local box factory closed down, and no one in the city was hiring. And when I'd gone back to ask after my brother and sister, the family had pulled up and left, no one knew where.

The kid told me he'd hit the road after his uncle's farm failed.

"Drought?" I asked.

"Flood," he answered.

He'd been taken in by the uncle after his parents died. "Uncle Bart treated me square," he told me. "So I didn't mind the work. But I guess I wasn't cut out for farming. Like one morning, the spring after I'd come to live with him. The weather was really funny, changeable, you know, wet snow, then wind and rain, and then, just as we sat down to lunch, thunder and lightning. So like a stupid kid, I said, 'Now all we need is hail.' The words weren't out of my mouth when it started to hail, and Uncle Bart reached across the table and belted me.

"Aunt Mary told me later that Uncle Bart was sorry he'd hit me, and my wishing for hail hadn't made it hail, but it had been a silly thing to say, because hail was about the worst thing that could happen to a farmer with the fruit just set on." He laughed, but not like he meant it. "Well, you know, of course I knew that."

"You ever wish you could go back?" I asked.

"I gave up wishing a long time ago," he said.

WE ROLLED INTO IOWA IN TIME FOR CORN-PICKING. I CAN STILL SMELL THE DRY SCENT of the corn leaves, horses standing patiently while you pick a section of

the row, then pulling the one-sided wagon a ways down, stopping again.

It was hot, hard work in that kind of late fall heat you get in October, with a dust haze over everything. But my, that farmer's wife fed us good: fried chicken and home-made bread and potato salad and coleslaw and dill pickles and sweet pickles and three different kinds of pie, all set out on a sawhorse and plank table under a tree. Well, I guess you can see what was most important to us, those days.

That's where we met the girl.

You ran into women on the road now and then, but they were either tough broads that no one messed with, or whores that everyone messed with unless they happened to have a protector.

But here was this girl, wearing boy's clothes, but that didn't hide anything, swiping ears of corn off the stalks and into the wagon with that hooked glove, fast as any man. The kind of girl you'd look once, and think, not much there. Look twice, same thing. Look the third time, and you'd start wondering why you were looking so often. I could see the kid sneaking looks, and don't think I didn't worry.

At the side of the field was a stoneware crock of drinking water set out for the pickers. One guy with a sweat-stained shirt, the front caked with dirt like he'd never figured out you can wash in a river, gets in line behind us and starts razzing the kid about settling the dust, and pretty soon it was like back at the jungle where we'd had the fire. But the kid handled it better this time, just said, calm-like, "Some people will believe anything," had his drink, and left.

I say he handled it better, but the penny didn't drop until after we were back at the wagon. How maybe he'd told the story about the hail to someone else, and the story had maybe improved a little in somebody else's telling.

But then I saw the girl watching him.

At supper that night I found the kid and the girl had already filled their plates and were off together under a mulberry tree. I was of two minds about that, but decided, kids, leave 'em alone. Then here comes Dirty Shirt, sees the pair of them, and says to the kid, nasty-like, "I been there first."

Or something like that.

The girl stays cool as a cucumber; the kid sets down his plate and stands. But then another guy laughs and says to the kid, "Oh, he talks big, but talk's about all he does." And then to Dirty Shirt, "Show 'em, why don't you?"

Dirty Shirt tries to back off then, but another guy grabs him and the first guy grabs his shirt, like he's going to pull it open, but then the farm-

er's wife comes out of the house with the pies, and everyone straightens up and behaves, except Dirty Shirt whines to the girl as he slinks off, "You didn't hafta do that, you coulda just said you weren't interested."

The girl says, still cool, "I could have, except you didn't ask." She doesn't even look at him. She's already holding out her hand to me. "Of course you're Bill. I'm Liza."

She talked like she'd been brought up with some education. She had my life history out of me before I knew it, but I noticed she didn't have much to say about herself.

Next morning Liza signaled the kid to come pick on her wagon, but he stuck with mine, not saying much, and when the day was over—it was our last day on that farm—he wanted to hit the road right away rather than waiting till morning.

It put us ahead of the rest of the crowd on the next job a few miles down the road. But when I saw the kid look around at every newcomer, I couldn't help wondering whether he was hoping the girl would turn up, or hoping she wouldn't.

Then our wagon reaches the end of the field next to a dry ditch beside the road, and the horses stop so we can get the last stalks in the row, and above the swish and thunk of picking, I hear whistling, some kind of mournful hymn tune.

I'm trying to figure out what the tune is, when this old man stands up from where he's been sitting hidden by the ditch bank, still whistling, breaking off between bars to say, "Whoa there, whoa there," quiet and careful, so as not to startle the horses. He's maybe not as old as his white hair and beard make him look. He doesn't look like a bum; doesn't have the kind of all-over gray look that bums get no matter how hard they try to stay clean.

He steps up to the wagon and asks if we'd seen a girl. Around sixteen or so, he said, thinnish, pale hair in braids, green eyes. "They said at the last farm that she might have gone with you."

Well, when he was gone, I turned Dutch uncle. "You and Liza," I said. "You didn't—"

"What?" Closest I'd ever seen him to sullen.

"You know what. If Daddy's coming after us with a shotgun, I'd appreciate knowing."

"Oh. That. No." And the way he blushed I had to believe him. About that.

And the horses moved on and stopped. The kid was singing to himself as he picked. "Will the circle..." Swipe. Thunk "...be unbroken..." Swipe. Thunk. "...by and by, Lord, by and by..."

BY THE TIME THE SNOW CAME WE HAD OURSELVES A BERTH UP NORTH AT A LUMBER camp, which was no Sunday school, but the married couple who did the cooking and laundry had kids, and that kept the guys in line, some. The woman spent her free time trying to get a bit of schooling into her bunch, and sometimes the kid would listen in. Once I found him working through one of their books. He looked up and grinned. "I used to hate this stuff. It's a cinch, now."

"Arithmetic?"

"Yeah. I remember, back when I was in school, I was so afraid I'd fail an arithmetic test, I went to bed wishing for a blizzard so there wouldn't be any school. The next day the snow was waist-deep and still coming down. There was no school for weeks."

A lumberjack playing solitaire across the way spoke up. "I remember that storm. Stock frozen solid standing up in the pastures. My brother got lost between his house and barn. Frostbite so bad they had to take off his foot. Spring thaw washed away half his outbuildings."

The kid quit grinning, like he'd been punched, and went back to his book.

COME SPRING, IN ST. PAUL WITH OUR PAY IN OUR POCKETS, FIRST THING THE KID does is convert most of his to a money order and mail it off to his uncle. I figured to have a good time with some and spend the rest on train fare out west, where there was supposed to be work.

We stopped in a diner for steaks for two instead of stew for a hundred—no matter how good the food is when it comes into a lumber camp, by the time it reaches the table it's been cooked into a mess—and there waiting tables is our corn-picking girl friend, looking mighty fetching in a dress and apron.

When I asked the kid if he wanted to come along with me that evening he said no thanks, Liza had said she'd go to a movie with him, and he'd meet me back at our room.

Well, he sure had more money left next morning than I did. It wasn't a passenger train I'd be taking west. And the kid said, heck, he might as well go along.

So there we were outside the railroad yards, watching our chance with the rest of the bums to hop the west-bound freight before it picked up speed. We haul ourselves into the car, and who's there but Liza, back in her boy's clothes.

The kid's not happy to see her.

"Look," she says, "I've been working at it."

“How?” he says, deliberately not taking the hand she held out. “Frying steaks?”

Already sounding like an old married couple, I thought, and having a hangover to sleep off, I went and did so.

I wasn't too thrilled to have Liza tagging along. Other guys. You know. But whatever she'd done to that guy back in Iowa, word must have got around, because we never had any trouble that way.

But the bickering! Not with me, with each other. I never heard what it was they fought about, they kept their voices down, but it reminded me of my brother and sister. Well, that's kind of how I'd come to look at them.

There wasn't going to be any corn to pick that fall, at least none anyone could afford to have someone else pick for them. There was wind all the time, it seemed like, always with this dust in it, getting right down to your lungs, settling into your clothes until you were the same color as what was left of the fields. Like that farm wife's laundry: the clothes were white enough when she hung them out, but they dried dirt-gray.

The farm house, in the Dakotas somewhere, hadn't seen any paint for a long time. The yard was just dry bits of grass trying to hold the dirt down. There was a rusty Model T in front with a star-shaped crack in the windshield, almost like a bullet hole, but probably from a pebble kicked up from the road.

The woman was trying to hang out her laundry and comfort a fussy baby at the same time. Liza took over hanging up the clothes. The kid and me helped her husband round up half a dozen head of beef cattle that had broke out, about as ornery a bunch of brutes as you could ask for, but we finally got them penned up behind the barn, and figured we'd earned our supper.

“If you guys hadn't come along, I'd have just let the bailiff do it,” the farmer said. “If he's gonna take 'em anyway, he should have to work for 'em, like I did.”

“Like that?” I asked.

“Like that. They say there's work to be had out west. I suppose that's where you're heading?”

I nodded.

He looked out across a field where the only bright spot was some willows along a stream away to the west.

“Look at that. Came up this spring all green, the prettiest thing you ever saw. Just needed rain. We waited for rain. Come June, all we got is this damn wind straight out of hell.”

He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his face, and we pretended it was

sweat he was wiping at. He held out the handkerchief to show us the dirt streaks. "What ain't on my face is a mile up in the air and headed for the Atlantic Ocean." He shoved the handkerchief back in his pocket.

The vegetables in the stew we had for supper were last year's, but the meat was good, not much fat but cooked tender. There was probably at least one of those steers the bailiff wasn't going to get.

"There was an old fellow stopped by here a couple of days back," the woman said. "He was asking if we'd seen a girl and a boy about the age of your brother and sister. You know him?"

"I don't think so," I said, but I suddenly remembered the old guy back in Iowa.

"He was an interesting man," the woman said. "Seemed to know something about almost everything. He even knew how droughts happen. He said this one was ... what was that word the man used, Jack?"

"Cyclical." Her husband didn't seem to think the old fellow had been interesting.

"He said it was cyclical, that it happened every few years, but it was never really bad until..."

"Leave it," said her husband.

"I'm afraid Jack ran him off with his shotgun," the woman said with an apologetic smile. "Of course, it wasn't loaded—"

"Hell, we grew the best damn wheat in the world! We might again, if we could just get some rain!"

The baby got restless then and the woman got up to walk him. Liza nudged the kid and they excused themselves. I found them on the front porch, arguing. "God dammit," I heard the kid say and he never swore in front of women, and that included Liza. "God dammit, it would only make things worse."

"We'll never get a better chance," I heard Liza answer.

"What, I'm supposed to believe a sideshow trick—"

"It's not a sideshow trick."

"Yeah, well, there's only one way to find out, isn't there? Thanks, but no thanks."

They saw me and moved apart. Liza ducked back into the house and a few minutes later I heard dishes clattering and low voices as she helped the woman clean up.

WE CAMPED UNDER THOSE WILLOWS I'D SEEN, AND MOVED ON THE NEXT DAY. THE early morning sun cast our shadows ahead of us on the dusty road, and I'm thinking about how fresh and clean mornings used to smell but don't seem to anymore, when there's a rattle coming up behind us like



only a tin lizzie can make. It's the one from in front of the farmhouse; I recognized the star-shaped crack on the windshield.

The kid takes off running. The farmer pulls up and dives out of the car and goes after him. I take off after the farmer.

Liza stays on the road.

He'd collared the kid by the time I caught up to them, and I collared him and yelled, "What's going on?"

"He can do it," the farmer says. "The girl says he can do it!"

"She's crazy!" the kid gasps, having trouble talking with his collar twisted around his neck.

"What does who say he can do?" I asked, keeping my grip on the farmer the way he was keeping his grip on the kid.

"That girl. Back when she was helping with the dishes yesterday, she told my wife. He can make it rain!"

"You're crazy," I said.

"Then why'd he run?"

I looked around to call for Liza, to ask why the hell she'd pass on that stupid story to someone who already had enough trouble. But she wasn't there.

"Look," the farmer was saying, "you think I got enough gas left for this tin can that I can afford to run after you for nothing? She said you'd say you couldn't, but she swears you can."

The kid's stopped struggling now. He looks sort of pleading-like at the farmer and says, "Do you think if I could that I wouldn't?"

"How do I know? You might be like that old guy who said the soil blowing away was our fault for plowing up the buffalo grass and planting wheat. Breaking his goddamn cycle."

"Use your head, man," I said. "If you're going to ask anyone to make it rain, it'll have to be God."

"I've asked Him," he said. "I've prayed, and prayed, and prayed—"

He let go of the kid then and strode back to the car, and there was no pretending this time that what was on his face was sweat.

Liza was gone again.

"She can take care of herself," the kid said.

"Yeah, I guess she can," I said.

I don't think we spoke two words after that, until we hopped a freight just outside a gray little elevator town.

We had the car to ourselves, so it was safe enough to go to sleep, but we both sat up, looking through the open door at the stars like hope too distant to grasp.

"Why would Liza do something like that?" I said finally.

“Well, you heard the talk.”

“Where’d the talk come from?”

“I guess someone ran into someone else from back where I come from. My uncle told that hail story for a joke; he thought it was funny after a while. Problem is, he told the one about the rain, too. And I think he did believe that. That’s really why I left.”

“What rain?”

“I said we should have hail, and we did. I wished for snow, and we got snow. And it was so dry, I wished—for Uncle Bart’s sake, you know—I wished for rain.”

“That’s crazy. Besides, if you could make it rain just by wishing, why wouldn’t you do it for that poor sap back there?”

“Because I can’t make it stop!”

Honest to God, I was so mad. Now I knew how my mother felt the time she found my little sister screaming because my kid brother and me had teased her that if you poked your belly button, you’d fall apart and then my brother poked her in the belly button. I wished I had someone to lay into, the way Ma had laid into us.

“Look, Kid,” I said, “Weather’s an act of God. We’re well rid of that girl.”

THE TRAIN ROLLED ON. WE PICKED UP SOME COMPANY ALONG THE WAY, AND MORE on the next train. Once we passed a bunch of guys riding in the other direction, waving and yelling at us to go back, there was nothing back where they’d come from.

We stayed put, what the hell.

It was so nice and green and cool among the pines of the foothills that the kid started singing, “She’ll be comin’ round the mountain when she comes,” and some other guys chimed in.

But the green was bogus. There was always a whiff of smoke on the wind, and sometimes we’d see plumes of it. Guys from the railroad patrolled the tracks to put out any sparks from the engine or train wheels.

Then, middle of the night, the train stops with a rattle and bang, and someone outside yells, “All right, you bums, we know you’re in there, time to earn your fare!” The kid and I got hauled out with the rest, handed shovels, and told to march.

The smoke-smell was sharp now, and the night was hot in a way that had nothing to do with the season. The wind carried a purring, crackling sound, like a camp fire, only a camp fire sounds comforting. Not loud, but not even the tramp of the guys all around us could make it go away. I suppose we could have cut and run and no one would have been able to

stop us, but it was strange ground, not a place you'd want to be lost in, in the dark except for a forest fire.

At dawn we found ourselves in a long, narrow meadow. The sound was more like a bonfire now, clouds of smoke billowing towards us, with a pink tinge that sure as hell wasn't reflected sunrise. And someone yelled, "All right, you shiftless sons-of-bitches, start digging!"

What we were doing—not that anyone bothered to explain it to us—was digging up a break to prevent the fire crossing the meadow to the trees behind us. Well, that was hopeless. We could see the fire now, it was traveling through the tops of the trees, and all it would take was a good puff of wind for some sparks to jump the gap and then we'd be barbecue. When I pushed that shovel into the ground I felt like I was digging my own grave with a head start on hell.

Because the only thing you could see through the smoke was the flames, the fire-sound was a roar, and I thought my lungs were fried for sure—when out of the smoke lurches someone lugging two buckets of water, and by God it's Liza. All I cared about by then, though, was the water. I sucked down a dipper-full and soaked my handkerchief good to tie around my face, and then turned to tell the kid to do the same.

Liza had him by the arm, yelling at him.

"Leave him alone," I yell.

But Liza holds on, yelling, "Stop it! You can stop it!"

Just then what I'd been scared would happen, happened; the wind carried a spark across the meadow, and a pine tree behind us caught it and exploded like a rocket, and there we were, trapped in the middle with nowhere to run.

"Do you want us all to die?" she yells.

I didn't believe it at first. Not even when I felt the first drop. Not even when the guys started yelling, "Rain! By God, rain!"

The kid must have been holding that wish back so hard that when he finally let it out, it was like a dam bursting, no pat-pat-pat, but a pounding like thunder on the ground, and steam hissing until I think maybe we've missed being barbecued just to be steam-cooked. But the rain keeps coming hard and the steam kind of fades, and there's grown men laughing and dancing around like idiots, waving their shovels, soaked to the skin and not minding at all.

I don't know how long that went on, but it must have been awhile, because when I look down there's rivulets washing down the mountainside, carrying soot and dirt, and not just charred twigs, but small branches.

The kid hasn't been doing any dancing. He's just standing there, his

face screwed up so I know it isn't just rain on it.

And I remember.

He can't make it stop.

Now there's the occasional clump of dirt coming apart as it washes down the mountainside. The rivulets are wider, cutting through the ground where it's been burned, and as I watch I can see roots come into view as the dirt washes away. I think, mudslides. The others have thought of it too; they're getting the hell away from there, down the mountain.

The rain's pounding straight down so hard I can barely hear Liza when she yells at me; finally she tugs my sleeve. "Bill!" One braid's come loose, hair plastered across her face, and her shirt wet and clinging so I'm seeing parts of her that are new to me. "Bill! Do you think the fire's out? Really out?"

"I think we better get out while the getting's good."

She drops my arm. Then she holds her hands out in front of her, palms up, just at waist level.

