

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



A.M. **Dellamonica**  
Harvey **Walker**  
James **Wilson**  
Cat **Ashton**  
Laurie **Channer**  
Siobhan **Carroll**  
Patricia **Rutale**  
Steven **Mills**

nonfiction by Peter **Watts**  
and Michael **Bishop**

cover art by Bob **Eggleton**

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*Here is a woman so terrified of sf-cooties that she'll happily redefine the entire genre for no other reason than to exclude herself from it...*

# Margaret Atwood and the Hierarchy of Contempt

Peter Watts, Fiction Editor

START WITH A METAPHOR FOR LITERARY RESPECTABILITY: A spectrum, ranging from sullen infrared up to high-strung ultraviolet. Literature with a capital L (all characters, no plot) sits at the top. Genre fiction, including science fiction (all plot, no characters) is relegated to the basement. Certain types of fantasy hover in between, depending on the subspecies: the Magic Realists get loads of respect, for example. Tolkien gets respect. (His myriad imitators, thank God, do not.) Down in the red-light district, science fiction has its own subspectrum from “soft” to “hard.” It’s generally acknowledged that the soft stuff at least leaves room for literary style—Lessing, Le Guin, the New Wave stylists of the late sixties—while the hardcore types are too caught up in chrome and circuitry to bother with character development or anything approaching literary technique.

I call it *The Hierarchy of Contempt*, and although you might point to exceptions at any wavelength, it seems a reasonable approximation of

the literary “credscape”—according to the current regime at least, which holds the realist novel to be the benchmark against which all else is judged.

Given that realist benchmark, you might expect respectability to correlate with real-world plausibility in the narrative. You would be wrong. The supernatural noodlings of the magic realists are often classified as genuine art, while hard science fiction—which frequently goes to great lengths to establish scientific plausibility—tends to attract the loudest catcalls. The same critics who roll their eyes at aliens and warp drive don’t seem to have any problems with a woman ascending into heaven while hanging laundry in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, just so long as Gabriel Garcia Marquez doesn’t get published by Tor or Del Ray. In this context, the Hierarchy is neither consistent nor rational; those who live by its tenets tend to develop psychological problems.

Margaret Atwood, for example.

Here is a woman so terrified of sf-cooties that she’ll happily redefine the entire genre for no other reason than to exclude herself from it. Of her latest novel—a near-future dystopia detailing baseline-Humanity’s replacement by a genetically-engineered daughter species—she has said: “*Oryx and Crake* is not science fiction. Science fiction is when you have chemicals and rockets.” It was not an isolated slip. Atwood has also characterized science fiction as the stuff that involves “monsters and spaceships,” and “Beam me up, Scotty.”

Atwood claims to write something entirely different: *speculative* fiction, she calls it, the difference being that it is based on rigorously-researched science, extrapolating real technological and social trends into the future (as opposed to that escapist nonsense about fictitious things like chemicals and rockets, presumably). The irony, of course, is that Atwood’s very explanation as to why she *doesn’t* write science fiction not only places *Oryx and Crake* squarely in the science fiction realm, but at the *least* respectable end of that realm—the hard, extrapolative depths of the deep infrared.

Whenever Atwood makes such remarks—she trotted out the same horseshit back when *The Handmaid’s Tale* was released—I suffer mixed reactions. Sheer dumbfounded awe, for one—that this bloody tourist could blow into town and presume to lecture the world about the geography of the ghetto, blithely contradicting generations of real geographers who’ve spent their whole lives there. It stirs something violent in me. And yet, above the gut, I just can’t believe that Atwood is that stupid. She knows Wyndham from Gibson, she reads them both. She’s certainly not an idiot; she’s not necessarily even a liar. But a terrible truth lurks in



the back of her mind, a dark, commonsensical thing barely repressed by peer pressure and the rear guard efforts of marketing gurus. She can feel it deep in the id, gnawing towards the light; should it ever escape the very world of OprahLit would fall, the peaceful sanctimony of its inhabitants laid forever waste.

Here is the unbearable truth that Margaret Atwood struggles so heroically to deny: *science fiction has become more relevant than "Literature."* In fact, it could hardly be otherwise. Here in the real world, people run software with their brainwaves. Robot dogs are passé. Teleportation is a fact. It has become routine to genetically cross goats with spiders, fish with tomatoes. Every week seems to herald the arrival of some new and virulent plague. What has stronger resonance in such a world: a story about the ramifications of human cloning, or a memoir about growing up poor in post-WWII Ireland?

Atwood must know this, on some level. She knows she can't stay relevant by ignoring world-changing events. She knows that many of those events are rooted in science and technology, so her fiction must deal with those issues. She knows, in other words, that she has to write *science fiction*.

But she just can't bring herself to admit it, and the resulting backflips and contortions remind me of an old trope that would be science-fictional even by Atwood's limited understanding of the term. I'm thinking of the stereotypic malign computer from sixties *Star Trek*, haplessly trying to parse James Kirk's ingenious claim that "Everything I say is a lie." Unable to resolve the contradiction, it sparks. It fizzes. It cries "Does not compute," its once-stentorian voice gone all high and squeaky. Finally, in a puff of pink smoke, it expires.

Margaret Atwood deserves our pity. Cognitive dissonance can't be a pleasant way to go. ♣

### **About our cover...**

When we asked cover artist Bob Eggleton about his cover piece, he said:

"This is an unpublished work, recently done. A private commission for Mr. Jim Belfiore of Maine, it portrays Jim 'on a really cool planet or moon' were his words of instruction. The joke is that in college, Jim did an astrophysics project in which he discovered what at first was an 'unknown object' in the night sky. Excitedly he announced his great find, only upon closer scrutiny, he had in fact 'discovered' ... Saturn. Hence the title: 'Jim Discovers Saturn?'"

*Ramon had seen it in Atlanta, children forced by worried parents to go through the motions of living in the hope that it might be habit-forming...*

# The Children of Port Allain

A.M. Dellamonica

ABIGAIL HAD TOLD HIM THAT PORT ALLAIN WAS A PRETTY town, and it lived up to the promo. Set flush on the edge of the Queen Charlotte Strait, it was tiny, clean, and prosperous. The streets had just been paved and there was fresh paint on the storefronts. Renovations were underway on a couple of the older office buildings. A nice place to visit, as the old saying went.

As Ramon walked off the ferry, he spotted a police officer casing the disembarking foot passengers, her gaze calm and speculative, substantial as a touch on the shoulder. Behind her, an old man in an immaculate blue suit was walking with a protest sign.

“Port Allain: over 50 deviants served. Welcome to the home of perverted scum,” read the front of the sign. Residents flowed past the protester as if he was invisible. He pivoted to reveal the back placard, where the famous face of Rupe Moresby loomed fourteen inches high. “No Second Chances!” read block letters above the picture.

“Protect our children,” the old man sing-songed in a reedy voice.

Ramon scanned the ferry terminal, spotted his ride click-clacking



toward him on high heels.

“Doctor Corazone?”

“Just Ramon, Mayor.”

“Dandy. That’ll make me Sheila.”

Studying the copper-haired matron, he shook the offered hand. She was well-dressed and alert, with deep lines just beginning to set around her mouth. Scooping up his suitcase, she hefted it into an illegally parked teal Civic. “This is a change.” She grinned. “Usually I do this run with reporters.”

A faint surge of unease broke through him, like a wave on the beach. He patted his pocket automatically, discovered his inhaler wasn’t there. It must have ended up packed in the laptop case. “You get many journalists?”

“One or two a month. Enough so I’ve got a standard tour worked out.”

“A tour?”

“Interested? I’d be happy to take you past the landmarks.” Squinting into the sun, she winced as the ferry’s horn sounded, two loud blatts that echoed as it pulled out of the terminal for its return to the Mainland.

“Perverts out! Protect our kids,” crooned the old man, and a tired, hunted expression clouded the mayor’s eyes.

“The tour would be very helpful,” Ramon said, biting his lip as the car door opened and the scent of stale cigarettes washed out from its interior.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: ABIGAIL WARREN, AGE 14.

“Abigail, do you know why your parents sent you to live with your grandmother?”

“Live with her, Doctor? That’s a laugh.”

“Can you tell me why they sent you here?”

“They haven’t given up hope.”

“Hope. What do you think they’re hoping for?”

“They haven’t accepted my death. They’re hoping you’ll tell them that I am still alive.”

“And you’re not?”

“No, Doctor.”

“You can call me Ramon if you like.”

“Whatever.”

“Why do you believe that you are dead, Abigail? Can you help me understand that?”

“You can’t understand it, Ramon. You just have to accept it.”



"INITIALLY WE WANTED A POT GREENHOUSE," SHEILA SAID AS THEY SPED ALONG THE coastal road on the eastern side of the town. Classical music threaded from her stereo while the ocean sparkled through the faintly tinted glass of the car windows. The retreating ferry was a smudge, its escort of circling gulls mere specks.

Driver's side, a stone wall hugged the highway, twenty feet tall and loaded with high-tech defense toys: cameras, motion detectors, and scanners. Made of experimental chip-resistant mortar, its surface bristled with sharp-edged outcroppings, all designed to snag blood, hair and skin samples from anyone foolish enough to climb it.

"We figured there was a market for growing medicinal marijuana."

"Government research?"

"Exactly. The pulp mill had shut down, and people were getting desperate."

"Hard times."

"And how. But then one of the Interior towns beat us to the punch. They got the greenhouse." She pulled alongside a wrought-iron gate, tapping a garage door opener that was clipped to her sun visor.

"This wall—does it surround the city?"

"No. We're not a prison, Doctor. Nobody's penned in here."

"It must enclose something."

She nodded, fishing in her purse one-handed for a crumpled map of the town. Doubled lines marked the wall, forming a trapezoid that hemmed in a good third of the municipal lands. They ended at the beaches, terminating in squat hexagons labeled as guard posts.

"City within a city," Ramon murmured.

"Most of the families live inside."

So someone *was* penned in—the kids. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to build a fortress around your criminal population?"

"Cheaper, but illegal. They have rights."

"Of course."

"Some of the childless couples live downtown or in the west end. But most of the residential developments are already inside the wall. We're expanding it north."

"Who paid to build it?"

"Mostly it's federal money, but the security companies pitched in. It's a big R&D write-off, and they're convinced there's a market."

The gate opened onto a narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel, like a garage or car wash. Flickering light played over the license plate while a beam shone down to illuminate the interior of the car.

"The computer brings up photos of the car's registered drivers," Sheila



said. "Guard does a comparison while infrared scan makes sure there's nobody lurking in the back seat or trunk."

Ramon took a deep breath, stretching his tense and tired lungs, and reminded himself again to look for the puffer in his laptop bag.

"We call this gate Checkpoint Charlie," Sheila said, and he laughed dutifully.

The garage went dark and then, just after his eyes adjusted, they drove out into blinding daylight. The scan had taken less than a minute.

"What was I saying again?"

"The marijuana project."

"Right. Well, a few weeks after that plan goes up in smoke, forgive the pun, my predecessor—Mike Renault—is sitting in his bathtub listening to the radio. He tells people now that he was thinking about pulling the radio in with him. Frying himself because he felt guilty the town was dying."

"You don't believe him?"

"Blame the mayor's something of a local pastime here." She shrugged. "People get upset about the way things are, they need a target. Mike couldn't deal with that. So the pity-me angle in the bathtub story..."

"I see."