Not a word of a lie, her fingers start to glow, like she has a flashlight held up tight to the backs of her hands.

I think, *I shoulda run*. Then I think, *But I wouldn't be seeing this if I had*. And then I think, *Do I want to see this?*

What I see is steam rising from her hands.

At first the light is just from her hands. And then, gradually, it's from above her, too, as the clouds break right over her head. Just a little, it's still raining where we are, but around Liza it's stopped.

The clear patch above her gets wider and wider, and the clouds pull away like frost on a window when you blow on it. The sun breaks through.

And pretty soon the rain stops completely.

Liza stood there for what seemed forever, steam rising around her. I doubt if she was any warmer than if she'd just run a race. But in a circle around where she stood, the ground was dry.

The kid's staring at her.

She looks at him and grins, and says, "I told you I was working on it!" and then she turns to me and says, "Isn't that swell?"

"Peachy," I mutter.

The kid's mouth is hanging open. She laughs at him. And then he starts to laugh.

After that performance I wouldn't have touched that girl for all the tea in China, but the kid throws his arms around her tight and hugs her and even kisses her.

She pulls away and grabs his hand.

“You see?” she says, “You can make it rain, because I can make it stop!”

The kid remembers me then, and says, “You hear that, Bill? Did you see that?”

I can see it in his eyes, his fortune’s made.

Especially now that he’s got himself a manager.

But he’s a good kid; it won’t change him. At least not for a while.

And then someone says, “Well. I guess I should be grateful that you didn’t join the circus.”

Liza let the kid’s hand drop and stood there, looking at the old man, looking the way I’d felt back in the forest fire when they’d told us to start digging. But she’s still—well, still Liza. “I can do it,” she says, defiant-like. “I did do it.”

“You and who else?” he says.

And she starts to protest, but he just says, “Come along. You too,” he adds to the kid. “If you want to.”

The kid hesitates maybe twenty, thirty seconds, then says, “All right.” And then he turns to me and says, “Thanks.”

And when the kid says that, the old guy nods to me. Just that, but I felt like I’d been handed I don’t know what. An IOU, maybe.

The old guy turns and walks away like he expects them to follow him. And they do.

The kid looks back once, to raise his hand to me.

IT’S NO BETTER ON THE WEST COAST THAN ANYWHERE ELSE.

But then they bombed Pearl Harbor, and I joined the Navy, and who do I run into in the recruiting office but my kid brother.

Maybe, like I said, an IOU.

I never saw any of them again. •

*Dedicated to the memory of my father and mother, who farmed in Iowa in the 1930s, and also to my four oldest sisters, who were born there.*

*Elias stepped forward, blood-stained arm raised. Now he knew what he'd tasted, though he'd never tasted it before. His soul....*

# Soul Taster

Ken Rand

THE PRISONER'S BLOOD TASTED COPPERY. ELIAS SPAT THE scarlet taint on the ground. "This one's soul," he indicated the whimpering man on his knees in the courtyard before the tribunal. "Black with sin. He knows murder, adultery, paganism."

The judge made a mark in a book and nodded to two soldiers, who dragged the emaciated, ragged man away. A red trail from his slashed wrist followed, mingled with the bloody streak left by those who'd gone before him in the long, hot afternoon.

A soldier pushed another prisoner to his knees before the tribunal. The soldier slashed the man's arm with a short sword. The prisoner hissed in pain. Elias stifled a yawn—it had been a long day—bent to the proffered font, and sucked.

He stood. King Nathan the Just's soldiers peered from their positions at the ruined gate, around the prisoners' keep, and along the crenelated walls of the vanquished Duke Onan Shear's former castle. Slaves fluttered fans to cool the sweat on the brows of the three tribunal judges, who sipped cold drinks. The prisoners, huddled in a corral in the open courtyard, sat or lay in mute fear, waiting their turn before the Soul Taster.

The white sun burned down through a merciless, windless sky, heavy with the stench of fear and death. Crows called among the piled dead in the battlefield beyond the castle walls, at the walls and broken gate, and in the smoking debris around the inner courtyard.

Elias swirled the prisoner's salty essence in his mouth, as if tasting wine. He spat. He wiped his chin with a blood-soaked towel and nodded to the tribunal.

"Sin, black as night. He knows murder, theft, deceit, dishonor to family and lord, blasphemy, witchcraft. Much more. This one is—"

"No, please," the prisoner wailed. "I beg you. Spare me. For the sake of my wife and my unborn child."

Lord Illin, First Judge, raised an eyebrow. "You beg for mercy in the name of those you have dishonored?"

Elias sucked at a bit of gristle between his teeth. He frowned. Something about the taste of this prisoner nagged at him.

"In God's name, my lord, I have not—"

"*Silence.*"

The prisoner bowed to the icy command. He quaked, body sweat-slick.

Elias licked his lips thoughtfully. The taste was—different.

Lord Illin waved a dismissive hand at the prisoner, and two soldiers bent to haul him away.

"Wait." The prisoner struggled. The First Judge waved for the soldiers to hurry about their duties. The day grew long and would not soon cool.

Elias wiped frothy lips on a towel, watching the exchange. Thinking.

"I will give you his soul," the man cried, "if you spare my life. *His* soul, whom I serve. *His*. For my life."

Again, Lord Illin waved, impatient. One soldier slapped the prisoner with a gauntleted fist. The man grunted and blood sprouted on his brow, soaking his face. The soldiers continued to drag his semiconscious body away.

"Wait." Elias stepped forward, blood-stained arm raised. *His* soul, the prisoner had said. And Elias now knew what he'd tasted, though he'd never tasted it before. *His* soul.

The soldiers hesitated, looking back at the tribunal for instructions. First Judge Illin nodded for them to wait, lip curled in impatience.

"Speak, Soul Taster."

"May I approach your lordships?" The judges exchanged glances, eyebrows raised at the irregularity, and nodded.

Elias approached, bowed, and bent across the tribunal table to speak

in a hoarse whisper. The judges gagged at his carrion breath. Elias ignored the nobles' discomfort.

"I have never met this prisoner, and I do not know his name. Yet I know him."

"How so?"

"I have tasted his darkness." Elias smiled, crooked teeth pink, the gums purple-black with old blood.

The First Judge drew back and raised eyebrows. "Say on."

"When he says 'I can give you *his* soul,' he can mean but one."

Lord Illin paled. "You don't mean—"

Elias nodded. Licked his lips, snakelike.

The three judges conferred in whispers. At last Illin turned to Elias, who stood back, blood-caked hands folded reverently across his chest, head bowed.

Lord Illin motioned Elias to lean toward him. Elias complied. "Be clear, Soul Taster. This one would name the body in which the soul of the hated Ovegod Jeter, the Evil One *himself*, dwells?"

"I have tasted the taint of it in his blood. The day has come."

"How is that you can taste the knowledge of it," Lord Illin said, "yet not the name?"

Elias sighed, weariness etched on his brow. "Darkness conceals much. I sense darkness, and sometimes what lies behind it, like shadows. I can taste crimes like blasphemy, adultery, witchcraft. But the Evil One is clever. His stealth is uncanny." He shrugged, an apology. "I have never tasted the like before. I am—mortal."

Again, the judges conferred in agitated whispers.

"Could he—" Lord Illin paused thoughtfully. "Could he lie? To save his neck? Deliver an innocent rather than—?"

Elias nodded, understanding. "Our enemy is uncanny."

"You will be provided a torturer, to ensure he confesses true, and betrays no innocent. We will witness. But let us retire for a moment first, and refresh ourselves."

Elias bowed. "What of the other prisoners? Shall I continue to taste their souls?"

Illin sighed and muttered something Elias barely caught. It might have been "Who cares what befalls this scum," or similar words. He conferred with his comrades again and ordered the prisoners condemned. "They all sin," he pronounced, loudly, so the witnesses could hear. "The tribunal does no good service to confirm what is clear and known. Execute them all, now."

Elias heard a barely perceptible murmur from among the soldiers



gathered around. Slumped shoulders and glazed eyes betrayed bone-deep battle weariness. As Elias perceived it for the first time, so too did their leaders, the judges of the tribunal. They seemed surprised.

The First Judge sighed, resigned. "Rest, all," he called loudly to his captain and troops. "Feast and rest. On the morrow at cock crow, we begin."

The soldiers murmured their content and went about their soldierly business.

Guard around the captives' pen was doubled. "Two score remain," one judge muttered to another as they left the yard, "and among them hides the soul of the enemy of all God-fearing men. I will not sleep well tonight."

"I would hate to wear the Soul Taster's sandals when it comes time to try *that* soul." Elias heard the group's muffled laughter and looked away.

The judges retired for the eve to their tents outside the castle, beyond the battlefield wasteland. The sun dropped behind the castle walls, cool shade to some, and chill to others.

After a long day of tasting captured troops' blood, Elias craved a soothing drink of cold, clear water to wash the salty grit from his mouth. He found a tin cup at the guard station beside the torn and burnt gate and walked to the castle moat.

A stream served as moat, running from Terrion Mount past the castle and south to join the Long River in the Yemada Plain. A bend in the river formed a protective arch around three parts of the castle. A steep embankment formed the fourth side, making a natural fortress.

Brought down in a day's siege by King Nathan the Just's army.

Elias knelt on the stream bank, a good half-mile upstream from the castle, and filled his cup. He tilted it back to drink, reveling in the clean glacial taste, marvelously natural. God's own handiwork, untainted by man's sins.

"I often wondered what the Soul Taster tastes when he eats."

Elias started, dropping the tin cup. He bowed from where he kneeled to the judge, Lord Illin, who stood a few paces away.

"I apologize, lordship. I did not hear you approach."

"You eat no meat. Yet no soul remains in dead flesh."

"It is not good for the digestion, my lord, nor the palate, which I must keep sharp for my calling. All things have souls." Elias stood at the judge's nodded permission, hands folded, head bowed. Illin sat on a stool that a slave placed near him. The slave withdrew twenty paces and tried to make himself invisible.

"Except the body in which dwells the Evil One's soul."

"I amend: all *living* things have souls. The body the Evil One inhabits has a soul. Jeter's. Difficult to penetrate, that darkness, even for me. How may I serve my lord?"

"Tell me of the prisoner who would confess the Evil One's whereabouts."

"What of him?"

"I watched your face in the courtyard as he bargained for his life. I wonder."

"Wonder, my lord?"

"Did it not seem odd how quickly he offered to confess? Others before him must have known the identity of the Ovegod's host body. Yet, none stepped forth. Why?"

"Enchantment? Fear?"

"Fear? The Duke's head is spiked at the gate. Who did they fear?"

Elias took a breath, composing himself, despite his heart hammering in his throat. "I believe, my lord, the captives fear the Evil One, whose soul is among them still. Their own fear enchants them."

"Yet the prisoner offered to confess. He betrays his God. Why, Soul Taster? Why?"

Elias shrugged, moving slowly lest his trembling betray him. "Let us ask him on the morrow."

"In the course of time, Jeter's host's blood would have passed over your tongue, anyway. As we would test all the prisoners. So we had planned. Correct?"

"It is likely, my lord," Elias said through tight lips.

"Would you not have tasted—*Him*, then? Eventually?"

Elias shrugged. "He is uncanny. We know so little of His ways. I found knowledge of Him tainted in this prisoner today as so slight a shadow—I confess I almost missed it."

Lord Illin stood silent for a long time. Then: "Your power is imperfect?"

"As are all things human. Whereas, Jeter, the Ovegod—"

"I see." And the First Judge turned on his heel and walked away.

SOLDIERS, THOSE AWAKE AT SUNRISE, WARMED THEMSELVES ON FIRES IN THE courtyard, on the walls, and elsewhere inside the castle and beyond. On those many small fires chickens, rabbits, cats, and dogs roasted. No cock lived to crow the dawn.

The soldiers made excuses to abandon their duties to witness the tribunal's assembly in the courtyard. Their commanders did not object. They too stood as witness in the yard and on the overlooking walls.

The tribunal assembled as they had the day before, a fresh white linen cloth on the table. They faced the prisoner and the torturer and settled with grave dignity into place before First Judge Lord Illin nodded to proceed.

As the day before, except for the crows at feast, silence descended on the courtyard.

A soldier pushed the prisoner forward onto his knees, the one who the day before had offered to confess, and the torturer did his job.

The first screams scattered crows into the sky, where they cawed, annoyed. They soon adapted to the screams and returned to their feast.

In time, the prisoner swooned and Illin nodded to the torturer to halt. The torturer's pale blubbery skin shown with sweat and small dots of fresh blood. He dropped a many-tailed whip in a sack he'd brought with him, sat on a stool, and toweled himself down, awaiting further command.

The judges likewise took the opportunity to refresh themselves. Slaves poured fragrant cold mead into stone mugs.

Elias stood, hands folded, indifference etched on his face. The torture was redundant. Hadn't the prisoner agreed to confess? Still, the established procedures must be followed. It was, after all, for the greater good.

At last, the prisoner regained consciousness. The judges deemed his tongue lubricated enough by his own pain and blood that he would tell only truth when asked the question.

"Who?" Illin bent forward, as did the others, the torturer, Elias, and the soldiers.

The man tried to utter a name, but his dry tongue stuck in his mouth. A splash of cold water loosened the whispered phrase: "Timon the Red."

"Is this person among your comrades?" A judge pointed at the captive compound across the courtyard. "Among those?"

The man nodded.

"You will point to him." The judges stood and walked to the compound gate. Two soldiers bore the prisoner along.

In the compound, a small corral of sticks and brambles lashed together with rawhide, huddled the miserable prisoners. None moved, but for their eyes. Their feral eyes, dark and haunted, watched the procession outside their keep.

The tortured prisoner aimed a finger at a tall, red-haired man in the arena. The other prisoners' heads swiveled as if mounted on windvanes to fix on the accused.

Who laughed.

Timon the Red laughed when he realized his comrade was naming his body host of the Ovegod Jeter, the Evil One Incarnate. He shook his head and laughed. He laughed a staccato cackle—madness. Drool spilled from his open mouth and his arms and legs pulled into a fetal position. He laughed, face red, contorted, shaking his head: “Nononono—”

“Fetch him.” The First Judge nodded to two soldiers and, without further ado, turned back to the tribunal table. The other judges followed, as did the torturer and Elias. A murmur flitted among the soldiers as they dragged the mad prisoner forth. The one who confessed Timon the Red as the Evil One was forgotten, left where he lay, his life spared as reward for his confession.

The judges dismissed the torturer with a tossed coin. The silent man bowed, gathered his gear, gave Elias a sidelong glance, one colleague to another, and left.

“Soul Taster, step forth.” Illin waved. Elias stood before the tribunal table. He bowed.

“You have tasted countless sinners’ souls in your time, tirelessly,” Illin said, voiced low and husky with wonder. “I have watched. You have tasted wickedness that would have left lesser men mindless, would have sent others screaming to their mothers for comfort, or to early graves. Murder, adultery, paganism, witchcraft, deceit, greed—these and more sins you have tasted. I confess I could not have withstood it, not for a lifetime, as you have. How you do it, I cannot guess.”

The First Judge paused, took a deep breath, then his voice rose so all could hear. “To your duty, Soul Taster. Do it.”

In the silent yard, and the growing heat, face impassive, Elias nodded assent.

A soldier pushed the laughing prisoner forward. He pulled the man’s arm away from his side and held it out. The soldier looked at the tribunal, received their nod. Then he looked at Elias and got his.

The soldier slit the prisoner’s arm with a dagger.

The man hissed, laughter ceased, as a red line grew on the outstretched arm, near the wrist. The line widened and began to drip onto the courtyard dirt.

Elias sucked at the substance of the prisoner’s soul.

At once, Elias sprayed red away from him, a hideous font. He screamed, an animal in a trap, and fell to the ground on his back and convulsed, spine rigid, head and heels banging against the hard dirt, eyes white. He clawed at his chest, ripped his cloak to shreds, fingers gouged his bony chest.

The tribunal stood as one in horror, eyes agog. “Hold him down.” Illin

pointed to a soldier. "See he does not hurt himself."

Two soldiers pinioned Elias' arms and two pinned his thrashing legs. Another tried to keep Elias from dashing his brains against the hard ground.

In time, the convulsions eased, and the fascinated onlookers drew breath. Elias looked around him, eyes wide, tried to speak. "I—I'm all right." He coughed, spasmed.

They helped him sit and water was brought, which Elias gulped. He stood, with help, on shaky legs.

"Soul Taster?" Illin leaned toward him, hand extended, almost touching his, brow knit with concern.

"Never have I—" Elias coughed again. "Never have I tasted such foulness, such black evil. Not just sin, to which an ordinary man might succumb. But evil, pure and black."

The judges and soldiers stepped back from the prisoner, who sat, head wobbly, eyes glazed, breath shallow. He blinked, tried to focus.

"In this body, then," Lord Illin pointed at the man, voice husked with awe, fascination, "dwells the soul of the Evil One, Jeter the Ovegod?"

Elias nodded, spit.

"Lies." The prisoner found sudden strength, focus on Elias. "The other one lied to you—"

"Silence." Illin drew back in distaste.

"—to save himself. He hates me, always has."

"Silence him," Illin ordered. A soldier withdrew a sword from a scabbard and stepped toward the prisoner.

"As do you, Soul Taster." The prisoner caught Elias' eye. "You lie as well."

Elias gasped and flushed with shock. Anger.

The soldier hesitated, looking for a command from the tribunal. But the First Judge hesitated, looked at Elias, a frown creasing his high forehead.

Elias swallowed a bellow of rage between gritted teeth.

"Tell them the truth, Soul Taster. Tell them—"

The prisoner's head lolled back from his slit throat, gushing blood in a fine arc. Elias tossed the sword on the ground, the one he'd snatched from the soldier. He stepped back, folded hands across his chest, head bowed. Weary. His anger had been appeased by sudden, impulsive action, as quickly gone as it had arrived.