"Anyway, the radio. Mike hears them talking to this woman who helped hound Rupe Moresby out of Lamontine. The interviewer was giving her the usual hard time. 'Where are these people supposed to go?' That kind of thing."

"What did the woman say?"

"Probably 'Who cares?'" Sheila glanced at her ashtray and then slammed the brakes. "Anyway, the interviewer then comes out with this song and dance about how the experts say the way to keep these guys from doing it again is to take them into the community. Help t'em 'em. *Embrace* 'em." She shot Ramon a half-apologetic glance from under dyed copper bangs. "Here we are. Stop one."

It was a typical playground: well mowed and maintained, with signs regarding leash bylaws and graciously bending trees. Flowers nodded gently in the light breeze. Toddlers sprinted from the swings to the slides under the watchful eyes of their mothers while a gang of pre-adolescent boys and girls kicked a soccer ball across the lawn.

"Lot of big dogs," Ramon murmured.

"Man's best friend, right? There's cameras in the lamp posts. There and there." Sheila pointed a lacquered pink nail.

"And them?" He nodded at a uniformed RCMP officer who was chatting with the mothers. Her partner was reffing the soccer game.

“Dawn to dusk police presence. Park’s closed at night—they cruise by to make sure.”

“No incidents?”

“Not at the parks, not anywhere in town.” Then her tone changed. “There’s one of our trouble kids.”

He recognized the face immediately—a sober child of four whose picture had materialized in his e-mail. Blond, blue-eyed, on the chubby side, she pumped her legs on the swings dutifully as her father urged her on. Swinging like a pendulum, she never once asked for a push, never screamed in fear as she went higher, higher.

“So young,” Sheila murmured.

He frowned. His research had been unable to account for the extreme youth of some of the Port Allain victims. Perhaps Abigail was an anomaly, and the other children were suffering from a different delusional disorder. Perhaps he had come all this way for nothing.

But the girl’s face, devoid of life or joy, such a familiar expression...

“If you want to watch for a while, I’d hop out and...”

He shook his head. The girl was moving so fast that her body lurched at the top of each swing. No inclination to self-preservation—definitely one of the symptoms.

The girl’s father caught her carefully by the hips and slowed her down.

“All the parks are monitored?”

Sure. There’s a local company playing with the current facial recognition software for the cameras. They want to amp it up so it can scan video for a profiled target using other markers—gait, body language, typical gestures... I’m not sure what else. Anti-terrorism being hot right now, the airports will snap it up. That’s thirty jobs, right there.”

“Plus whoever handles the tapes, I suppose, and the extra police salaries.”

“Tip of the iceberg,” Sheila said, backing out of the lot. “Ready for stop two?”

“ABIGAIL, IF YOU ARE DEAD THEN YOU MUST HAVE DIED.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“How did you die?”

“It was an accident. I went climbing with some friends at Birch Point.”

“Yes?”

“We thought it’d be fun. We took climbing at school this year.”

“Do you enjoy that?”

“When I was alive I did.”



“So you were climbing?”

“Yes. But I missed a handhold and fell.”

“From high up?”

“No. But I landed on my head. I was killed instantly.”

“Then what happened?”

“Paramedics pronounced me dead at the scene. My parents buried me a week later.”

STOP TWO INCLUDED A WALK OUTSIDE, GIVING SHEILA A CHANCE TO BUY OFF HER nicotine demon by parking far from a low-slung concrete building and then hiking him over a paved path through the lush grounds.

“This used to be the community center. It shut down during the hard times. Town couldn’t afford to run it.”

“That’s a shame.”

“We’re building a new one. Institute bought the site two years ago. One hundred percent private capital.” Butting the cigarette, she pushed through the fire-rated doors.

“International Institute of Self Defense.” The sign hit him first—stark black letters on a red background. Across from the reception desk, women were beating on each other in a converted racquetball court. Their faces were taut, intense. A muscled instructor was filming the carnage, presumably for later analysis.

Sheila’s tour continued. “They run classes for locals all year, but you’d be stunned how many people send their kids to the summer camps. The adult classes have a high out of town enrollment rate, too.”

“From other towns in the area?”

She flinched. “From all over the world. The school’s reputation is huge. They sell training videos in fifteen countries.”

He nodded, remembered seeing this all in a magazine article. One or two reporters a month. “I guess it makes up for tourism.”

“Oh, we do fine on tourism.”

“Really?”

“It was down for a while, but then the recreational properties just outside of town got cheap.”

On a wall next to the reception desk was a slidescreen. Ramon thumbed the switch.

Letters faded in: “The Devils We Know.”

It clicked automatically to the next frame: Rupe Moresby again. Port Allain’s celebrity resident was captured in a recent photograph, with six o’clock shadow on his milky face and a charming glint in his eye. Text at the bottom listed his conviction record, the ages of his victims, his prison

release date.

"This is legal?"

"Sure," she said. "Anyway, they agreed."

"Why?"

"Where else could they go?" She reached out and, with a crisp turn of her fingers, snapped the screen back to blackness.

"ABIGAIL, HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT SOMATIC STRESS-INDUCED DELUSIONAL Disorder?"

"Corazone's Syndrome?"

"If you prefer."

"Yes."

"What do you know about it?"

"Some kid in Atlanta whose parents died in a fire decided he died too. Then a bunch of other kids from the fire caught it from him."

"That's essentially right. They believed they were dead. Do you know anything else?"

"They felt bad because they were living in a firetrap and their parents had told them to be careful. Not to play with matches."

"Yes."

"Did the kids start the fire, Ramon?"

"One of the parents had an accident with a cigarette lighter. The children felt responsible anyway. Sometimes we feel bad about things that aren't our fault, Abigail. For example, you feel bad about the little boy who was abducted near Port Allain, don't you?"

"Maybe I did before I died."

"Where did you hear about the syndrome?"

"Dad. He thinks I have it."

"Because you believe you are dead?"