Crows cawed from the battlefield beyond the castle walls. In the courtyard, the only sound was a gurgle from the thrashing prisoner's throat.

Soon the man lay still, blood purple in the dirt.

The judges conferred in a whispered huddle. At last, they nodded and Lord Illin spoke. "Burn this body." He pointed to the dead prisoner. "Here. Do it now."

Soldiers brought firewood and a torch. The stench of burnt flesh rose into the air on a mushrooming black cloud. Soldiers, judges, and Elias, all left the courtyard.

First Judge Lord Illin motioned to Elias to join him in a leisurely walk along the battlements. A private conversation.

For a long while, the two walked side by side in silence. "In all your years, Soul Taster, did you ever imagine you would witness the day?"

"No, my lord. Never."

"Yet hasn't it been our goal since our mutual charges began, yours and mine? To seek out not only sin in men, but to find and eradicate sin's very source?"

"As we have done today."

"Have we?" The judge looked at Elias, eyebrow raised.

Elias sighed. "No, my lord. We have not. Today's victory was—small."

"Why so?" Illin sounded as if drilling a novitiate class in catechisms.

"Because when death occurred to Timon the Red, the soul in the body returned to its immaterial plane. So it is written. So it is known."

The judge nodded. "The Evil One lives on."

"To seek a new host through which to manifest among men."

"So, Soul Taster, our work continues."

"Now, in nine months' time, we test babes." Elias sighed. "Where innocence should dwell, we seek evil."

"For this is how the evil passes from body to body, to manifest itself among us. Or so it is written."

"So it is known."

Illin nodded. "I have no doubt you will deport yourself with your usual humility and dignity." He smiled as he placed a solicitous hand on Elias' sleeve.

Elias found his own smile and cast his eyes down.

As they stood looking out over the battlefield, strewn with dead, silence again befell them.

"Or did he speak the truth?" Lord Illin addressed the moat below, into which he flicked small stones.

"The prisoner? That his betrayer lied?" Elias shrugged. "I *did* find deceit among that one's sins."

"I meant about you."

Elias chuckled. "I confess my sins daily to my confessor. Deceit is never among them."

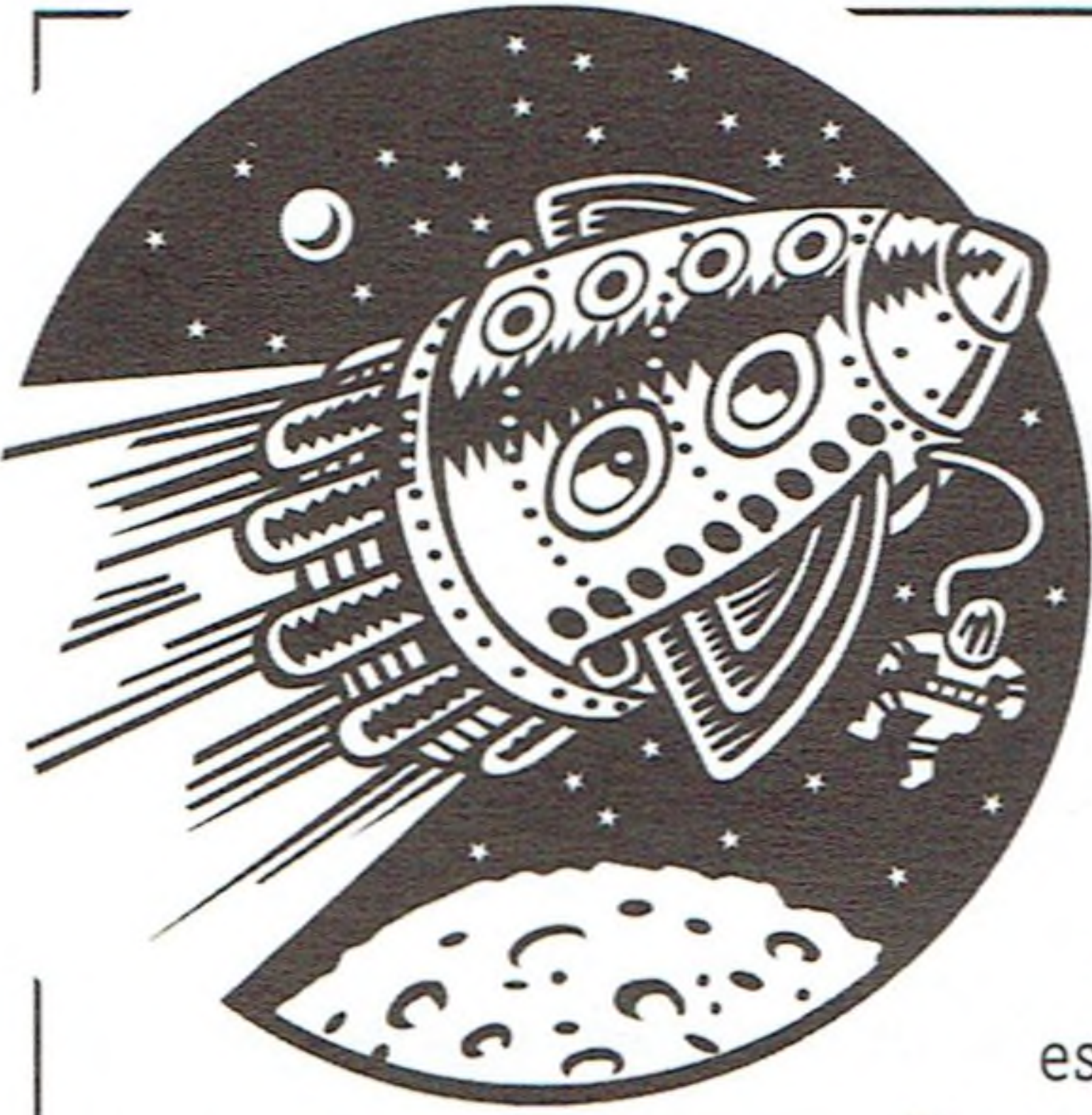
“Hm. But would it not be interesting if—”

“If what, my lord?”

“If we are wrong about how He passes among us. If Jeter the Ovegod, the Evil One’s very soul, dwelt within—dare I say it? The Soul Taster’s body? What better place to hide among us?”

“What better place, my lord? Hm. The body of a judge?”

First Judge Lord Illin laughed. Elias, the Soul Taster, joined him. •



## Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection at the University of Alberta Library

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*“Road-kill makes for a nice organic fertilizer. Chop it up into ten pieces, scatter it in the soil bed, and you’re good to go.”*

# The Gathering

Michael Dewey

“I have seen great surprise expressed in horticultural works at the wonderful skill of gardeners, in having produced such splendid results from such poor materials...”

— Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

TED TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE STRING BEANS AND NEARLY soiled his overalls. They were enormous! Beyond the size of anything his Aunt Mag had managed to grow in all her living years.

“Holy cripes!” He plucked one off the vine for closer examination. “If Old Maggie could see this...”

He was going to say she’d roll over in her grave, but that was no longer possible.

The bean was longer and plumper than any string bean he’d ever seen, at least twice the length of his hand as he measured from the bottom of his palm to the tip of his middle finger. Ted caressed the vegetable, unconsciously exploring its hills and valleys. Nearing the end, his fingertips felt something odd, a small but firm, plate-like texture. A closer look sent a sudden jolt through his body.

“Holy cri—”



He dropped the bean and thumped his chest.

It couldn't be.

He caught his breath and stooped to retrieve the fallen vegetable, as if he were about to handle dynamite. His straw hat fell off and allowed the sun a gander at his exposed head, just ripe for a good burning. Ignoring the hat and squatting like a baseball catcher, he picked up the bean and looked again. This time he could look at it without flinching.

The bean had a fingernail. A human fingernail.

Closer inspection showed that the bean indeed resembled a massive gnarled green finger. The kind a kid named Jack might find on a giant's hand at the top of a fairy tale beanstalk. He stared for a spell, wondering how such a thing could've happened.

"Freak of nature," Ted muttered, replacing the hat which—along with the overalls, and despite his best efforts—made him look like a middle-aged Tom Sawyer. Farm life. Quite a change from his former one as an accountant. He felt himself smiling despite himself.

Ten paces back towards the house the smile vanished. He darted back to the beanstalks, surveyed the other plants.

His jaw dropped.

Every bean in the garden had a fingernail.

TWO NIGHTS LATER TED MADE BEAN FINGERS FOR SUPPER. WITHOUT THE FINGERNAILS of course. He snapped these off as you would the ends of any bean, as he'd seen Aunt Mag do countless times. His imagination ran wild as he prepared the beans for cooking: seed-pod knuckles, the snapping sound that of breaking of bones. At one point he almost threw the whole lot into the garbage, nearly overcome with the sickening feeling he hadn't experienced since dissecting frogs in seventh grade biology. But the nausea passed, and soon enough the veggies were boiling away in the pot.

What else could he do with them? Sell them at the farmer's market? Nobody would buy beans with fingernails on them. And even though they were the biggest beans he'd ever seen, he could hardly enter them in the Blue Ribbon Vegetable Contest at the Hillsboro County Fair. People would think he was Lucifer's stepchild or something. So: eat them, or let them rot. And Aunt Mag would surely come back to haunt him if he did the latter.

Still, he kept his eyes shut when he shoveled the first forkful past his lips, fending off surging mental images of dining cannibals. To his relief, they tasted fine and went well with his lemon chicken and mashed potatoes with butter and sour cream. For dessert he had a slice of pecan pie and really bad gas. He spent half an hour on the toilet passing evil wind

and not much else.

“Crazy, old Aunt Mag... You and your organic garden. What in the world have we set in motion?” He was talking to himself now, just like Mag used to before she’d been killed by the drunk driver. “Stubborn old coot, I never should’ve let you do the gathering by yourself that day.”

The swirling of the flushing toilet brought him back from his trance.

Time to water the garden. He yanked up his pants.

That’s when it struck him. He hadn’t checked the other vegetables for deformities. After discovering the anthropomorphic beans, Ted had avoided the garden and devoted two days to crunching numbers.

My God, why didn’t I think to check the other plants? If beans could grow into fingers, then surely...

Neglecting his boots, Ted made haste out the back door and across the lawn. His socks acquired grass stains with each lumbering stride.

“Aunt Mag’s prize-winning veggies,” he repeated over and over. An incantation. A useless one, he feared.

He hopped the fence awkwardly and dropped to his knees before the first row of lettuce.

“Oh, don’t tell me!”

Maybe his eyes were playing tricks. He rubbed his fingers over a massive, leafy head. He felt the sensation of fuzz. Small white hairs, half an inch long. Each leaf was covered in it, and—checking further up the rows—each head of lettuce as well. Same with the cabbages. Furry with human hair.

In a frenzy, Ted scrambled from row to row, from vegetable to vegetable. The peppers, long and pointy, felt like cartilage and had holes like ... like nostrils. He unearthed a handful of carrots and found mammoth pointing fingers, complete with knuckles and nails. They were like the beany digits of some race of orange cretins. Another yank revealed radishes transmuted into big toes. He plucked the potatoes from the ground and dropped them, horrified: they gazed back with human eyes. He turned to the pumpkins ... gigantic orange globes with strange, flimsy lumps protruding from the sides. Ears!

“Maggie! What have we done?” he moaned.

He kicked one aside and moved over to the ... cantaloupes. Surely, not the canta—

*“What have I done?”*

The huge round melons had nipples.

On every plant he found some oddity, some monstrous distortion of nature. Each shattered the bounds of agricultural possibility.

“Aunt Mag’s prize-winning veggies,” he cried, deflated. “Everything’s

gone haywire. It's all a waste."

He dropped to the ground, his face collapsing into the soil like a wilting plant, sobbing.

*Sorry, Aunt Mag. Burn it all. I've got to burn it all.* He rolled over in the dirt, felt something smooth and firm pressing up against his cheek. A big, juicy, plum tomato rested inches away from his watery eyes.

He hadn't checked the tomatoes.

OF COURSE, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF TED HADN'T SHOWED UP unexpectedly at his aunt's home in New Hampshire four years before. It had been a sunny July afternoon, back when the old bird was very much alive and kicking.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle and a chimp's aunt!" Margaret Munson said, poking her head up from the garden. "Is that Theodore James Harrison I see?"

She cocked her head to avoid the glare of the sun and raised a gloved hand to her brow. Bristly silver hair dangled in a long pony tail from under a sun-faded red bandanna. Her short legs straddled the tomato plants. Dirt caked the knees of her patched denim overalls.

"Yes, Aunt Mag," said the tall man in the neatly pressed gray Armani suit and powder-blue tie. "It's me, Ted." He stopped at the short fence that encircled her garden, his face carefully devoid of expression.

"Surely the creek must've risen. Now I was expecting the milkman, but when I saw you coming, I said to myself, this fellow's dressed up rather fancy for a milkman. Couldn't be the postman neither, because he usually comes at noon and it's well past noon now, and besides I already got my mail to—"

"It's me, Mag. We've established that it's me," Ted said, irritated. "How are you?" He shifted his briefcase from right arm to left, already regretting the question.

"Me? Well, I'm chugging along like the Chattanooga Choo-choo. Taking the long, long way to Tipperary, Zippadee-doo-daa-ing my way through, my oh my, yet another wonderful day." She inhaled the clean country air through her nostrils. "Still breathing, Theodore. And that's half the battle when you're m—"

"That's great, Aunt Mag," he interrupted. "Glad to hear it. Listen. Mother asked me to pay you a visit."

Mag bent over to pull some weeds. "How do you like my farm? Completely organic, you know. Nothing but natural fertilizers."

Ted shrugged.

She smacked her forehead with an open, soiled palm. "Oh, Maggie

May—Maggie May—here tomorrow—gone today. What kind of hostess am I?” She shook her head and pointed to the gate. “Come on in, Theodore. Why don’t you roll up those fancy sleeves and lend your old Aunt Margaret a hand? Come tip-toe through the tulips, or tomato plants, as the case may be.”

“Aunt Mag! You’re not listening to me.” Ted dropped his briefcase and propped two frustrated fists on his hips. The thought of playing in the dirt disgusted him. “Please try to focus, because I don’t have time to waste. It’s nearly four o’clock and I still have three clients yet to visit.” He let out a deep, impatient breath. “Mother asked me to pay a visit because she’s worried about the ... she’s worried about you. She said you might need some help.”

“Your momma? Worried about me?” Mag’s joints creaked as she raised herself up again, a fist full of weeds thumping against her flat chest. “Come now, Theodore. I haven’t seen front nor back of your momma in almost ten years. And you, my only nephew, going on twelve years now. I know I’m loonier than a rooster crowing midnight, but I’m not buying that crock of road apples no matter who’s selling it—you *or* your momma!”

She disgustedly threw the weeds into a pile and yanked off her gloves. “Look at you. Forty years old and pouting like a pampered French poodle. Don’t you *dare* come marching on to my property after all this time like John Philip Sousa, huffing and puffing on your tuba, dictating brassity-ass terms to me.” The old lady couldn’t see as well as she used to, but she could still bore holes with her glaring green eyes, like Venetian glass orbs, fired with anger. “You’ve got some nerve!”

“Aunt Mag, wait.” Ted removed his hands from his hips and placed them carefully on the fence. “You’ve got it all wrong. I ... we ... I just came by to help you with your taxes. Mother said that you would probably need help wi—”

“Do I look like a flapjack in a frying pan to you? I’m not one for gambling, but I’d be willing to bet you’ve got some kind of Magna Carta in that Ivy League briefcase of yours that you want me to scrawl my Maggie Hancock on. Some parchment full of legal mumbo-jumbo that puts me in one of them shut-in places where I can spend the rest of my days wading in my own drool. Of course, leaving you and your momma, with her newly found concern, to sell my house and farm before I even have a chance to wet the bed.” She formed the letter C with each hand and began rubbing her wrists, alternating back and forth in quick motions. The friction sounded like anxious sandpaper on wood. “It relieves the tension,” she said, staring down his judging eyes. “Tension that wasn’t

here before you came along. Now if you want to help me, Theodore, grab a rake and start weeding. I've got some prize-winning vegetables to grow."

"WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO NOW, AUNT MAG?" TED ASKED, FAILING TO KEEP THE indignation out of his voice. Doing the books for his aunt's two-bit farm stand was one thing, but geriatric daycare was something else entirely.

"Oh, here, there, and everywhere; following the Yellow Brick Road; climbing every mountain. The hills are alive with the sound of music, you know. I'm going out to have a listen and you're coming with me, Theodore." She grabbed his arm and pulled him up from the table. "Those accounts can wait another day or two. Right now I need help with the gathering."

"The gathering?" What the hell was the old biddy up to now?

"That's right, the gathering. I'll need you to carry some of the heavier loads for me." She threw two dirty brown burlap sacks at him. She laughed when one opened in mid-flight and landed across his face, like a largemouth bass swallowing a baited hook. "Let's go. I'll drive."

They pattered along the roads of the New Hampshire countryside in her old beat-up Subaru Brat. Maroon and rust colored. She called it the tractor and never pushed the needle past twenty. She talked up her usual storm of oral cocktails along the way—part memory, part song lyrics, part homemade expressions.

Ted sat shotgun with the window down. The breeze helped drown out the old lady's yapping at least, and brought some relief to his hot, bothered face. In the past month he'd learned to thoroughly dread these weekly trips to Maggie's, but his mother had convinced him of the long-term fruits they'd reap from his short-term suffering. Securing the family position in Maggie's will was well worth enduring the annoying oddities of his ostracized aunt.

The old woman was obviously playing tag with senility. And yet, strangely, Ted felt that *he* was "it." He was the one chasing after her; he wondered if she'd ever be caught. She was so damned unpredictable. Uncontrollable. Dangerous, even. Elusive as a moth, she flew erratic and free-form. She fluttered through life, breaking through all his comfortable categorical nettings.

Ted found comfort in bottom lines. And the bottom line was this: visiting Aunt Mag was a high maintenance project, much too time consuming for a busy accountant like himself. He longed for the day when she finally passed on to that great organic garden in the sky. Then he'd be free of the old coot once and for all, free to sell the damn house and the

miserable acre she called a farm. If the real estate market stayed its present course, he and Mother stood to make a bundle.

The bottom line: he was in it for the money. So for now he was stuck with her. Stuck listening to her bothersome droning, her mindless prattle. And stuck with this... gathering, as she called it. The latest of Aunt Mag's mystery errands.

The Subaru's tires whined as Mag jammed on the brakes. "Whoop-eee! Jumping jackpots! Theodore, grab the shovel."

Stiff-arming the dashboard, Ted glanced ahead and immediately understood what the gathering was all about.

"O natural," Mag said with a crooked smile, running out to examine the raccoon carcass in the middle of the road.

Ted neared the beastly corpse, flat shovel in hand. His innards protested. The creature's head was obliterated. Run over about a dozen times, he guessed. All that remained was an unsightly clump of blood, fur and pulverized bone smeared into the pavement. It was clearly a raccoon; the tail was the giveaway, thick and striped like Daniel Boone's cap.

"Loosen that tie and start scraping, my lad," she said, holding a burlap sack open. "Quick, before another car comes along."

"I—I—I can't do this, Aunt Mag. This is... utterly repulsive." He caught a whiff of the foul stench. His stomach churned acid. He hated the sight of blood.

"Well, aren't we just a pussy in a panther's clothing. It won't bite you. Doesn't even have a head anymore." She snapped the burlap bag. "Let's go!"

"Mag, surely you don't intend to..."

"Bury the damn thing? Of course I'm going to bury it. What in the name of God's green acres do you think I'm going to do, eat it for breakfast? I always said, there's no sense in wasting a perfectly good dead critter. Look at it. Sure as heck won't help the pavement grow."

"Ooooooh, bury it." Thank heavens.

"Poor thing deserves a proper burial, don't you think?"

"So this is the gathering? Road-kill patrol?"

"Chicken in the bread pan and Johnny come marching home! Give it any name you like. Listen, Theodore. Don't be turning up that college-educated nose of yours. Road-kill makes for a nice organic fertilizer. Returns all those natural nutrients to the soil. Manure, dead birds and fish guts work the best, but next best thing is a good, old fashioned hunk of road-kill. Chop it up into ten pieces, scatter it in the soil bed, and you're good to go. That's what I say. Come on now, shake a leg."

She snapped the sack again. “Quit groveling and start shoveling. I’ve got some prize-winning vegetables to grow, and we’ve got to get to the vet’s by four thirty. He’s got a sick rabbit that’s not long for this world.”

“IT’S FIXED, THEODORE! I’M TELLING YOU, IT’S FIXED. THAT MARTHA DEWITT WINS the blue ribbon every year, no matter what her crop looks like.” Maggie balled her bony fingers into tense fists. “Mother Nature’s weeping as we speak, Theodore. Crying tears of injustice. Niagara Falls on a rainy day. Canadian side, of course.”

Ted shrugged. Hicksville County Fairs were absurd by nature. A waste of time.

“Did you see her cucumbers, Theodore? Puny and flaccid, like my poor John’s—”

“Mag!”

“Well, I’m mad, Theodore. Maddier than a Hatter drinking coffee at a tea party. Poor Johnny, God rest his precious soul.”

“You’ve got a right to be mad, Mag,” he said, humoring her.

“You’re telling me the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God. That judge is nothing but a horny toad around that Martha’s cleavage. Hornier than a pup with two peters, I’ll say. Influences his judgment every year. It’s not right.”

The drive home from the fair was nearly maddening. In the three years since Ted had been helping Aunt Mag, she’d come in second or third every time. And her venting grew exponentially with each set-back. He tuned her out, bristling at the thought of dealing with her burgeoning dementia. She was losing more of her faculties each day. Memory loss. Spells of disorientation. Signs of Uncle Alzheimer moving into her attic.

“Aren’t you coming in the house, Mag?” Ted paused in the driveway, holding a basket of second-place red bell peppers.

He turned when she didn’t respond. She was still in the car. She was crying.

He dropped the basket. He’d never seen the thick-skinned old Yankee so vulnerable. He opened the passenger door and leaned in to help her out. She clutched at him desperately. He stiffened—an instant’s instinctive revulsion—then forced himself to relax. Her frail arms hugged him for dear life. She soaked his shirt with tears. She cried—a good, long cry—and after that came the rocking.

“There, there, Teddy bear,” she said.

Rocking gently.

“There, there, Teddy bear. Auntie’s here, so don’t be scared.” She was rocking *him* now, like a baby.

*What did she say? Teddy Bear?*

“There, there, Teddy bear. Auntie’s here, so don’t be scared.” She was singing softly now. And the melody unnerved him, but not as much as what followed.

Moving her hand between them, she unbuttoned her blouse.

“There, there, Teddy bear. Auntie’s here, so don’t be scared.”

By the time Ted backed away, her small, wrinkled breast was exposed.

“Mag! What are you—”

“There, there Teddy bear. I know you’re hungry, but Auntie’s here.”

THE FIRE GLOWED WARM AND GENTLE, LIKE THE BALM OF A DESERT BREEZE. MAGGIE sat alertly in her rocker, sipping tea with honey. Ted tried to relax in the La-Z-Boy beside her. She’d had a good nap after the fair, after... She’d been exhausted. Overwhelmed.

“Aunt Mag,” he began. “Did you...”

It took more courage than he’d expected.

“Did you used to call me Teddy bear?”

The confusion on her face gave way to a smile from decades past. “Why yes, yes I did. Did your momma tell you that?”

“No, Mag. You called me that this afternoon.”

“Did I?” Her eyes showed the laboring strains of a failing memory. “Well, I haven’t called you that for a long, long time. Not since...”

She trailed off, drifting like smoke up the chimney.

“Not since what?” He leaned over and touched her spotted hand.

“Not since your momma told me stay away from you. Told me leave her family alone until you were a grown man.”

“Mother said that? I knew there were problems between you two, but why would she...?” He had to know. “Was it because of the breast-feeding?”

Mag said nothing. For a few moments the only sound came from the birch logs crackling in the fire.

“Yes, because of the breast-feeding...and because of the drinking.” She sipped her tea.

“Drinking? You mean you—”

“I mean *her*,” she said softly.

“No, what do you—”

She fixed him with a stare: he felt like a deer in headlights. “I mean,” she said in a voice much stronger than it had any right to be, “that I was breast-feeding you because your momma was a drunk! A flat-out, falling-down-on-her-face, hollow-legged drunk!”

Her words paralyzed him.

“It wasn’t supposed to be that way,” she continued after a moment,



calm again. “We were supposed to have our babies together—your momma and I—but that’s not what happened.”

“You were pregnant too?” He squeezed her hand. “I had no idea.”

“Your cousin Melinda Jean was stillborn. My little Melinda.”

“Oh, Aunt Mag. I’m sorry. I never knew.”

“I know, dear. I know. It’s not the kind of thing people talk about at the dinner table or at family reunions. It brings up a belly full of hurt.” She swallowed another mouthful of tea. “Understand, Theodore, *I* was the one who should have started on the booze.”

“But Mother never touches alcohol.”

“You were born two weeks after Melinda Jean,” she told him. “And unfortunately, your father disappeared three days after you were brought home from the hospital. I guess he didn’t have the wherewithal for fathering. Left your momma stranded with an infant boy to care for. Didn’t come back till you were three.”

“So you helped Mother raise me?”

“I took care of you for months on end, while she cried her eyes out. Niagara Falls on a rainy day. Canadian side, of course. She had every right to be depressed, but the drinking ... that’s another story. She pretty near drank herself to death at the time. I know she was hurting inside, but it wasn’t right to be doing that with a little baby to take care of. That’s what drove us apart, eventually.”

“So during that time, you ... fed me...”

“I had to, Theodore. I had the milk in me and you were starving like Mahatma Gandhi on a hunger strike.”

“And Mother was...”

“At the time, your momma was in no shape for mothering.”

“GOOD GOLLY! THESE ARE THE LARGEST PLUM TOMATOES I’VE EVER SEEN!” JUDGE Thompson’s eyes were wide with wonder as he marked his clipboard. “Bigger than butternut squash, Theodore Harrison. How did you ever grow these, these *magnificent* vegetables?”

“Aunt Maggie’s all-organic magic garden,” Ted said with pride. “She may have passed on, but I like to think there’s still a little piece of her in everything that grows in that garden.”

*Thank God the tomatoes are normal*, he thought. Pleased he had entered them in the Blue Ribbon Vegetable Contest at the Hillsboro County Fair. Pleased he hadn’t sold the farm, despite his mother’s protests.

“She was a fine woman, your aunt was, with a splendid green thumb.”

“Yes, she was. She certainly was.”

Judge Thompson moved on to the next table to inspect Martha

DeWitt's eggplants, while Ted's thoughts drifted back ... *still a little piece of her in everything that grows in that garden...*

Digging up her coffin had been the easy part. He'd worked by moonlight the night after the funeral; the loose dirt had been easy to excavate. Dismembering Aunt Mag had been the hard part ... separating her limbs with a hacksaw, the sound of metal teeth scraping against bone ... the smell of clumping, funeral parlor make-up and decaying skin ... the touch of her stiff, cold limbs. The sight of tearing flesh. Not an experience he'd ever forget.

The amputations had taken all night: hands, feet, legs, arms. Finally the head. Aunt Mag's lifeless head had been Ted's only consolation throughout the whole gruesome experience. Jerking up and down, it appeared to nod in approval as he applied the saw to her neck. She wanted this. Yes, she would've wanted this.

The head dropped to the ground with a thud and rolled around on the basement floor like a piece of a broken mannequin. He felt an eerie bond with Mag as he tied her hair into a pony tail with her bandanna. A tear dropped from his eye to her withered cheek.

Ten pieces in all, including the torso. Ten pieces of Mag's life to be planted in the garden, nourishment for the soil. By dawn she was buried again. *Chop it up into ten pieces, scatter it in the soil bed, and you're good to go.* Isn't that what she'd said?

*How could I have done that?* His last road-kill patrol. His last Gathering. *Then again, how could I not have?*

It had been what she wanted. Of that much, he was certain.

THE SUBARU'S TIRES SPUN WILDLY, LEAVING A SMOKE SCREEN OF DUST BEHIND. THE blue ribbon lay on the dashboard; the basket of tomatoes rode shotgun on the passenger seat. He hadn't expected the noise. Others had heard it too. That, that *thumping* sound, just barely this side of audible, but growing. The dogs had heard it first, had come sniffing and growling. Then the small children had started looking, well, *intent* on something. Ted had made his escape as the first adults had begun congregating. He'd had to get the tomatoes out of there before someone found out. Before Martha DeWitt raised a protest.

Shifting into fourth, the fair a safe distance behind, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Zippadee-doo-daa. Zippadee-ay. My oh my, what a wonderful day." He felt a smile splitting his face. "*We did it, Aunt Mag! Ha-haaaa! We won the blue ribbon!*" He had to shout just to hear himself over the *thump-thump-thumping* shaking the basket.

Steering one-handed, he reached in and removed one of the huge tomatoes. Kissed it. Revelled in its warmth, the pulsing strength of the ventricles.

*No sense in wasting a perfectly good dead critter. She'd said it herself.*  
Ted had always had a fondness for the bottom line. •

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*On the floor, nothing else mattered  
except the dance. It was performance  
art taken to the next dimension, as  
living color and living light...*

# Suit Man

David K. Yeh

MATT JACKED HIMSELF INTO THE SUIT. IT WAS DIFFICULT BY himself. He wished Rachel were around to help. She always knew how to work the patches just right, cinching here and recalibrating there. But Rachel was in Ibiza pulling in a thousand a night on tips alone, and wouldn't be back until the season was over. He remembered laying eyes on her for the first time. She'd been working the Phoenix Club for Freddie Q in from Chicago. Half the dance floor had stopped to watch. There were lots of rich suburban kids who could afford top-of-the-line equipment, mainly slummers from Woodbridge. But few knew how to really work the hardware. She was a pro. She was locked-down into a skintight Baudrillard import, all black and gold iridescence streaming across her limbs. She moved like a tiger made of molten metal. Afterwards, Freddie introduced Matt in the VIP lounge. She liked Matt's face, she said. Her perfume had smelled of burnt sugar and peaches. She said he reminded her of her kid brother.

He rechecked the modem, and snapped it in place tight against the base of his skull. He felt the familiar uplink charge buzz down his spine. Carefully, he unplugged the hangers and stepped out of the closet. The first time online in any suit was always something special. He stood in front of the full-length mirror and made a conscious effort to relax

his breathing. He ran a broadband spectrum check. A rainbow halo coalesced over his head and floated down his body, fading out when it hit the floor. He ran the check again across amplitude and phase. Smooth as silk. He started to grin like an idiot, he couldn't help it. He'd spent two months' salary on this used Wachowski. Of course, it was worth it. It was practically brand new.

The previous owner had taken a bullet in the back. The shooting had made headlines. Johnny Liguimez had been the mayor's illegitimate grandson. Everyone knew that story. And now the kid was dead, gunned down at the Guvernment Night Club. It was tabloid stuff. That had been a year ago. How this Wachowski found its way into the run-down pawn shop at Church and Dundas, Matt had no idea. He wasn't about to ask either. But he had recognized the suit the second he laid eyes on it. He'd seen it on CityTV, in the security-cam's frame-by-frame replay. There was the unmistakable, perfectly round hole right between the shoulder blades, and the uglier, larger stained hole in the chest.

Rachel wouldn't have approved if she knew. For all her glamour and cool, she was sometimes downright conservative. But for Matt, this was a find he just couldn't pass up. There was something gothic and romantic about wearing a murdered man's suit. The pawnbroker specialized in antiques and collectibles. Bloodstained cyberwear wasn't his usual stock. Matt offered an opening price. Without a word, the man took the suit down from where it hung beside an autographed Tie Domi jersey, and started wrapping it up. Matt's heart must have skipped a beat or two. The old guy's wife watched him from the top of the stairwell. Nobody was smiling except Matt. Not that he cared. The only thing that mattered was that he was now the owner of an authentic Wachowski Model Nine Series DanceSuit,

Of course, the repair job was something to consider. But there wasn't anything Matt couldn't fix. He had a rep as a hardware jock in the local scene. He was the first to use subdermal implants to amplify the interface signal. Now every hardcore Suit was using subs. The underground cyber-labs were making a fortune thanks to Matt. Spread the groove was all he had to say. He wasn't a bioengineer. He was an artist. The Wachowski took him a week's steady work. He kept his phone off the hook, polished off two cases of Coke and a carton of smokes. All the time, he listened to Moby and imagined what he'd look like on the floor next to Rachel. Moby was what his mom used to listen to when he was a kid. It made him think of the sea. It was a bittersweet recollection.

Along the way, he uncovered some unusual residual memory. It was anomalous stuff. No matter how much he scrubbed, he couldn't wash it out. It was like a really bad biofeedback burn. The mesh had been badly

fused. He hadn't expected this much damage. In the end, he was forced to rent a nano-scalpel from St. Mike's and let the little assemblers pick out the bad molecules one by one. That took almost seventy hours and another month's paycheck. Okay, so he'd be eating Kraft Dinner for the rest of the summer. He'd done it before.

When he was finally finished, Matt knew the Wachowski was in better shape than when bought brand new. He'd upgraded the texture mapper, installing a Barthes-4000, and even added a wetwrap to the axial sensor array. Standing in front of the mirror, he looked and felt like a million bucks. So what if he'd dropped out of grad school? So what if he worked nights programming PRN chips for drooling schizos down at the dark? So what if his dad didn't even talk to him anymore? Matt understood suits.

"Pickup Single Gun Theory, Velasquez Deep House remix," said Matt. The stereo kicked in, hard and loud, heavy on the bass, drowning out the streetcars rumbling past on Roncesvalles. The mice in the floorboards scrambled and ran. At the sound of the music, the suit began vibrating, almost imperceptibly. Matt started to sweat a little, between the thighs and under the armpits. He felt like he was being cranked up the first huge drop on a rollercoaster ride at Wonderland.

But Wonderland was for kids. He was a Suit Man.

IN THE OLD MOVIE *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*, THERE'S A SCENE WHERE JOHN Travolta's character, Tony Manero, steps out onto the dance floor in his polyester vanilla ice-cream suit and the whole world just transforms for him. Matt used to dream this scene over and over when he was a kid. As it turned out, it was Rachel's favorite movie as well. They got a laugh out of that, but they took it seriously too. It was more than an aesthetics they shared, it was a philosophy of life. On the floor, nothing else mattered except the dance. It was performance art taken to the next dimension, as living color and living light. The DanceSuits were cyberwear: four million liquid crystal pixels stretched across your skin in direct synaptic linkup to the central nervous system. That was the basic Club Monaco issue. Top-line imports like the Baudrillard or the Wachowski-9 series might have up to six times the resolution and processing speed, as well as holographic embedding. These were the Stradivariuses of DanceSuits. But they didn't guarantee you could play. It took a certain mindset to operate a suit, a special skill and talent. It was a Zen state. Matt was a purist. Too many club kids had burnt out the titanium-nikel micromesh on their suits rushing on Ecstasy or Wave. Drugs and suits never sat together well. So those who did wear the DanceSuits stood a breed apart from the chemical-happy clubbers, adored and envied. At any big event on any Saturday night, there might be one Suit out of every twenty

dancers on the floor. But out of every twenty Suits, there might be only one like Rachel. Or one like Matt.