"Because I am dead, and he doesn't want to face it."

"Do you think the children in Atlanta were right in believing they had died?"

"You're either dead or you aren't."

"How is it that we are talking now, you and I?"

"That's easy, Ramon. I'm not here. You're talking to yourself."

THE TOUR GROUND ON, PAST THE EXPANDED CORRECTIONS OFFICE FOR THE expanded parole staff, past a solid block of offices where lawyers worked to defend Port Allain's parolees from victim-launched lawsuits, past a guard dog obedience school.

Ramon didn't find any answers, any clue to the central delusion domi-



nating Abigail's consciousness. He couldn't blame Sheila for giving him a tapioca tour, emphasizing the up side of Port Allain's economic miracle without acknowledging its costs. What else could she do?

"Down thattaway's a brand-new, fifteen-bed women's shelter."

"Is that related to the parolees?"

"No, no, nothing like that. But we ask for money, the government shells out." Her voice was faintly contemptuous. "More Mounties, more parole officers, more streetlights. We started asking for that shelter twelve years ago. Suddenly—presto, here it is. They're afraid of us."

She drove back outside the wall, toward the unprotected downtown core. "That's the telemarketing center," she said. "About half of them work there. They teach it in prison."

"Electronic chain gangs. What about the other half?"

"This and that. Some live off money from their families. There's a few in the fishery. Six of 'em clean offices after hours. Plus the Shrink Tank pays."

"The what?"

"Sorry." She slammed on the gas as a light turned yellow. "That's what we call the Abnormal Psych Center."

"Of course."

"Speaking of which," she said brightly. "Last stop!"

It was a new industrial park, campus-style, surrounded by green belt and jogging trails. A central wedge of shops filled the ground floor—restaurants and services targeting the Shrink Tank's workers and support staff. Competing hot dog stands glimmered near the gate, and Ramon smelled roasting pork. A Stellar's jay perched in the branches near the stands, measuring his chances of making off with one of the hot dog buns.

"Most of your parolees participate in psychological studies?"

"The Tank's here to study them. You've probably seen some of their papers."

He nodded.

"Studies and studies. There's even one lady studying how good they are at taking psych tests." She grinned and fingered her keyring with a yellowed thumb.

"Why don't the Center psychologists deal with the affected children?"

"The parents want you. You're an outsider, you discovered the syndrome—"

"I was one of a team..."

"And you cured Abigail Warren."

"I'm treating her."

"Anyway, your Shrink Tank colleagues won't even admit Corazone's

exists. One fellow tried to tell me you hypnotized the Atlanta kids.”

“It’s like that with a new disorder.” Which was an understatement. The disorder itself might have been acceptable. Its propagation, the way it spread, almost like an infection, was not. His early work had been on cults, on the way charismatic leaders could induce symptoms of mental illness in varied members of their flocks. That had been well-received, but when he moved on to the Salem Witch trials, to the outbreak of hysteria that had consumed first a group of girls and then a whole town...

“Pop psych hack,” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

“My peers don’t think much of me.”

“They’re just jealous because nobody made a documentary about their research.” She grinned.

He nodded, knowing it was silly to crave their acceptance and burning for it all the same.

“Wanna go in and duke it out with them?”

“No.” He looked at the blue buildings, imagined his colleagues inside, administering tests to nondescript ex-convicts, gauging their responses to pornography, drugs, electricity. Industriously studying, quiet and uninvolved.

Sheila was still speaking. He snapped back to meet her gaze.

“Pardon?”

“Highlight of the tour’s over here. Place called Trackworks.” Digging for a cigarette and her lighter, she indicated a gray building at the far end of the park from the Shrink Tank. “It’s a bit of a walk.”

Trackworks turned out to be a high-tech venture billing itself as a personal security provider. Screens filled the company’s main control room, big line graphics mapping out the town three times. Colored dots marked the screens, pulsing faintly, high-tech pins marking locations on the map.

Sheila introduced him to an earring-decorated man named Cy, who had a firm handshake and the fervent eyes of a true believer. “This screen’s for the kids,” he said, pointing first to a map speckled with green dots.

“All of them?”

“About eighty percent of the locals pay to subscribe.”

“Is it expensive?”

“Sliding scale. Once they sign up, they get the locator injected in one of three places—we don’t tell people where, I’m afraid...”

Femur, shoulder, or pelvis. Abigail had told him. “How big is it?”

The young man passed him a tiny vial. Inside was a filament of wire the size of a straight pin.



"It identifies the specific child?"

"That it does." Cy highlighted a dot near the wall and text came up on the bottom of the screen.

"Client #894, Rio Flayer, Hispanic male, brown hair/eyes. Ten years old," Cy read. "We can call up more. Prints, contact numbers for his parents, that kind of thing. We've got a DNA sample in the freezer, too."

The green dots were scattered all over town, along the beach, in parks, malls and the residential areas. Most of them were inside the bright blue lines of the wall.

"The range on the trackers is fairly short, is that right?"

"Yes, but we have receivers all over town. The RCMP have a portable they can use to scan the woods if—"

Sheila coughed.

"If someone gets lost," Cy said smoothly. "We're working on an ocean model, too."

"Can you bring up the Corazone kids?" Sheila asked.

Ramon winced. The Atlanta orphans had been big news, but the press hadn't liked the unwieldy name of the disorder. They claimed the abbreviation, SSIDD, was too close to SIDS. When they took to calling it Corazone's, they'd alienated his colleagues on the SSIDD research team. Now he had a reputation as a glory-stealer, a prima donna.

Cy's keyboard clacked and most of the green dots faded from view, leaving a scant thirty in the neighborhoods. A few glinted on the beach.

"Parents dragged 'em out again," Cy murmured.

Dragged them out. Ramon had seen that in Atlanta, children forced by worried foster parents to go through the motions of living in the hope that it might be habit-forming.