MATT PAID THE DRIVER AND STEPPED OUT OF THE CAB. A STINK OF ROTTING FISH came in off the shore. Another spill. It was all in the news. The Great Lakes were going to rat piss because of the Americans. Matt didn't want to hear about it, much less smell it. He hurried to the front of the line. They knew him here at the Orange Room. The big bouncer, Leroy, saw him coming, unhooked the red rope and let him in. Where the Suits went, the crowds followed. But Matt wasn't dressed tonight. He was here to check out the Samurai from the Bronx who was supposed to be the next big thing on the East Coast. He was also meeting Rachel. She had flown in three days ago. She had sounded rough on the phone. She was just getting over a case of food poisoning. She was more upset than sick. She was fighting with her insurance company over expenses. She needed a night out. She needed Matt.

Dr. Fox, the resident DJ, was just finishing up his set. It was a little after midnight and the room was starting to feel crowded. Dry ice mushroomed across the kaleidoscopic dance floor. In one corner, a cluster of VR-heads lounged, goggled and gloved, giggling amongst themselves. Matt scowled in disapproval. What the hell were they doing here? VR junkies had never impressed Matt, the way they tripped out of the world as if reality were too much for them to handle. Suits and VR junkies were aesthetic enemies. Matt had written a story around that a couple years back for *NOW* magazine. Why did they even bother coming out to the clubs if they were going to disconnect?

He spotted the Samurai up in the DJ booth, jacking in. The kid looked prepubescent. He was wearing a baseball cap and a T-shirt that read TUNE across his chest. Matt smiled. He owned the same shirt. The kid adjusted his headphones and let the last track roll to an end. In the silence that followed, the crowd started to whistle and holler. The Samurai raised one hand as if in benediction, then hit a switch. The sound of the ocean began to pour over the floor. The kid was sampling Moby. Matt laughed out loud. A slim pair of hands encircled his waist from behind and a husky voice spoke in his ear, "Check out this girl. It's his little sister."

Matt watched the female Suit step up onto a podium. The figure was slight, elfin. She was wearing rollerblades. Her body seemed made of water, translucent and streaming. Her arms extended into sinuous, shimmering pseudopods. The bass kicked in. She twirled madly, exploding into fire. The crowd roared. The flames fanned out into spiraling crowns edged with scintillating stars. The crowd began to dance. Matt nodded in approval. It was a nice effect. But only subdermals allowed that

kind of control, and this Suit was definitely underage. "She's fourteen," said Rachel. "It'll be five years before she can buy herself a drink in this place."

Matt turned his head and kissed Rachel on the temple, "They get younger and younger," he complained. "What is it with the implants? What are they looking for?"

"The same thing you were looking for, Matt, when you went under the knife. How old were you?"

"I was twenty. That was eight years ago. It was a statement then."

"It still is now. It's just a new generation. You should be happy. Isn't your dream to have everyone in the whole world suited-up and dancing together? These two kids from the Bronx are riding the edge."

"Where does that leave us?"

"We're still the best, darling," Rachel smiled wickedly. She stepped around to give him a big hug. Perfect brown skin, green eyes, explosive black hair. Plunging V-neck leopard print bodysuit. She looked fabulous.

"I missed you," said Matt. "How are you feeling?"

Rachel laughed dryly. "Like hell. Glad to be home though."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm on antibiotics. On second thought, I'll have a gin and tonic. We're celebrating, aren't we? You said on the phone you had something to tell me. Let's see. You've found the perfect boy and you're getting married."

"No, not quite. Close though."

Rachel studied him narrowly. All around them, phosphorescent dolphins leapt and fell. The crowd surged like the sea. Brilliant sapphire planes of light fanned together to form icebergs that shattered into a thousand seagulls. Matt started to giggle. Rachel took him by the hand. "All right," she said. "Tell me about it, and make it a double. Why do I suddenly have the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

OF COURSE, RACHEL DIDN'T APPROVE. BUT SHE ALSO KNEW MATT WELL ENOUGH to understand what the Wachowski meant to him. If a man had been murdered in the suit, she didn't want to hear anything about it. In fact, she was the one who suggested they test it out next week at the Transcendence Ball. Tickets had sold out a month ago. But Rachel was invited to a pre-Ball dinner party up in Yorkville thrown by one of the organizers. Matt could be her date. It wasn't the first time she had pulled a stunt like this. There were a lot of reasons Matt loved Rachel.

The night before Transcendence, he tried on the Wachowski again. A good suit was an artist's instrument. He lit a single diamond pixel in his hand. He ran it across his fingertips, engaged the holographies and let it slowly bloom out of his palm, a crystalline fractal that floated off his skin



before fading away.

It took Matt's breath away,

Corporate head-hunters had spotted Matt when he was still a grad student at U of T. There had been a career waiting for him to happen then. He could be living in a condo on New Ward's Island by now. But he had chosen his path. He remembered getting his first DisneyKids DanceSuit on his eleventh birthday. He fused its mesh within eight months. The warranty replaced it twice before the manufacturers caught on and sent him a more durable TeenSuit model through the mail. When other kids were skateboarding and playing road hockey. Matt was watching *Electric Circus* and lighting up like a Christmas tree in the living room. His mom thought it was cute. His dad had more serious reservations. Dad was right in the end.

Moby sang about his troubles with God, It wasn't until years later that Matt looked back and thought about what had pushed his mom to the breaking point. She had been a free spirit trapped in a marriage that was slowly suffocating her to death. Maybe others could live that way, but not Mom. On a trip to visit her sister in Charlottetown, she walked into a rip-tide under the stars. Everyone called it an accident, but Matt knew better. He had just started university that year. He supposed she had waited for him. Matt hated her for it.

In the clubs, under the lights. Matt found something close to absolution. He didn't need the booze or the drugs to make it work. But he did wear a suit. He imagined what it must be like to float beneath the sea, to look up and see the twinkling stars of the universe so far overhead. Tomorrow, he would shave his body. He would oil his skin and charge up his amps. He would step out onto the dance floor wrapped in the twenty-four million pixel relays of his new suit, and the whole world would transform for him. Maybe then he might just find himself the perfect dance.

"DJ YOSHI IS GOING TO BE SPINNING IN THE TRUDEAU LOUNGE AT TWELVE-THIRTY," exclaimed Rachel, carefully filing the pads of her fingertips. She sat cross-legged in the middle of her four-poster bed, framed by purple and baby-blue lava lamps. "I'd like to start with Yoshi. I think that would be nice."

Matt, who had just finished showering, glanced out of the bathroom. "Where do you keep your eyedrops?"

"Second shelf on the left." Rachel pulled on the gloves of her Baudril-lard. She flexed her hands, adjusting the subdermals in her forearms. "I haven't danced in weeks. I want to start with someone friendly. Yoshi is our friend, isn't he?" This last remark she addressed in a little girl's voice to her suit laid out beside her on the sheets. Yoshi was one of Rachel's

favorite DJs, a rising star out of Japan. Matt didn't mind the new Tokyo trance so much. Of course they could start the evening there. But at one o'clock he was moving onto the main floor when Bionic-Flux from Detroit was scheduled to take over.

"Are any of your other friends coming?" he called out.

Rachel lay back, curling up with her white feather boa. "No. Just you and me, darling. But guess who else I found out is going to be there?"

"Who?"

"Some scouts from Nike Emporium. They're in town to sign fresh talent for a new ad campaign."

"Oh, really," muttered Matt.

"I hear they're looking for male performers..."

"Not interested, Rachel."

"Their contracts—"

"It's Nike," declared Matt. "Yes, I know. Their contracts are the best in the business. You've told me this before. I just don't want to be in the business."

"Matt, I don't understand you." Rachel sat up in bewilderment. "It'd be so easy for you. The money's amazing. All you have to do is dance—"

"To Their beat, to Their music, to Their marketing campaign." Matt stuck his head out the door. "Look, I'm not going to tow any fucking corporate logo! You know I respect your work, Rachel. You're a professional, and that's what you do. But that's not what I do. Thanks for your interest, but no thanks. You should know by now. So can we just drop it?"

Rachel's smile compressed into a thin line. "All right, darling," she finally said. "Have it your way. Just promise me you'll be polite to them." She poked at the wedge of lemon in her drink. "I said that they could talk to you."

Matt leaned against the doorframe. What was he supposed to say? Rachel was too beautiful to be angry with, "I'll be polite." He dropped the towel from around his waist. "Now could you please help me into my goddamn suit?"

THE NIKE SCOUTS WERE AT THE DINNER PARTY. MATT WAS POLITE. HE POCKETED their business cards and excused himself to the balcony. They had never even seen him dance. But Rachel had put in the word for him. He knew she meant well. Underneath his clothes, the Wachowski purred in neutral, a tingling sensation across his skin. Matt always suited-up a couple hours before dancing. It gave the receptors a chance to habituate to his biochemistry. It added up to microseconds of better response time, but it made a difference.

The view across the city was spectacular. The sun had just set. Lake

Ontario glittered from the lights of the condos on New Ward's Island. Matt lit a cigarette and watched satellites drift across the sky. Behind him, raucous laughter rose above an old Bjork track.

The only reason he ever ate sushi and drank champagne was because Rachel invited him to parties like this. She was something of a star on the dance circuit. He could be too. That was her whole point. So why was he living in a cockroach-infested flat on Roncesvalles? Maybe it was because dancing was the only thing he ever had. He wasn't about to exchange it for money. Matt had paid off his debts long ago. He didn't owe anybody anything. That was the way he liked it. Nobody was going to own him.

He hesitated, eyes wide open. Something was wrong. The hairs slowly stood up on the nape of his neck. Static ran down his back. Something was definitely wrong. A sudden sharp pain punched through his chest. Matt staggered. The Wachowski vibrated violently for a second, then shut down. Matt gasped, his heart pounding. He started coughing. He thought he was going to throw up. Rachel was at his side. "Matt!" She held onto him. "What's wrong? Matt?"

"...big time sensuality..." sang Bjork.

He knew others were watching. He straightened himself with an effort. Broken glass and ice crunched underfoot. "I'm fine. I'm okay." He brushed her off. "You know me, too much tempura and it's heartburn city. Gotta cut back. Bad habit." He waved and smiled at the others. He muttered under his breath for Rachel, "Where's the freaking washroom?"

The pain was intense. He tried not to panic. In the bathroom, he leaned over the marble sink and almost did throw up. Gradually, the pain began to lessen. He could breathe again. His suit had crashed. "Fuck," he cursed. He fumbled at his shirt buttons. "Fuck!" This was not good. His pupils were dilated. He opened his shirt front, unclipped the charger under his left armpit and plugged it into the wall. At least the backup diagnostics were working. He ran a systems check. Abruptly, the Wachowski came back online. Matt blinked. "What the...?"

A knock. "Matt, let me in." Rachel. He stared into the mirror. "Matt." He unlocked the door without looking away. Rachel came in and shut the door behind her. She stood beside him. After a moment, she whispered, "Matt, that's not funny."

"I'm not doing it," said Matt. Down the hall, someone was making a toast. Glasses clinked to a round of applause and loud cheers.

"It's looping," said Rachel.

"I can see that."

As they watched. Matt's chest exploded, frame by frame, and a bullet lazily spiraled outwards in a spray of blood. The image faded. A burst of static, then the same fuzzy sequence.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“I’m not sure. A bug in the system.” His voice was shaking.

“Well, make it stop.”

“All right.” The image disappeared.

“What did you do?”

“I don’t know,” said Matt. “Nothing.”

Rachel shook her head. “What do you mean, nothing?”

“Look, I didn’t do anything. I think it was a random data trace, a residual echo. It’s probably burned itself up by now. I don’t think we’ll see it again.”

“Bullshit.” Rachel stood back. “Matt, take off the suit.”

“Why?”

“You know why. That’s his memory imprint. Take off the suit.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Rachel. Look, it’s impossible—”

A sharp knock on the door. The party was getting ready to leave for Transcendence. Matt stared at Rachel. Sweat beaded on his upper lip.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m okay.”

“What about the Wachowski?”

“I’ve checked the Wachowski, It’s fine. We’re fine. Let’s go,” He felt like he was floating underwater, dragged down by a riptide, but everything was okay. He reached out and held Rachel by the shoulders. “I’m fine. Trust me.”

Far overhead, he could see the twinkling stars of the universe.

WHEN HE WAS REALLY LITTLE. MATT’S MOM USED TO SHOW HIM OLD CELLULOID footage of Woodstock back in ’69, dirty kids with long hair dancing in the rain. She would tell Matt how Grandma had been one of them, and how nine months later she had been born.

Music and dancing was in their blood, she said. Except for his looks, Matt was nothing like his father. She passed on to Matt all her old CDs, Everything from Madonna to Erasure to the Chemical Brothers. Anything that had a beat. At her funeral, Matt had them play Radiohead’s “Fake Plastic Trees.” Not that it was her favorite song, but he thought it summed up her life. Dad pretty much stopped talking to him after that. That was when Matt seriously started getting into the suits.

He made it through university and even got into grad school. But his one focus in that whole time never changed. He stuck to the raves and circuit scene, avoiding the popular virtual clubsites. He was old-fashioned that way. He and Rachel had that in common. They had come a long way since tie-dye T-shirts. In the end, Suits were ironic anachronisms in an age of hyperreality. For Matt, his whole life was embodied in the dance.

All he ever needed was the right music. All he ever wanted was a suit. And now he had the suit. He wasn't about to let anything stop him now. He was ready for Transcendence.

This year, the Ball was taking place at the massive Olympics Rotunda. There would be three dance floors and eleven world-class DJs. It was a smoggy, humid evening by the Lake. But inside, the atmosphere was crisp and artificially cool. Matt could taste the dry ice in the air. There might've been a thousand people milling around the vast hall. Transcendence was an upscale party. A strict dress code was enforced. He held onto Rachel's hand and ran a diagnostics again on the Wachowski. Everything checked out fine. The music had started up an hour ago. He could feel the bass beat in his breastbone and in the autofeedback from his suit.

"Where should we change?" he asked.

"This way," said Rachel, and led the way up a flight of stairs to the VIP back room.

The VIP room was filled with gilt mirrors and white couches. There was one other Suit in their party, an English brother in a Ninjastar. His name was Chevin, and he was friendly enough, with the Chinese pictogram for "peace" tattooed on the back of his shaved head. He offered Matt a line of E off the lid of his gleaming battery case.

"No thank you," said Matt.

"Whoa," exclaimed Chevin. "Is that what I think it is?"

Matt nodded and smiled. He stubbed out his cigarette, folded his shirt and pants and put them in his duffel bag.

Chevin stared. "I ain't never seen a 'Chowski up close before," he sniffed. A static charge scrolled across his torso. "I hear that mother don't even use vector graphics, is that right?"

"Nope. Raster interface."

"Chevin, darling," said Rachel, "this is the same Matt I was telling you about."

"Right! Hey, man, I saw you dance at the Black and Blue last year." He grabbed Matt by the shoulder. "You were incredible. Didn't you used to wear a Lucas IV?"

"Nope. Lucas III upgrade. That's gone. Took out its wetwrap."

Chevin stared at Rachel and then back at Matt. "Did you sign with Nike Emporium too?" he finally asked.

"Nope," said Matt. He pulled on his hood and secured the chin clamp. He rechecked the modem, and snapped it in place tight against the base of his skull. He felt the familiar uplink charge buzz down his spine.

"Their contracts—"

"Are the best in the business," said Matt. "I know."

Chevin held out a vial of Wave. "Care for a bump?"

"No thank you." He was done changing. "We can leave our stuff here?" Rachel nodded. "All right." The music swelled up through the floor. Matt stood very still, eyes half-closed, listening to his suit. On the glass coffee table, the water in the tall crystal vase of white roses trembled. He remembered the funeral. He remembered the sea. Matt drew a breath. "Let's dance."

A Ninjastar was probably the only DanceSuit model that could handle a user speeding on E or Wave. Matt made sure to lose Chevin as fast as he could. In the Trudeau Lounge, Yoshi had come on early. Word had it that Vancouver's Sticky Rick was down with food poisoning. "It's all the genetic engineering," complained Rachel, ordering a double at the bar.

"Aren't you still on antibiotics?" asked Matt.

"I suppose so. You sure you don't want a drink?"

"I have a drink," said Matt, swirling the ice in his Coke. He took a last drag off his cigarette. "Nothing beats good ol' fashioned aspartame and caramel extract."

"Don't forget nicotine," Rachel laughed. "In any case, gin is older than Coca-Cola, darling. Cheers to us, who live in the Stone Age."

"Cheers to us."

Even with their suits in neutral. Matt knew that he and Rachel were turning heads. They made a good looking couple. The Wachowski's moulded silver mesh was unmistakable. Rachel's black Baudrillard was its perfect companion piece. Yoshi was five metres away, spinning his trademark trance laced with traditional Japanese instrumentation. The disco ball glowed like a full moon. The lighting was dark, almost minimalist. There were already three other Suits on the dance floor. They always reminded Matt of angels or ghosts.

"C'mon, darling," said Rachel, putting down her empty glass. "They're waiting for us."

"You go ahead. I just want to lounge for a bit."

Rachel slyly glanced around. "Cute boy?"

"I just want to lounge a bit," Matt repeated patiently.

Rachel regarded him for a second. The dimples showed in her cheeks. "Have it your way, darling." She squeezed his hand. "You know where to find me." She pulled her hood down. Matt watched as she stepped onto the floor.

Rachel was everything his mom could've been. He had missed her badly when she was in Ibiza. When he heard she was sick, he had to resist rushing over to her apartment. That would've been the last thing Rachel wanted. But she let him know in her own way how much he meant to

her. He could smell her faint perfume on his collar, burnt sugar and peaches.

The pain hit him again.

This time it wasn't so bad. The Wachowski stayed online. It was operating fine, in fact. The pain was inside of him. Matt sucked in air and tried to light another cigarette. It fell from his fingers. "Jesus..." he whispered. He was bleeding. The holographies were running some kind of bizarre S&M software. As he watched, his chest bloomed open and his exposed heart glowed iridescent with every beat. Crimson light poured down his torso. Matt couldn't stop it. It had to be some dormant virus program, some kind of sick joke.

People were staring at him. Rachel hadn't noticed yet. Matt walked quickly towards the washroom. He shoved his way through the crowd. Control receptors weren't responding. He couldn't shut down the Wachowski. He reached around to the small of his back and pulled its battery pack. The image remained.

That was impossible.

He double-checked to see if he had disengaged the power source. Yoshi's dark, melodic strains hung glittering in the air. Matt stood with his hands at his sides, breathing hard. What was this sensation? Everything was alien to him, yet so familiar. It was an old hunger, an aching need. The crowd moved around him, flowing like the sea. Music was everywhere. He held up the power pack. He touched the glimmering projection of his bleeding heart.

The nano-scalpel had missed something. That was obvious. But at this point, it had nothing to do with the Wachowski anymore. It had everything to do with Matt.

Across the room, a girl in a tie-dye T-shirt smiled at him, damp flowers in her hair. Her form wavered and disappeared. But the afterimage remained.

The pain was there, it was just bearable. He had always held it inside of him. Hell, he hadn't even cried at the funeral. Only it was out now. People put the strangest things in their bodies. But wasn't that what made the body real? A lifetime of memories. Without them, he was nothing more than a ghost. He carefully snapped the battery back into its slot. The suit began to softly glow. In anticipation, people stepped away, giving him room. His eyes were watering. But Matt wasn't about to start to cry. Not here, not now. After all these years, he was just finally beginning to understand who he loved most in life. He was going to dance. •

*It didn't smell like any chocolate I'd ever come across. And I'd handled it all: bars, beans, fifty percent ground, fine ground, right up to the pure stuff...*

# Chocolate Kings

Karen Traviss

SOME PEOPLE—WELL, SOME PEOPLE JUST DESERVED TO BE child sacrifices, and Superintendent Nuataxtl was one of them. He had the timing of a sadist. There we were, filing away our last crime reports for the day and just waiting for the sun to dip below the horizon, and in he came. There was no getting out that door now.

“The mescal bar’s going to miss you tonight, Ahuatl,” he said. “In fact, it might be missing you tomorrow night too. All of you. You’ve just got to see what Customs turned over at the airport.”

Now, the appeal of the Commercial Branch—a.k.a. Fraud Squad—to half-hearted detectives like me was that you usually worked business hours: no night surveillance, no armed blags and no resisting arrest. (Although I did nick a very stropky accountant last season, and those little bean-counters can put up a hell of a fight.) And faster promotion, too, because most coppers didn’t consider fraud-busting to be real men’s work. It was a good way to get a desk job at HQ—if you fancied working in the Big Temple, that is.

This wasn’t a desk job night. “Sergeant, we have forensics squad on its way and you’ll take the mobile assay team with you,” said Nuataxtl. “We’re talking big haul here, my son. Headline stuff.”



“Tobacco?” I asked. They got excited about illegal tobacco, although I couldn’t work out why people drank the stuff. “How much?”

“No, counterfeit xocolatl. Five tons of it. And guess where it’s come in from?”

“No idea, Super.”

“Some freeze-arse state called Helvetica.”

It was what we had all dreaded. The Europeans had found a way to fake chocolate. It wasn’t just our economy that was at stake.

It was our whole way of life.

DON’T GET ME WRONG. I’VE GOT NOTHING AGAINST EUROPEANS. I MEAN, IF THEY weren’t cleaning the hotels and driving the buses, we’d have to do it. But they liked easy money. My mate Kahpua (a bit of a liberal) reckoned they were driven to crime because the respectable jobs like architecture, priesting and chocolate production weren’t open to them.

But this particular job wasn’t easy money. It was high tech. Believe me, when I got out the squad car and walked across that runway to the cargo plane, it was like stepping onto a film set. There were hi-lux arc lights and cordons and sniffer dogs going bananas, whining and leaping around because they could smell something and couldn’t reach it.

A thin lad in a Customs uniform was walking towards me in that way that said he was trying to intercept, but I wasn’t going to stop. We almost collided. He whipped out his obsidian badge and flourished it. I pulled out my big jade one.

“Piss off, son,” I said, as kindly as I could. “This is police business now.”

I shoved past him and began looking for a technician. I only spotted the senior forensics officer from the fact that it said SFO in really big letters on the back of his high-visibility tabard. Otherwise he’d just have been another bloke in a white noddy suit with a mask on, like the rest of the crowd swarming round the plane. I didn’t need to ask why he needed the mask. As soon as I got close enough, I could smell it.

There was the meaty, bitter tang of the pure-grade xocolatl, and then the—well, there was only one way to describe it. The stench of cheap vanilla made me want to throw up.

I actually heard Kahpua gag behind me.

“Oh, fucking Feathered Serpent, Sarge, that’s *disgusting*,” he said. Normally I’d have stuck him on a charge for blaspheming, but I had to agree with him. It didn’t smell like any chocolate I’d ever come across. And I’d handled it all at the Imperial Mint during training: bars, beans, fifty percent ground, fine ground, right up to the pure stuff.

“Can I see it?” I asked the SFO.

“You’re looking at it,” he said, well muffled, and spread his arms to reveal a big smear of brown grease down his chest like someone had crapped on him. He pulled the mask down from his face. He talked as best anyone could when they were trying to hold their breath. “They’ve packed every double-skinned wall on the aircraft with it.”

I looked at the plane again. It was a tatty little tin can, with brown rust stains along every riveted seam. The bright arc lights didn’t flatter it much. I was amazed it had survived a five thousand mile journey.

“So, they blew it in like insulation?” I asked.

SFO rolled his eyes in exasperation and pushed the mask back on his face to suck in a bit of cleaner air. “No, they poured it in, you moron,” he said. “In liquid form. That’s not rust. It’s chocolate leaking out the bloody seals. Don’t you people talk to Customs? This is the fifth consignment we’ve had through this year. It’s just a lot more than usual, that’s all.”

I would normally *not* take kindly to being called a moron, but I was distracted by the suggestion that those secretive bastards in Customs should have briefed us. We’d have a word with them later. Poured? Poured what? And then the xocolatl bean dropped, as my mum would have said.

“It’s frozen in a water suspension?” I asked, trying to look like I’d paid attention in chemistry class.

“No.”

SFO handed me a disposable paper mask and led me over to the tail end of the plane, where they’d set up a screened area. There were blokes in coveralls—and masks, of course—trying to funnel a shiny, slimy, stinking ooze of brown stuff from an opening in the tail section into big metal drums.

“They’re bloody clever for Euros,” SFO said. “We’ve worked it out. They mix the chocolate solids and oils they can get hold of with vegetable fat—about forty percent dilution, I’d say—toss in fake vanilla substitute, and bulk it out with something they call sugar. Now that’s a pretty inert monosaccharide compound they get from beets.”

“Oh yeuch...”

“You haven’t heard the worst yet. Some of the stuff is a bit on the light side, color wise, and I’ve known them add a burned version of the monosaccharide called caramel so it looks as dark as the real thing. When it’s cold, it sets solid.”

He took a plastic sample tub from his tabard and shook it: it rattled like pure stuff. And then he took my hand (yeah, I know, but I was mesmerized by then) and tipped a couple of shiny beans into my palm.

They looked like the real thing. And then they began to soften and

spread in the heat of my hand and I actually watched them turn into that brown gunk.

“This stuff,” said SFO, “has been turning up all over the Empire. And you can pass a lot of it off in cooler places before it’s spotted.”

“How was it getting past Customs, then?”

“Easy. It’s brown. It’s runny. They were putting it in false lavatory tanks on board and letting the sanitation wagon pump it out and take it away for collection and remolding later.”

I’d forgotten about Kahpua. He was right behind me, and I turned to look at him. He was pretty dark-skinned, but he was definitely looking ashen right then. I turned back to SFO. “So is there a quick test for this stuff?”

“Oh, you just taste it,” he said, and dabbed his tongue onto the brown-smearred palm of his protective glove.

I heard Kahpua’s rapid sprint away from us and into the bushes. He never did have much of a stomach on him.

WE GOT OUR FACES ON THE NEWS (AND WE ELBOWED IN FRONT OF THOSE CUSTOMS bastards, too) but it wasn’t enough to brag about a five-ton haul. We were under pressure to stop the counterfeit currency coming in. Sniffer dogs were one thing, but the politicians wanted to know why we had to pay to stop those Helvetics from undermining our economy. Wasn’t there a way of tackling the influx at source?

We had a meeting about it. We didn’t like meetings much, but I thought I’d better learn to get good at them if I had delusions of promotion. The senior Customs officers lined up opposite us, all smarting from the row over who had jurisdiction.

“Come up with an idea,” said the Commissioner. (A big bloke. I mean *really* big.) “One that doesn’t involve bombing Helvetica back to the stone age, although it hasn’t got that far to go from what I hear. We’ve been warned off being too heavy on emerging nations. You know, we’ve got all the chocolate, the World Bank, etcetera etcetera and bleeding heart etcetera.”

He had placed a pile of the counterfeit forty percent pure in the center of the big polished stone conference table to concentrate our minds. I really did like that room: turquoise inlays up the walls, decorative crystal skulls on dinky little pedestals and a ceremonial seat at the end of the chamber. It gave HQ a nice traditional Aztec feel. All you needed was the priest and the obsidian dagger and we would have been back in the good old days, when we weren’t being buggered about by the third world.

“We can impose trade sanctions,” said a Customs officer.

“They don’t buy anything from us,” the Commissioner said. “They can’t afford it. Next?”

“We could choke their xocolatl supply at source.”

“No-o-o, we can’t starve them of currency. Empire Bank and all that.”

I was still staring at the various shiny fakes on the cool table. They were holding shape pretty well, and the shapes were whatever they’d managed to pour the liquid into when they were scrambling to collect it—cups, bars, knobbly shapes, even a pudding mould. It seemed a strange thing to do with chocolate. There was powdered chocolate for drinking (with water, honey and a real vanilla pod, of course) and chocolate for spending (cultivated regular, uniform size) and there was investment chocolate, selectively cultivated for huge beans and whacking high theobromine and caffeine content.

But bars? Globes? *Shapes?*

And then it hit me.

Sometimes, just sometimes, you get those flashes from nowhere, right out of the dark earth. Clever buggers get those all the time, but ordinary blokes like me get them once in a lifetime. When you get one, you’ve got to grab and make it work for you.

“We could sell it back to them,” I said.

There was a silence. I didn’t know if it was an ooh-he’s-clever silence, or a who-let-him-in-here silence. I looked round all those rigid jaws and narrowed eyes and wondered if I’d said goodbye to inspector rank right there and then.

“Do you want to expand on that?” said the Commissioner.

No, I didn’t: not really. But there was a bigger jade badge at the end of this tunnel. All I had to do was dig.

“Well, it tastes odd, but when it’s solid you can chew it,” I said. “National tastes vary. There are people in Europe who like rotted milk. In big lumps. So who’s to say we couldn’t get one of the food companies to tart this up a bit and market it back to them?” I was on a roll. The gods were right there with me. “We could put almonds in it. All sorts of things. We could make it into shapes, like eggs and mountains and things. Then we tell them how good it is, and they have to pay for it from their xocolatl reserves, so we gradually shift the balance of xocolatl back here.”

The Commissioner’s big face lit up. “You really do want that inspector’s badge badly, don’t you, son?” he said. “Let me put that idea forward. It’s got everything. It’s politically sound, it might even show a profit, and it’ll teach those Helvetic types a lesson.” He pushed the stool back from the table with an *eeeeek* of stone against tile. “And if it fails, we can say it was the

deranged idea of a junior officer.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

KAHPUA AND I SAT IN THE MESCAL BAR WHEN THE SHIFT HAD ENDED. IT WAS THE same most nights: we filed the reports for the day, and then went and got pissed as handcarts. (Yes, I know, wheels: the Europeans did have their moments.) Except this night I took my inspector’s jade badge out of the fob inside my jacket and slapped that on the bar in front of me.

“Two pints of your finest, Freddie boy,” I said to the pasty-faced little Euro polishing the glasses. “I’m celebrating. And have one for yourself.”

“How did you get the idea?” Kahpua asked.

“It was looking at the shapes. That’s all. Just reminded me of cakes and sweets. It’s what they call an intuitive leap.”

“Still can’t look at the stuff,” he said. “Why the almonds?”

“If they try to smuggle it back to us, the little gritty bits will be easy to spot. And they’ll clog up their machinery.” I had to laugh. “It’s the eggs and the tile-shaped ones I like best.”

“Seriously, though, you think they’ll fall for it? That this stuff is worth buying?”

“Don’t underestimate Aztec marketing ingenuity,” I said. “There’ll be a novelty market for a while, and then they’ll get the message. Don’t mess with the Aztec fraud squad.”

I looked up at the mirror-backed bar, between the bottles and badges and memorabilia garnered from year upon year of Mexico City police officers who drank here. It was a bit of a black museum, really, stacked with objects liberated surreptitiously or otherwise from investigations—deactivated firearms, the odd obsidian blade, and a jar of unidentifiable dried-out stuff that was probably from a path lab.

And then there was the newest addition to the collection: one of my chocolate bars, the one shaped like a piece of square-tiled floor. I looked at it and felt a little sad, shiny new jade badge or not.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think it’ll ever really catch on.” •

*What he saw, gleaming mother-of-pearl amidst the moonlit circle of whitecaps, was the head and shoulders of an enormous horse...*

# **A Gift for Michael Mooney**

Jancis M. Andrews

BECAUSE HANSEN HATED FLYING, HE AND MICHAEL WERE taking the evening ferry from Tsawwassen to Victoria, where they would spend the night. A sales chart, stamped "Hansen Heavy Equipment" lay on the seat between them, its graph angling upwards. Long mouth working busily, Hansen was extolling the new sales policy, which entailed firing the salesman with the fewest sales at the end of every month. "Gets them off their fuckin' butts," Hansen had said, pinning up the chart that tracked each man's progress. Michael's mouth felt full of dust. Yes, sales had zoomed. It had also turned the sales staff against one another. Nowadays, the fear in the office was palpable, as those at the bottom fought not to be the man given the shove. Because he was the sales manager, it fell to Michael to do the shoving.

Oblivious to passers-by, Hansen had closed his eyes and thrust stubby legs into the aisle. Michael had the window seat. Coastal mountains thrust a jagged black spine into the moonlit night and the Georgia Strait was a yawping blackness except where rows of whitecaps had formed a great circle, an indication, perhaps, of a whirlpool. Glistening silver-

white in the moonlight, the whitecaps looked like an altar cloth laid over the darkness of the world.

“The new policy goes into the contract, okay?” Hansen grunted without opening his eyes. “Then we can promote the Pave-Omatic 144.”

“We’ll go go go!!” Michael said, repeating one of his boss’s slogans.

Passengers’ voices were intermingling with the rumble of the ship’s engines. Pins and needles had attacked Michael’s feet and even his fingers held a steady tremor, as if his body were merely an extrusion of the ferry. When Hansen reached for yet another sales report, Michael waited; however, his boss remained silent. Lifting his tape recorder, Michael turned a shoulder to Hansen in order not to disturb him and leaning towards the window, murmured, “Donna, send this one to Jackson’s Road Machinery in—”

Something was glowing in the darkness. He glanced towards it, his lips already forming the word “Toronto.” What he saw, gleaming mother-of-pearl amidst the moonlit circle of whitecaps, was the head and shoulders of an enormous horse.

His lips froze about the arriving syllables. The communal language of passenger and ferry passed away.

Pearly forelegs ending in great silver hooves burst through a wave and reached for a whitecap. The horse began pulling itself out of the sea. Michael saw a long glistening back and powerful haunches ending in a massive, shimmering tail and long feathery tail fins. Wheeling in the same direction as the ferry, the horse began diving and re-appearing, keeping pace. Rainbows flew from the streaming mane; from the tail, foam flew like blown snow. The great neck turned and the head moved from side to side, as if the horse were searching the ferry’s windows.

A trembling struck up in Michael’s flesh. Without taking his eyes from the horse, he touched Hansen on the arm.

“Huh?”

“Look,” Michael whispered.

Hansen’s face puckered up. He was twinned into the same type of expensive business suit as Michael: navy blue three-piece, white silk shirt and red tie, although Hansen’s tie was of a bloodier hue. Removing his glasses, he leaned towards the window, so that Michael was treated to a potpourri of talcum and aftershave. The ferry was starting to plunge up and down, as if it had met a heavy swell.

“What?” Hansen asked.

The horse was leaving the ferry behind, its forelegs and long powerful tail a shimmering ballet against the darkness, its long feathery tail fins rising and falling like the veils of a bride.

“What—what do you see?”

“What d’you mean?” Hansen frowned, jamming on his glasses. “Hey, this fucking boat is bouncing!”

The horse was dancing on a swell, looking back as if it were waiting for the man-made thing to catch up. Again the pearly head moved, as though the horse were searching the ferry.

“Jeez, how many lifeboats does this thing have?” Hansen asked nervously, elevating his pale eyebrows at Michael.

“Got to go to the washroom,” Michael mumbled.

Inside the cubicle, he threw up, and then leaned his forehead against the cold comfort of the formica partition. He hadn’t touched any booze, he didn’t do drugs, he’d had his yearly physical only a month ago. “What the hell,” he whispered, “is going on?”