A shrill buzz crackled through the room and the central map lit up. Two dots appeared in the northeast corner of the map, one green, one purple.

"What is it?" Ramon said.

"Two targets within one hundred meters of each other." Cy smiled. "It's okay. Happens all the time. There's a pediatric dentist down in that neighborhood, square between two of the work sites."

"What do you do?" He was dry-mouthed as the child's information slinked up the screen. "Client #1232, Mika Cho, Asian female, black/brown, seven years old."

Cy scanned the dots. "It's Rupe," he said. "He's a good boy. If he sees her, he'll back off. If he gets to fifty meters, we'll phone him and the cops..."

Ramon's heart pounded as the dots closed on each other.

"Seventy-five meters," said one of the operators.

Suddenly the purple dot veered away, tracking down a narrow lane, moving fast, putting space between itself and the green dot of Mika Cho.

At one hundred and ten meters, the screen went blank.

Sheila, beside him, let out a long sigh without seeming at all aware of it.

"See? Rupe's very reliable." Cy, without missing a beat, pointed at the third screen. "We call this Project Alibi."

"It's the..." he groped again for a collective noun. Nobody jumped in to supply one. "Parolees?"

"Yeah. They subscribe for free—we've got ninety-eight percent. It's in their interests, really. Cops call us every week from all over the country, asking who's out of town, when they left, do we know where they went. You can't imagine how much time they'd spend getting interviewed if we didn't know where they were."

Ramon swallowed.

"Of course, it saves police resources too," Sheila said.

The map had a sprinkling of dots, far fewer than the children's map, all purple. Most were densely concentrated in three or four locations—the telemarketing center, he supposed, the Shrink Tank and the fishery.

"We have three area towns interested in having us put in children's tracking centers if our tech continues to pan out."

"How do the neighboring towns feel about all this?" Sheila shifted beside him, but Ramon gave Cy a big smile and added: "It seems to be an issue for some of the kids."

"Well, it's about what you'd expect. Most of them have safety plans."

"Our cops work with their cops," Sheila added. "When one of our guys leaves town, they hear about it."

"That's it? No uproar?"

"Sure. There's an annual protest. Seven thousand people came last year."

Ramon wondered how much that had poured into the economy. "Nothing else? No violence?"

"Sure, a little." Sheila's expression was pained. "Out of towners looking to bang them up, once in a while."

"All the more reason to participate in Project Alibi," Cy put in cheerfully.

"What about lawsuits?"

"One. Municipality of Kelsey Bay."

"The town where the boy went missing?"

"Tamor Critchard. Yes."

"But didn't they just arrest the fellow who murdered him?"

"Yeah," Sheila said. "The suit argues he traveled to Kelsey Bay to abduct



a kid specifically because he figured our guys would get the blame.”

“It’ll get shot down as soon as we get a court date,” Cy said. “You can’t sue a municipality because someone lives there.”

You can blame them, though, Ramon thought.

“Even the dead boy’s parents couldn’t be bothered to touch it. Just a bunch of small fish politicians pretending they’re in touch, that’s all this suit is.” Cy scowled. “They aren’t even trying to understand what we’re doing here.”

On the map, the dot that was Rupe Moresby was on the move again, edging toward a bright cluster of purple trackers in the industrial part of town.

“What is that?”

“Craft Center,” Cy said.

Ramon swiveled. “Pardon?”

“Another work site,” Sheila interrupted. “Shall we?”

“ABIGAIL, DO YOU KNOW A LESLIE PUTNAM?”

“She was my best friend until I died.”

“Do you think Leslie misses you?”

“Sure.”

“Was Leslie there on the night when you and your friends went joyriding outside the wall?”

“We didn’t go outside the wall. I told you, we went climbing.”

“Leslie says you slipped away from the group.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Leslie says that you and four of your friends drove outside the wall, and then you went off by yourself. When the police found you, you were very upset.”

“It’s not true.”

“The five of you were going somewhere particular, weren’t you? Were you looking for the boy who went missing from Kelsey Bay?”

“That never happened. I went climbing. I fell. I died. My parents buried me.”

“The next children who fell ill were all friends of yours. They came to see you in the hospital. Did you tell them about something you saw?”

“There was no hospital.”

“Did you tell them you saw a corpse?”

“I was dead on the scene.”

“Does it upset you?”

“I’m not upset.”

“Why do you think Leslie’s saying these things if they’re untrue?”

"If she needs to pretend I'm not dead, that's fine. Everybody pretends."

TOUR COMPLETED, SHEILA DROVE HIM TO THE BED AND BREAKFAST, A TALL Edwardian house not too far from the wall, a white home screened from its street by enormous chestnuts and tangled red arbutus. A hunk of bedrock dominated the yard, thrusting up from the soil like an iceberg.

The woman who met them at the door was almost an ex-hippie caricature: long gray hair, flowing dress, and sandals. A mandala hung from her neck and her name was Rain.

She was friendly enough to Ramon, but she could barely meet Sheila's eyes. She hauled Ramon's case out of the Civic with ruthless speed, jerking it over the threshold before the other woman could offer to help.

"I'll pick you up in the morning," Sheila said. "The parents' meeting starts at ten."

"Fine."

"Anything you need?"

"No."

"Well..." She cast a faintly troubled glance at Rain, who had reappeared in the doorway, arms crossed. "Have a good night. Thanks again for agreeing to come."

Then she was gone, lighting a cigarette before she was even out of the lane.

"Drink?" Rain's voice echoed his own feeling of relief at the mayor's departure.

He nodded, followed her into the foyer, took in its warm colors and hardwood floors as she poured them both sherry from a crystal decanter. Upstairs, she showed him his room, bright and spacious, with a fireplace and writing desk. A massive clawfoot tub gleamed in the bathroom, next to a table covered in bowls of bath salts and scented potions.

"You did the Sheila tour, huh? What did you think?"

"I—" He stopped, caught halfway between a platitude about the town's prettiness and a comment about Sheila herself. "It was surreal."

"She's only thirty-eight, you know." Absent bitterness filled Rain's voice. "She looked it until she got elected. Being mayor's put fifteen years on her. They don't turf her out of office next election, she'll smoke herself to death. Everyone on her case and..."

Blame the mayor. He didn't answer, busied himself with exploring the room and locating his asthma puffers.

"You got kids? Most of the reporters phone home as soon as they get here."

"No kids."



"Fine. I've got a spiel for you—everyone in this town has a spiel. There's a basket downstairs full of restaurant menus and anything else you might need to know. Here's a key in case you're out late. I lock up at nine. You can have breakfast at six, seven or eight. Everything's organic. Do you have any allergies?"

"Cigarette smoke. Pollen. Cut grass. Cats."

"Food allergies."

"No."

"Questions?"

"No."

She took off her glasses and peered at him. "Are you going to be able to help the kids?"

"I won't know until I meet them. They might not even have SSIDD."

"I thought that was a sure thing."

"There are some discrepancies."

Rain nodded, took a breath, seemed to lose some of the anger. "There's a TV in the living room. I keep a bunch of old movies on hand. People find they help."

"Help... after the tour?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Dropping the key on the bed, she left him with his bags and his mystery.

Discrepancies, yes, but similarities too. The Atlanta kids were stressed for months about the condition of their building, even before it burned down. Here, the children probably suffered from similar prolonged anxiety. They could easily believe their parents were endangering them, just as the Atlanta kids had.

But the trigger in the Atlanta case had occurred when the first boy saw his mother's body. Nobody here had died.

What had Abigail seen?

"YOU SPENT A LOT OF TIME THINKING ABOUT TAMOR CRITCHARD, ABIGAIL, IS THAT right?"

"I guess."

"Did you suspect someone in town kidnapped him?"

"Someone in town?"

"I meant one of the parolees."

"The baby-fuckers?"

"Euphemisms bother you, Abigail?"

"Of course I thought it was one of them. Wouldn't you?"

"How do you think he managed it?"

"Tamor didn't live in town. Anyone could've gone out and grabbed him. He didn't have a tracker so he wouldn't show up on our map."

"After Trackworks and the police announced that the parolees all had alibis, did you believe them?"

"No. Dave Nichollson from school said the trackers could be fooled. He said Rupe found a way."

"How?"

"Hacking into their computers. Supposedly you could freeze your signal on the map."

"Was he right?"

"No."

"How do you know? When you and the other kids were caught outside the wall last June, were you testing this theory?"

"I wasn't caught anywhere."

"You said Dave was wrong. Were you glad?"

"Mostly. I was glad Rupe couldn't beat the system, but..."

"Yes?"

"Trackworks knew where I was every single minute. It was creepy."

"Okay, Abigail. After you found out that the trackers couldn't be fooled, did you still think someone from Port Allain had kidnapped Tamor?"

"Of course."

"How did you think he did it?"

"Lots of ways. Maybe he had a friend kidnap Tamor for him."

"Abducting a child isn't like ordering a pizza, Abigail."

"No? Put in an order and pay on delivery. Or maybe it's all buddy-buddy and they share."

HE PUT ON HIS SHORTS AND A PAIR OF RUNNERS, SLIPPED OUT OF THE B&B AND ran the wall, his usual swift jog giving way to a pelting, all-out dash, arms flying wildly as he drove himself down the brick walkway. He ran until he was exhausted, until every whoop of breath made his lungs hurt, until he was drenched in sweat and his toes were numb.

Collapsing on a bench near the beach, he watched the tide roll out, watched sandbars rising from the receding sheet of water. Families dotted the sand, parents relaxing in bunches while their kids ran along the shore, digging up shells and kicking spray. Gulls begged for handouts near the picnic baskets and boats slid back and forth, far out in the water.

As he sat watching, a new family arrived, two haunted adults pretending cheer as they coaxed their eleven-year-old twins toward the beach. One moved slowly, drifting with the automatic grace that Ramon found



intimately familiar. The other slumped, whined, argued.

Grimly the parents oversaw the beach rituals—blanket spreading, sunscreen, hats. The first boy submitted with wordless grace, flopping down onto a towel as soon as his father had done fussing. If he had the disorder, his heart rate would drop, and his core body temperature would follow. His eyes, if they stayed open, would cease to blink. It would be easy to mistake him for a corpse.

His twin struggled through the whole procedure, finally yanking free of his mother's grasp. He splashed out to a group of other children who took him in unquestioningly, giving him their Frisbee and letting him choose the rules for the next game.

"You're Corazone, right?" A thin Asian man in running gear blocked out the family. He ran a hand over the back of his shirt to dry off the sweat and then held it out. "Benson Wong. Port Allain *Crier*."

"I don't have anything to say to the press."

"I'm off the clock until the parents' meeting." The man plopped himself onto the bench and jerked his chin in the direction of the beach, the boy lying like limp lettuce on the towel. "One of the new ones. Sad, eh?"

"Yes," he said. "It's sad."

"Still—you're trying to get the psychiatric community to recognize Corazone's Syndrome, right?"

"If these children have Somatic Stress-Induced Delusional Disorder..."

"Not much question of that."

"I have plenty of questions."

"Like?"

"Why is it affecting four-year-olds?"

"Abigail has it."

He nodded curtly.

"And part of the whole disorder is the first kid passes it on to others, am I right? They all buy into her delusion..."

"I don't diagnose anyone without seeing them, Mr. Wong."

"You're the doctor. Point is, now you've got a pool of thirty kids to study and work with, you'll work out the kinks. Why they're young, how it spreads, all of it. Kind of a bonanza."