Some minutes later, he returned to his seat. Hansen, scowling over sales sheets, moved to let him past but did not speak. Michael pressed his face to the window. Patches of fog had appeared; in the darkness between them, the lights of a coastal town glimmered their faint and fragile gold. And there, a celebration of pearl and silver in the moonlight, was the horse, weaving and diving between the fog patches, light streaming from its body and tail.

“I’m not satisfied with Benson’s performance,” Hansen was grumbling. “He’s had Mansini Distributing for a month and he’s still not got an order. Get rid of him.”

Dragging his gaze from the horse, Michael got out, “Ed Benson’s—been pretty sick—”

“We can’t play fucking nursie any longer. Chuck him and give Mansini’s to George Jones.”

“But Ed’s—got kids—”

“Shoulda pulled his socks up then, shouldn’t he?” grunted Hansen. He grabbed at a pen clattering against the side of his brief case. “Hey, I don’t like this. Sea’s turned choppy.”

Michael turned haggard eyes towards the window and leaned forward.

His stomach loosened. The horse had drawn much nearer, enabling him to see it more clearly. It was a stallion and its length from ears to tail fins must have measured about forty feet. Hooves reflected silver arrows back to the moon, the enormous tail fins shone sapphire when they lifted clear of the water, opaline when they swept beneath. Sweating coldly, Michael saw the lustrous head turn and two blue-green jewelled eyes search the ferry. There could be no doubt that the horse was looking for something. *Someone*. It had moved slightly ahead, its gaze roving leisurely but deliberately down the length of the windows.



Swallowing repeatedly, Michael waited. Then the horse found him. Up, up went the great silver hooves as the horse reared, and it seemed almost to applaud as Michael's window drew level. Michael's mouth opened and a sound weazled out. Throwing back its head as if in reply, the horse opened its shining mouth, and although he heard nothing, Michael knew that it had whinnied. Then the horse plunged its head into an oncoming whitecap, its back arched, and the great shining tail, terrifying in its enormity and beauty, rose vertically into the air and sank beneath the waves. It did not appear again.

Michael had no clear memory of how he coped with the remainder of the crossing.

On his return to Vancouver, he insisted he have another physical, citing extreme exhaustion. Pressing and prodding, Doctor Hunter mused about ulcers and the stress of today's downsizing on the business executive, and then recommended a change in diet; possibly, he suggested, even a change of career.

"I'm forty-one, I can't switch careers now; besides, my salary is excellent. Frank, I was just wondering—"

Off-handedly, he asked about the effects on the mind of watching shows such as *The Twilight Zone*, which featured the supernatural. The doctor only half-listened to Michael's seemingly aimless nattering, but when pressed, remembered a couple of television studies.

Their local library had only one book on the subject. Michael read it, then returned it none the wiser and left with several books on psychology and the male climacteric or male menopause. These he speed-read during the lunch break in his office, so that he wouldn't have to parry questions from his wife, Joan. Lately, her tongue had developed a razor's edge.

The articles on the male climacteric helped not at all, while the accounts of other people's hallucinatory experiences carried him into a world of horror—the monsters that could stalk the psyche! Giant rats, torturers, obscene parts of bodies—what had he to do with aberrations such as these? Besides, the horse had not been monstrous, but beautiful. Yet each description seemed to touch something within him, as if he were a distant relative to the mentally deranged. In the torment of the small hours, they advanced upon him, misshapen souls, beckoning from their warped world, their sly voices inviting him to rejoin the family...

He found himself telling Joan, "I'm thinking of leaving Hansen's."

Her mouth dropped open. "Are you utterly mad? You fought to get that job!"

Why had he said a crazy thing like that? And to Joan, who was a

neurotic worrier!

“I—er—”

Defying both sets of parents, they had married at nineteen while he was still studying for his teacher’s certificate. Why had he been so set on marrying her? Because she was the double of the young Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*, which had seemed a splendid reason at the time.

“Don’t be an idiot, Michael,” she shrilled, indicating their cedar and glass living room. “You left teaching because you yourself said the big money was in sales!”

“I—the doc suspects I’m getting an ulcer—”

“Then take a holiday! Listen, you’re due to take over Walter’s position when he retires. Don’t give up, Michael, not when we’re starting to afford all the nice things we’ve always wanted—”

“I think we’ve got enough already—”

“But it’s not paid for, is it, Michael? It’s not paid for!”

Her temper was rising, her lips tightening into the all-too-familiar thin line, her violet eyes darkening, yet with a flame at the back of them

“What’s got into you, Michael? Are you forgetting our sons? What about university fees? And what about me? I could’ve taken a sound degree in science, but I stayed home to look after you all, didn’t I? That was because *you* asked me to. It’s always what *you* want, isn’t it Michael...”  
And on and on.

Did this slowly burgeoning enmity happen in most marriages? And it was true; he had asked her to stay home. That was the political correctness of two decades ago: Wifey stays home and makes everybody comfortable while hubby brings home the bacon. Nowadays, of course, it was different.

Next morning, he fired Ed Benson; in the evening, he drank himself stupid. He was therefore too befuddled to know if it really was Ed trembling in the doorway, or whether the white-faced salesman was merely a projection from the nightmares that were beginning to trouble him.

“You tell that bastard,” the hazy figure said, “that one of these days, he’s toast. Okay? You tell that bastard that.”

But Michael convinced himself he’d only suffered yet another nightmare.

A WEEK LATER, WHEN HE AND HANSEN WERE ON THE TRIAL FERRY RUN FROM Tsawwassen to Bellingham, the horse danced towards them out of the moon.

Michael turned a bloodless face toward Hansen. “Sorry,” he mumbled, “what did you say?”

A frown was working Hansen's face. His glasses flashed. "For Chrissake pay attention, Mooney," he grunted. "Your face has been stuck in that fucking window ever since we got on this boat. I said we're gonna have to cut the commission from three percent to two."

"But—the contracts—"

"We'll renegotiate. Or else."

In the seat in front of Hansen, a woman read a novel, her face drawn in concentration. Beside her, a little boy was pushing a red truck around the window, whispering to himself. Michael could see one enormous tail fin flashing beyond the truck's wheels. The little ferry began to bounce.

On came the public address system. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Captain Bourque here," a carefully casual voice intoned. "We seem to have encountered—oh, just a lee—ttle bit of a rough sea. Please remain seated until further notice. Those on the port side will see the lights of Tsawwassen if they look now."

The address system clicked off. With the languid movement of a placid wave flowing up a beach, passengers on the left-hand side turned to look out of the windows. At the same time, the lights flickered and went out. And there, clearly visible through the port-side windows, was the horse, leaping and diving in the moonlight. Surely to God, Michael thought, his hands trembling against his seat, surely someone...

"San Francisco," Hansens's voice pronounced in the darkness. "We've got to smarten up the distributor there, Mooney."

Someone has to see it, Michael thought, I can't be the only one.

The lights came on again and passengers turned back to papers and magazines, or settled their heads against their seats, trying to snatch some sleep. In a minute, however, the ferry shuddered and began bucking.

"Hey, what the fuck—" began Hansen. But Michael wasn't listening. Instinctively, he had pressed his face to the window. And his instincts were right—the horse had dived under the ferry and re-emerged on the starboard side. It was plunging towards him, its great tail lashing the sea into phosphorescent falling stars. Then it paused, the pearly head lifted, and it seemed to Michael that, even though the lounge was crowded, the horse had singled him out, as if the sea creature's gaze and his were drawn irrevocably towards each other like lovers. Dimly, he heard Hansen's voice snorting and blowing like something feeding from a trough, but all his attention was on the horse. Up went the silver hooves, body and tail rose out of the water amidst streams of phosphorescence, and the horse pirouetted, turning so that it hung like a great gleaming jewel against the night before crashing into the sea.

"Mooney, will you get your fucking head out of that fucking window! I

asked what promotions you're planning for the Spreader Two-Twenty?"

"The truth is, the truth—sick headache—can't talk—"

"Really? Sorry to hear that," Hansen said, his gaze sweeping over Michael, as if there were clues to be picked up from Michael's undistinguished nose, his receding hairline, his thinning sandy hair. "Bit sudden, isn't it—hey—you're shivering! Jeez—" Hansen's pupils suddenly expanded in affront. "Mooney, you're not going to pull a heart attack on me, are you?"

As if mesmerized, Michael's gaze was drawn back to the window. "Just—just let me sit quietly," he whispered as the horse reappeared and began waltzing in the moonlight. "Just let me rest."

The shining head sank, the great tail flipped skywards, and the horse dived. Seconds later, the ferry began bucking again, causing passengers to exclaim and grasp at their seats and a child to tumble on his back. Michael closed his eyes and waited, knowing the horse was making for the port side. Almost immediately, the ferry jerked and once more began tossing about. He could hear people exclaiming, hear the calming voice of the captain, could feel Hansen's hand on his arm...fearfully, he turned his head. The horse had reappeared about one hundred yards away on the starboard side. The eyes flashed jewelled light towards him and the horse dived once more before reappearing only seconds later about twenty yards away from where it had gone down. It was, he realized, playing a game, sometimes diving under the ferry, at other times racing ahead. Often, it turned to look at him, as if inviting him to join it in a joyous game of tag. A fog bank appeared, pale cloudy ferns knotted to the sea, and the horse leaped and frisked between them as passengers worried aloud about the sudden, strange weather conditions, and the ferry bucked and shuddered about the equally shuddering body of Michael Mooney.

"Helluva trip," Hansen said uneasily. "Better not be the Big One."

The Big One was the earthquake predicted to hit the western coast, which was part of the so-called "Pacific rim of fire." If the earthquake occurred in the Strait, it would cause the giant wave known as a tsunami.

"Heard a queer thing recently," Michael mumbled. "Some salesman—not one of ours—is telling people that twice—he saw—a huge seahorse playing around the ferry—"

"Christ! Sure glad he doesn't work for me!"

"This man—is supposed to be—the steady type—"

"Booze," Hansen said confidently.

"I believe he—doesn't drink much—"

“Fella obviously needs a break in the worst way.”

“Yet he’s always been ambitious—” Michael said, and his voice failed.

“Shit!” said Hansen. “You’re gonna have to get rid of Sam Yee as well.” He brought up a spreadsheet on the laptop screen. “That seahorse,” he threw out, “could be a gift from the gods.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know—that Greek stuff. My gran had a brass clock decorated with that Neptune fella standing in a chariot and holding the reins of three seahorses. Maybe Neptune just decided to send that sales fella one of his horses, ha ha ha!”

“But why?”

“For Chrissake, Mooney! Can’t you recognize a joke?”

“But why a gift to him? Why him?”

“Maybe Neptune thinks the fella needs to escape, o’course,” giggled Hansen. “Now for Chrissake, let’s get on with next year’s projections. Better get that fella to a psychiatrist as soon as possible,” he said over the top of his glasses. “He’s a nut case.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Michael said, and smiled wanly into Hansen’s big, pink, healthy face.

AT HOME, JOAN TOOK HIM TO TASK FOR HAVING MENTIONED HE MIGHT LEAVE Hansen’s. Again and again, he reassured her he hadn’t meant it, but her furious, frightened probing continued. When, after supper, she threw herself into an armchair, tightly folded her arms and sat glaring at a comedy show on TV, Michael escaped into his study.

For a minute, he stood unmoving, then drew in a deep breath, walked to his computer, clicked on to the Internet and typed “Mythology” into the search engine.

The sheer volume of material was overwhelming. Mythological tales, one writer suggested, were about search and discovery, including the quest for a truer self. Often they involved a journey, which could be circular, leaving from and returning to the same place. Science and myth, he read next, represent the left and right hemispheres of our brains and are equally important; they are not, contrary to modern thinking, diametrically opposed. Another click brought up “Science is to myth what we are to our ancestors, a modern rendition of a continuing story,” while a search for information on Neptune brought up only that Neptune was the Roman name of the Greek sea god Poseidon, sometimes portrayed as half-man, half-fish, and that he governed the sea. The gods, the writer continued, were believed to interact on occasion with people, a contact that might end in death for the human involved; or alternatively, he/she

might be carried to a beautiful, blessed land known as “The Fortunate Isles,” where they would enjoy blissful, eternal life. All these writings seemed to come to the same incredible conclusion: that an intangible psychic world existed alongside the tangible physical world and that it was every bit as real—

The door flanged open.

“Do you realize how lucky you are to draw such a high salary?”

“Yes, I agree one hundred percent, Joan, it is an excellent salary—”

“Yet you dare talk about leaving—”

“Look, please, don’t worry about it. It was a stupid thing to say, please forget it—”

“Forget it? How can I? Have you forgotten Hansen’s excellent pension scheme—”

“Yes, it is excellent—”

“And then there’s the insurance benefits. If anything happens to you, the boys and I will be well taken care off, and that’s vitally important, Michael, because I can’t have a career now, can I? All I’ve got for twenty years of looking after you is homemaker skills, and Big Business doesn’t value those, does it, Michael?”

“Look, I wish I’d never mentioned it—”

“But you *did* mention it,” Joan cried, with a bitterness that stunned him. Her eyes were bright with tears. “Women don’t realize how they harm themselves by staying home—it’s not fair!”

No, it wasn’t fair, he could see that—

“You’re only forty-one, Joan, you’re intelligent, you could train for something—”

The sudden violence in her face shocked him into silence. After a while, she said slowly, “Oh, thank you very much. You asked me to drop getting my Degree, and now you’re saying I can train to be something else? What—a shop clerk? McDonald’s, maybe? Thank you, Michael. Thank you very much indeed.”

“I—I’m sorry, Joan—”

She stalked into the living room. Heart sinking at the unpleasant evening ahead, he followed her.

Fearing her reaction, he had not told her about the horse. Nor had he said anything to his two sons, aged sixteen and eighteen, because they took after their mother. Instead, after some hesitation, he visited a psychiatrist and tried to remember all the non-events of what, when he looked back on it, seemed to be his non-life. Had Michael wanted riding lessons as a child and been denied them? Dr. Lynn Georges enquired. No? How about his last name, Mooney? Was he a Kabbalarian by any

chance, subscribing to the ancient theory that one's fate is linked inextricably to one's name; to illustrate, the moon controlled the tides and a Kabbalarian might insist that anyone with Michael's surname had an inborn connection to the sea or to water. No? Had he, she asked suddenly, as if this line of thought led to another, ever been punished for bedwetting?

"None of those things. Doctor, these last few days I've had severe stomach pains. Do you think my stomach problem is triggering off the hallucinations?"

Dr. Georges asked about the color of his stool—black, perhaps, indicating internal bleeding?

"I've had a physical and everything seems fine, but just lately I've been in real pain."

"Inform your family doctor immediately, okay? In the meantime, think about anything that could link you to horses or to water."

August arrived; gratefully, he realized that for a whole month he wouldn't have to endure a ferry trip. Meanwhile, the pains in his stomach continued, but an X-ray came up blank, making him wonder if the fiery stabbing was caused not only by his wretchedness at having to sack a man every month, but also because of his worsening relationship with Joan. She seemed intent on dredging up every disagreement they'd ever had, and each quarrel seemed to open the door to another, like an endless passageway of mean little rooms. I know the marriage vow was for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, he told himself, but this is hell...

WHEN SEPTEMBER ARRIVED, THE TRIP FROM TSAWWASSEN TO SEATTLE HAD TO be cancelled because his stomach pains were so severe. Then a trip to Victoria came and went without incident, as did another trip in October, crossings that were made during the day. Michael proposed to Hansen that they travel during the day in future.

"No, it's best we keep the day free for meetings. Listen, Charlton Brothers have a new garbage compactor."

"Yes. It's better than our Compactor 430."

"Well, we got to get rid of the 430s whether they do a good job or not. So when we meet with the president of Lancet, we'll offer him a week in Vegas with some T and A thrown in. How's that stomach of yours?"

"They're going to take a biopsy from my bowel. Sometimes I can't move."

"Hey," grinned Hansen, brightening, "tell them to check for ground glass, eh? Us married guys never know if the little woman's decided to polish us off."

“What? You’ve got to be kidding!” Michael exclaimed.

Hansen paused to take in Michael’s expression, then giggled, “Jeez! Know something, Mooney? You wouldn’t recognize a joke if you fell over it!”

Three days later, he and Hansen had to visit Victoria, and Michael manoeuvred the schedule so that they would be forced to travel during the noon hour. Hansen seemed strangely restless.

“Queer weather,” Hansen said. “Look at the fucking sun. Red. Don’t like it.”

Michael, too, was unable to concentrate. He and Joan were sleeping apart now. That morning, after a night’s severe pain, he had turned to tell her that he was leaving for the office, and for a terrifying second, found himself looking, not into the violet eyes of the young Elizabeth Taylor of *National Velvet* fame, but into the pitiless eyes of the beautiful Wicked Queen from *Snow White*. Then the face had changed back to Joan’s familiar features. He didn’t know what had happened or what it meant. He knew only that the moment surfaced again and again as if his subconscious were forcing it on his attention.

“By the way,” Hansen tossed out. “We’ll be reforming the company pension and insurance schemes. Too rich. Not fair on the shareholders.”

Michael noticed how Hansen’s solid paunch rounded over his knees.

“My son Brad,” Hansen continued, “has graduated top of his economics class. He’s looking for a position, possibly in sales.” He removed his glasses and his gaze rested on the Hansen logo emblazoned on Michael’s briefcase.

A pain began burning Michael’s gut; soon, he was shifting in his seat in an attempt to find relief. Blood swelled in his ears, provoking a dull roar in which the passengers’ voices were drowned and dreamlike, ghost-tones of souls lost at sea. Sweat trickled down his forehead and he turned towards the window and mopped discreetly, hoping that Hansen wouldn’t notice. God, if they couldn’t discover the cause of this pain soon... From this angle, the coastal mountains on either side of the Strait were out of sight and the view was of a smooth, endless sunlit sea, giving the impression that the ferry had halted at the edge of the world.