"Bonanza." Ramon got to his feet, stretched his aching calves.

"You gonna cure them? Off the record."

"I haven't seen them yet."

"You cured Abigail."

"I'm treating Abigail. It's not the same thing." Turning his back on the reporter, he retreated along the wall path, running towards the B&B.



"ABIGAIL, DID YOU EVER FEEL UNSAFE IN PORT ALLAIN?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you discuss your feelings with your parents?"

"I got the party line."

"Which was?"

"You know. Everyone works hard to be sure we're safe. All towns have guys like Rupe but having them here means it's harder for anyone to get to us. Port Allain's safer because we don't pretend it doesn't happen. Maybe the Center will cure them one day."

"And did this reassure you?"

"For a while. They caught this guy, one of the firemen, once. Assaulting his daughter, you know?"

"Yes?"

"Everyone said it would've gone on for years, except in Port Allain. Because she was real young and she wouldn't have told. But in our town, we're all educated. Even the little ones."

"Street-proofed."

"Scared shitless. When they caught the fireman, I was proud. Good old Port Paranoid."

"When did you stop feeling reassured?"

"I started thinking there were things they weren't telling us."

"Like?"

"Mom wouldn't talk about what they do when they're out of town. Or I'd ask what if they did get someone, and Dad would say that just won't happen."

"Did you resent that? Abigail?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"When the police showed up to collect you after your trip outside the wall..."

"I climbed. I fell. I died."

"You were hysterical, Abigail. You saw something when you were separated from the group."

"Nobody touched me, okay? I didn't see anyone."

"You told your parents you were dead forty-eight hours later."

"I wasn't there."

"You just said that you were."

"Can I go?"

"Soon. What about the others? Do you know if they went on this joyride or not?"

"Maybe."

"Where did the police pick them up?"



“On Forty-seventh and Lawson. Near the Craft Center.”

“IF YOU’D STOP SENDING HER MONEY, RAIN, SHE’D COME HOME.” THE WORDS growled through the bed and breakfast’s open window as Ramon jogged up the steps.

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“Goddammit, woman! Don’t you want to see your grandson?”

“Not here.” Rain’s voice was a scythe. “Not ever here.”

He rattled the doorknob loudly as he came inside, breaking the marital argument into chilly shards. He showered, changed, went out to a restaurant and picked at an excellent linguine. Returning, he eschewed Rain’s second offer of a taped movie and went to bed too early.

He dreamed he was walking in an empty shopping center, bright with polished marble and mirrors, all alone with the echo of his footsteps and the sound of water splashing in fountains. Every tenth or twentieth step he would trip and fall.

Each time he fell, he heard the grim sound of Abigail’s laughter.

He awoke a few hours before dawn, perspiring heavily, gasping for breath. White light shone through the trees from a streetlight, making cool, clean planes of Rain’s antique furniture. His balls were clenched up tight against his body, and his mouth tasted sour. He groped for his puffer, discharged the steroid mist into his lungs, fought for breath.

The Edwardian house was silent, like a shrine or a grave.

Craft Center. An innocuous phrase, so mundane that he had let it slip right past him.

He dressed, tiptoed down to the foyer and dialed a cab. Slipping outside, he rasped in the night air, chest tightening automatically on the chilly humidity. He was about to go back indoors when the car arrived.

“Forty-seventh and Lawson, please.”

“What you want down there at this hour?” In the rearview mirror, the driver’s eyes were flat and watchful. “Nobody’s around.”

“I want to see the Craft Center.”

“You some kind of thrill tourist?”

He coughed. “I’m Abigail Warren’s psychologist.”

“Ah.” The driver nodded, satisfied—of course he knew the whole story. “I’ll skip my spiel then.”

“You get sightseers?”

“Some. There’s drivers do a whole tour. This is So-and-So’s house, he got jailed for this. One fella made up little brochures, even, but the Parents Association shamed him into shredding ’em. Mayor should’ve done it, but she’s useless.”

They slid through Checkpoint Charlie onto the streets of downtown, alone except for delivery trucks and police cars. He tried to identify landmarks he had seen on the giant Trackworks maps, but was soon muddled and lost. It was a surprise when the car stopped.

"You want me to wait, right?"

"Of course."

The Craft Center was a small brick building that might have been a post office once, with high, dark windows and unassuming, blocky architecture. Unmarked, signless, it was surrounded by a manicured lawn. Tulips ran in lines along the sidewalks.

Ramon gave the front door a yank, testing the solidity of the bolt before he wandered around back, away from the cabbie's surveillance. It was a relief to be out of sight. Easy to imagine Abigail and her friends, thinking themselves unwatched for once even as the RCMP sped out to collect them. Simple to envision chaos at Trackworks: we have five juveniles at the Craft Center. Cy shouting for someone to call the parents, do something quick...

Had she made it this far, to this well-maintained loading dock and the tiny parking lot?

He climbed onto a green recycling bin, strained for a view through the window. No good—the blinds were closed. Was Abigail discouraged by the blinds? Had she smashed the window with a stone? He pictured her pushing the blinds aside, seeing something ... but what?

"Can I help you?"

He spun, expecting to see a cop, and instead found himself towering above Rupe Moresby.

Moresby was a small man—compact and muscular, with thinning brown hair. He was dressed in jeans and a blue-checked shirt, relaxing against the back of the building, his hands in his back pockets and a quirking smile on his lips.

Ramon swallowed. "Some night you'll do that and the guy you scare will have a gun."

To his surprise, the other man laughed. "Thugs don't take cabs out here to find us."

"You're assuming they're all smart." Furious, he clambered down from the recycling bin.

"If I wanted to live like a prisoner, I could have stayed in jail." Roguish good will emanated from the man, cheerful and mesmerizing. Ramon tried to view him dispassionately: decided Rupe Moresby was well-accustomed to charming people. Seen eye to eye, his face was more handsome than in his pictures.