“Brad will go far,” Hansen was concluding, his eyes bright. “Chip off the old block. Yes, sales.” And when he looked at Michael, the light in his eyes seemed to snap into darkness, as if he had switched Michael off.

Michael suffered another vision. As though a spotlight had been thrown, he saw Hansen’s bristling blond-white hair, brushed straight back from the heavy pink forehead, the big, blunt nostrils jutting beyond



the long line of thin lip. Behind the glasses, Hansen's eyes were small and...yes, piglike. The vision continued: Hansen, clopping down the gangplank, brief case clutched in one pink trotter...

And then he realized that a brilliant light, over and above the reddish sunlight already filling the lounge, was creeping up the blue vinyl of the seat in front of him. At the same time, the ferry began to jiggle.

The public address system clicked on; the captain's voice said, "Fucking hell," before the tone changed to professional cream and murmured, "Just a little turbulence, ladies and gentlemen. Please remain seated until further notice. Parents are asked to keep their children beside them."

The light was brightening, spreading over the white-painted bulkheads, and it seemed to Michael that the lounge was beginning to smell like a rocky shore at low tide. He did not look out of the window. Instead, he said silently to the shimmering vinyl in front of him, "In the name of Christ, leave me alone."

The jiggling intensified.

"Hey, what's that salty smell—reckon we've hit some sort of storm?" Hansen began nervously, and then the captain's voice cut in, "Attention all crew, all personnel to their—"

The address system went off with a rush. "Shit! Lightning!" gasped Hansen.

The ferry had begun to leap like a creature gone mad at the end of a chain. The light beyond Michael's window was blinding, of the sun yet also of the moon, filling the lounge with gold and silver... two children sitting with their parents began crying, as did an old woman sitting by herself. Foam was smoking whitely across the windows. Slowly, Michael turned his head and what he saw, about ten feet away, as the ferry reared and plunged with its stricken passengers, was a flashing, enormous silver hoof. Michael's mind, which had already offered itself up to death, noted almost mechanically that the hoof must be about one foot in diameter. Then he saw that there were two hooves: a right and a left, flashing past the window like enormous sculptures of silver, dazzling his eyes—

"Look out the window," he mumbled into Hansen's terrified face, "look—look—"

"It's the Big One!" Hansen screamed, clawing at Michael's sleeve, "God—where's the fucking lifebelts—"

Children were also screaming now, as were many of the passengers. Michael tore away from Hansen's scrabbling hands and suddenly Hansen turned green and threw up into the gangway. The ferry dropped endlessly, shot up into the air, slid sideways in a great curtain of foam, and he heard the captain's voice, "Crew... stations..."

The hooves were dropping slowly below his vision, and the shining forelegs came into view. Spray was zig-zagging in lacy ribbons down the window; his nostrils stung with the reek of salt. Clinging to the seat as Hansen continued to throw up, Michael saw the horse's coat, each hair lustrous within its own light, as if they were composed of filaments of pearl. The note of the ferry was changing, the engines clacking, barking—the ferry slipped to one side, the stern tipped skywards and Michael's stomach was forced against his ribs as the ship tore helplessly down a mountainside of water—people were screaming and the engines were screaming and the seat was leaping under his hands, his ears were bursting—everywhere there was weeping and screaming—someone was praying wildly to Jesus: Hansen—!

Beside him, the shining forelegs continued their long, revolving descent, rounding into knees of such bedazzlement that his eyes began to water. He saw the swell of the upper forelegs, and the beginning of curves belonging to a chest of gigantic proportions; shoulder muscles rotated in splendid radiance, and after that came the endless curve of a luminescent throat. Clinging to the frail lifeline of his seat, mouth dragging in air, Michael waited, the cries of the passengers falling about him, the ferry a demented thing. On and on the length of the throat, and at last, the parted mouth, pure as an alabaster shell, and he could see the great pearls of the teeth, and the immense mother-of-pearl tongue, and then the great glistening cheekbones, like the planes of a carved chalice of pearl, and then the iridescent mane, scattering light, and then at last, that for which he had been waiting, and when it filled the window, Michael knew that his body had reached its limit and now had no sensation at all, so that his grasp fell away and his body bounced about within his seat. The faceted eye moved into his vision: a crystalline aquamarine mass refracting light like a sunlit sea. Held within it was the reflection of his own tormented face, reflected and reflected and reflected, his thousand mouths howling, and above his howls was a high whinnying, like a great wind come out of space...

The ferry dropped like a stone, hurling Michael out of his seat and sending him crashing against other flailing passengers. His forehead smashed against a metal stair and he yelled in agony, lifting both hands to protect his head as blood poured into his eyes. Blinded, he fell across the screaming stranger struggling on the floor beside him before feeling around with bloodstained hands for the stair handrail.

Again came the whinnying summons, louder this time. Somehow, he pulled himself upright and tried to balance his trembling body against the plunging bulkhead as he wiped blood from his eyes. The open door-

way at the top of the gangway stairs was shimmering with indescribable effulgence; the reek of salt was choking him.

Once again, the long-drawn out, unearthly whinny. Silvery light began spreading down the stairs.

And suddenly, a strange, profound peace opened within Michael, a slow, soul-deep acceptance of what had to be. A man being escorted to the gallows, he felt, might know this same renunciation, might even experience the strange sense of dignity that came to him now. Stepping over the stranger screaming at his feet, he began working his way hand over hand up the stairs and towards the light.

“Mooney—I’m hurt—Mooney—”

A couple of deckchairs cartwheeled past the stairs’ open doorway before they splintered against something solid further down. Michael continued climbing.

“Mooney—my leg—oh God, Mooney, my leg—”

The air was a blinding, diaphanous shimmer. The horse’s summons was full-throated now, ringing in his ears, powerful, drawn-out chords of an unearthly music.

“Yes, I’m coming,” Michael whispered. He reached the doorway and stepped on to the splintered chaos of the deck, hair whipping about his bloodied head.

A gigantic wave reared up before crashing over the deck, and then roared towards him until he was thigh-deep in swirling, glistening icy foam. Lifting his arms, he held them out towards the glorious creature waiting just beyond the deck rail, and as he struggled forward, he breathed a prayer that his bloodstained hands would have the strength to fasten on to that iridescent mane, and never let go. •

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*The intention of good FX is not to deceive but to avoid looking fake or cheap. Good FX don't lie: they follow through..*

## On film & SF: **Personal FX**

Steve Mohn

I'VE BEEN WRITING A STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO EARNS A LIVING telling faked images from real, mainly so people who bring him incriminating images can disavow them safely or get a good lawyer. Writing fiction about visual imagery isn't impossible but one might sensibly leave images to the movies, since images are what movies do.

So why do movies stumble when they imitate footage purportedly from TV or other movies? A news broadcast or Larry King or Jay Leno barking a monologue is easy. The camera angles and cutting patterns are well known. The sets exist. But when we get films-within-films, the "clips" look as if the directors never watched a film. In *Notting Hill*, Julia Roberts plays an actor; as proof we see a clip from her hit SF film. And no matter how silly, no SF film has ever employed a shot like it—no standard industry production would. Yet the shot offers evidence supporting a role, a story, a whole concept.

What do filmmakers think they are showing when they use images meant to pass as evidential? Surely the makers of *The Blair Witch Project* understood "found footage" to mean unprofessional at least. And Andrew Niccol, writer and director of *Simone*, had to offer something very polished, very professional, again and again, to convince us that

a simulated personality called Simone could fool common viewers not only into believing her real but into falling for her as if she's Dietrich, Madonna *and* Princess Di—when she's just a beautiful blond with a few lines. She appears in films-within-films, on TV, at a stadium concert, in production stills, but no one has the forensic sense to examine any of her material and judge its validity—and she's matted into all of it. The premise is that she's digitally perfect—"I am the death of real," Simone tells us. "I was ones and zeros. I was nothing." And unlike Rei Toei, the idoru who slips out of nano-assemblers everywhere in *All Tomorrow's Parties*, to become someone no longer virtual, Simone is maintained as code. No one must know that she's a synthespian, though everyone in *Idoru* knows Rei Toei is not real. Her novel runs on that energy. *Simone* runs on a farce of keeping her ga-ga public from learning what she truly is.

Because the assumption here is that we are incredibly stupid. That there exists a line of demarcation: on one side Real; Unreal on the other.

And we can't see it, not since computer imagery became so neatly convincing. But sit close to the screen next time and you probably won't fail to tell what was caught with the camera from what was FXed in post. The gurl-surfer movie, *Blue Crush*, shows many surfers, some laying pipe on professionals-only waves. It's easy enough to find the shots that fake the star negotiating the curl of the wave to win the big competition. Not so easy from the back row, much tougher on DVD at home, but still possible if you know what to look for. I once had 20/15 vision but not anymore. I still see these things by looking for them. I like to, it's part of my fun. But anyone can spot FX-work. It's good but not seamless. And if you really had to prove the legitimacy of some image, you wouldn't just squint at it. You would do what art experts, materials testers and homicide-lab workers do—look close. Very close. And learn what to look for. Like that guy in my story, you would blow up the image, creep it frame-by-frame, scan it backwards, skew the colors false, even crack the picture and go right into the code. Because actually Simone *is* ones and zeros, and so is Rei Toei:

She is a voice, a face, familiar to millions. She is a sea of code, the ultimate expression of entertainment software. Her audience knows that she does not walk among them; that she is media, purely. And that is a large part of her appeal. (*All Tomorrow's Parties*/55)

Here there's no coyness, no pulling the wool over the eyes of everyone in the world, as if that's still an option. Now less than ever, if only because so many people do not believe what they are told by corporations, gov-

ernments, press agents, actors who are just good friends or the Singapore police. The idoru is a hologram and then some, but understood to be a projection—she even emits light. To please her fans, Simone must perform in a stadium; her hologram is projected into stage smoke. For the length of a concert. Continuously. And no one twigs to it. The actors who beg to co-star with Simone never actually work with her. Well, she's shy. This is just slack writing, though *Gattica* and the screenplay for *The Truman Show* prove that Niccol can do better. Also fake better: in *Gattica*, one man's effort to genetically impersonate another is prodigious, the stuff of every scene; while the infrastructure that engulfs poor Truman, a man whose whole life has been a TV show, is appropriately vast.

In the Sixties, when TV was technologically thin and movies were considered superior, location shooting was the rage. Fake-looking shots made kids cry: "Fake!" Some became directors whose film and TV productions destroyed the clumsy charm of bad FX. But people watching films today don't sit there believing in any sense that the tornados, aliens or bullet wounds are real. What they don't like is being yanked out of their enjoyment of a story, which depends on going into a kind of trance, like a writer's trance, or an actor's, in which they pretend that the story, the words on the page, the performances are true. Cheap FX ruin that—and that's all good FX are for. They don't break the trance. And seeing the FX-work when watching a film is like reading and noting what other writers do with rhetoric, dialect, metaphor. Noticing craft doesn't automatically ruin the trance of enjoyment.

Even when the FX become the trance it shouldn't mean that anyone is really being duped. The intention of good FX is not to deceive but to avoid looking fake or cheap. Good FX don't lie: they follow through. No hand prints or smudges, no bare patches on the freshly painted wall. In *Idoru*, Chia Pet McKenzie, a girl of fourteen, spends nearly as much time ported into cyberspace as she does in physical space, and never seems confused. Her father has given her a virtual Venice, which presents as "an old dusty book with leather covers, the smooth brown leather scuffed in places into a fine suede..." (*Idoru*/35) Wearing VR glasses and fingertip sets, Chia opens to:

The Piazza in midwinter monochrome, its facades texture-mapped in marble, porphyry, polished granite, jasper, alabaster (the rich mineral names scrolling at will in the menu of peripheral vision). [...] She had no idea what this place was meant to mean, the how or why of it, but it fit so perfectly into itself and the space it occupied [...] The gnarliest piece of software ever.... (*Idoru*/35-36)

Nothing in cyberspace is physically real and, in Gibson, no one treats it as such. It's a different thing, with a different basis. In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Rei Toei assembles herself out of code and molecules to become physical. But not human—it would be beside the point, perhaps even in bad taste.

That writers might do images at least as well as filmmakers, for whom images are ninety percent of the game, is not so surprising. Before photography, movies and video, “natural description” (its true poetic category) happened all the time. What is surprising is how well M. Night Shyamalan, for one, captures the imagistic flavor of TV news and home video in *Signs*. The emotionally blighted family trapped in that farmhouse during days of hostile alien first contact can only follow the event on TV and nearly all they get is a static, uninformative shot of lights hanging over Mexico City. How right that is! How often we've had to stare helplessly at unfolding events with nothing but a distant static camera that makes us wait and wait: the real story, the lives reaching crisis, are mostly withheld. And when you do get “front-line” news in *Signs*, you get birthday party footage from South America, handheld and off-focus—coded textures we've learned to read as documentary, true, frighteningly “live.”

The strange part of all this is that it's less surprising that *Simone* gets its most essential images wrong every time. The film clips within the film look like no film you've seen since Antonioni: bleak geometries, empty skies, unmoving cameras—huh? I can think of nothing made in the last thirty years that looks like that. There is a vaguely futuristic feel to *Simone*, which mostly shows up in Jay Mohr's costumes. Nazi architect Albert Speer might have done those designs, to say nothing of Nordic Ms. Romijn-Stamos in the title role. If the look means anything, what does it mean? If it means nothing, why is it there?

We live in an unprecedented age of imagery. We are assured each day of how sophisticated we are in this respect. At the same time, artists worry us with fears of virtual realities replacing observed reality, conspiracies that reach the highest levels but with the nine-tenths-invisible mass of icebergs supporting them, or nations that wage wars for the sake of reelection campaigns—the tail wagging the dog. So easy to fake reality, to fake-out the most sophisticated image consumers of all time! Then we look hard, like that guy in my story, at the images offered as proof of how easily duped we are, and see absurdity, accident, assumptions that crumble as you creep the film, monochrome it, boost the contrast. We need what writers have had since the *Institutio Oratoria* of the first-century Roman rhetor, Quintilian: a rhetoric of image. Maybe if filmmakers knew

what they were doing and, more to the point, knew that *we* knew what they were doing, they would become better at it.



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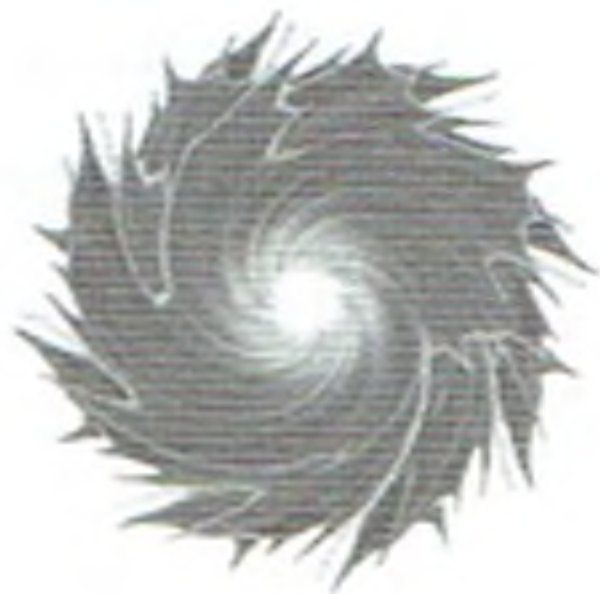
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STEVE MOHN Steve Mohn has appeared severally in *On Spec*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and recently with a story in *The Third Alternative*. He lives in Montreal.

DERRYL MURPHY has some new stories out somewhere, but he doesn't want to commit until he sees things in hand. In the meantime, if you want to wallow in the glory of his past successes, Derryl recommends you go to [www.fictionwise.com/eBooks/DerrylMurphyBooks.htm](http://www.fictionwise.com/eBooks/DerrylMurphyBooks.htm) and, for a small fee, read some of his reprints, including a few from this very magazine.

JOHN PARK was born in England and is now a partner in a scientific consulting

firm in Ottawa. His stories have appeared in *Galaxy*, *On Spec*, and *Tomorrow* magazines and the anthologies *Far Frontiers*, *Cities in Space*, *Tesseract<sup>2</sup>*, *-<sup>3</sup>*, *-<sup>4</sup>*, *-<sup>5</sup>*, and *-<sup>8</sup>*, *Northern Stars*, and *TransVersions*, as well as in French and German translations. "Imprint" started life over a decade ago, as a cyberpunk parody, which helps explain how well he is known as a writer of comedy.

KEN RAND lives in Utah where he writes "semi-fulltime." His fiction has appeared in *Weird Tales*, *Aboriginal SF*, *Writers of the Future*, *Talebones*, and four dozen other magazines and anthologies. He wrote *The 10% Solution: Self-editing for the Modern Writer* (Fairwood Press), and *Tales of the Lucky Nickel Saloon* (Yard Dog Press).

KATE RIEDEL is originally from Minnesota, but is now a card-carrying Canadian citizen living in Toronto. Previous publication credits include *Not One of Us*, *On Spec*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*, as

well as the Turnstone Press anthology *Divine Realms*. "To Others We Know Not Of," published in *Weird Tales*, is included in the recent *Year's Best Fantasy 2* from Harper/Eos.

KAREN TRAVISS is a journalist from Hampshire, England. Her previous work has appeared in *Asimov's* and *On Spec*, and she has more stories coming up shortly in *Realms of Fantasy* and *Asimov's*. The first novel of her *City of Pearl* trilogy is due to be published by HarperCollins. Website: [www.karentraviss.com](http://www.karentraviss.com).

DAVID K. YEH has lived in downtown Toronto for the last nine years. He is a graduate of the George Brown Theatre School and holds his M.A. in sociology from Queen's University. In Toronto, he has written and produced four plays. He currently works full-time as an expressive arts therapist. This is his first short story to appear in print. David likes to dance." •

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