“I have to go,” Ramon said, tearing his gaze loose, edging away.

“You don’t want to see the shop?” The words hit his back like a wash of cold water. “Shame, Doctor.”

Reluctantly, he turned.

“Fair’s fair,” Rupe Moresby said. “You know who I am.” He bounded up the steps next to the loading dock, unlocked a steel door. “This is the part that they don’t discuss with outsiders.”

“ABIGAIL, DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME YOU WENT INTO METABOLIC shutdown?”

“Yes. It was about a week after I died ... I mean, after I thought I died. Mom let me stay home from school. She asked Trackworks to let her know if I left the house.”

“Did you?”

“Just to get the mail.”

“Why the mail? Nothing else interested you.”

“Dad had applied for a job out of town. He was waiting to hear.”

“If he got the job you’d have moved.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I picked up the mail. Tamor Critchard’s picture was on a magazine cover.”

“Go on.”

“Then I saw there was a letter from the timber company, too. Addressed to Dad.”

“Did you open it?”

“I didn’t have to. They call when they want to interview. A letter means no way, no job.”

“And then?”

“It was like it sank in that I was really dead. I went and sat down in the living room and didn’t move. I got a little cold—that felt good. My ears made this roaring sound. A fly crawled over my whole face and didn’t itch at all. It was kind of cool.”

“How did you feel?”

“Safe.”

“How long did it last?”

“Until Mom came home from the Shrink Tank. She nearly bust a lung.”

DOLLS. THEY WERE MAKING DOLLS.

Twenty stainless steel tables lined the walls in two neat rows. A counter ran between them, covered in pieces—hair and eyes, tiny amputated hands and feet. In a corner two sewing machines were set up side by side,

with a pile of little clothes stacked neatly beside them.

On one table, he saw heads, lovingly carved from white wood, chubby toddler faces, lean pre-adolescents, young adults. Not mass-produced, no soulless doll heads here. These were unique, vibrant individuals, caught in a mix of expressions—surprise, contentment, their teeth crooked, their symmetry flawed by bent noses and odd dimples. The empty sockets above their cheeks were hollowed, waiting for the careful insertion of glass eyes.

A long silver knife gleamed beside a crate of wooden blocks.

"We sell them on the Internet," Rupe said, drawing a finger down one painted cheek. "To collectors, mostly."

Ramon's eye was drawn to a fully assembled doll, lying on one of the tables and dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. Little running shoes and socks sat beside her bare feet. She might have been real, if she wasn't lying on stainless steel, if her body had any life in it.

As she was, she reminded him of the boy on the beach.

"It bothers the parents. They don't talk about the Craft Center. But children wonder, don't they? God knows what they imagine we do here."

"How would you know?"

"I hear things. It's a shame small towns can't live on gossip alone."

"Not for you."

"True enough." Rupe chuckled. "I never thought I'd end up being someone's economic salvation."

Ramon shifted closer to the doll, saw that half of her scalp was still bare. A glue-gun and a swatch of blond hair lay in a nearby bin.

"You do the heads?"

"They taught me carving in prison. Art therapy."

"Where do you get your models?"

"So suspicious." Rupe stretched a long arm across the counter, pinched up a flat scrapbook. He let it fall open and Ramon saw pictures inside, photographs of kids. Some of the pictures were from the local paper. Music recitals. Scouting trips. Lovingly gathered. Neatly pasted.

"Abigail saw herself," Ramon said. "You carved her."

"No." Rupe shuffled pages in the scrapbook and glossy magazine photos appeared. "She saw him."

Tamor Critchard. Of course.

Amusement sparkled in the dark eyes. "It's in rather bad taste, I know, but we got a special order. Guy offered us quite a chunk of change. And he was such a pretty child..."

Ramon turned on one heel, lunged for the door. Stumbling on the cement steps, he caught himself with a shoulder-wrenching jerk. He



clenched, expecting Rupe to chuckle or laugh.

Words came out of the workshop. "I did my time, Doctor. Repaid my debt to society."

"Why did you show me this?"

"Why, so you can help your patients."

He turned so that he was nose to nose with the pedophile, stared openly, let him see his revulsion. Rupe Moresby didn't react—if anything, he looked like he was memorizing the lines of Ramon's face.

"I know what will help them."

"Children live near nuclear power plants, Doctor. They drink water that runs downstream from chemical factories." His lips twitched. "They live in fire traps if that's what their parents can afford."

"It's not the same."

"How would you know? Have you seen these kids yet?"

"Doesn't matter." His lungs ached as he forced the words out.

"You figure on getting rid of us? You're welcome to try. Sheila was elected on that platform, and look at her now. Stressed out and regurgitating the local catechism to reporters. We've got roots in the community. Clout. Political allies. Strength in numbers, Doctor, and besides—in case you haven't heard—we're creating jobs."

"We'll see," Ramon said, and this time he did walk away.

"RAMON?"

"Yes?"

"If I go home, will I become ill again?"

"Do you want to go home?"

"I don't know. I miss Leslie."

"Do you miss your parents?"

"I suppose."

"I know they miss you."

"Some other way..."

"Pardon?"

"It's the Allain lament."

"A poem?"

"It's a song. The fishermen sing it."

"I haven't heard it."

"Wish we could think of some other way/ to bring home our bread at the end of the day./Sea drags us down to the dark and the cold,/most like we'll drown 'fore we live to grow old."



THE SUN WAS UP WHEN HE GOT BACK TO THE BED AND BREAKFAST, RISING

gloriously over the ocean while birds circled, gold-tinged, above the fast-food restaurants along Main Street. He overtipped the cab driver and shambled past the arbutus tree on legs that felt like stumps. He was only half awake—some portion of his mind was trying to remember the words to an old Cole Porter song.

Terror and guilt. Abigail was thoroughly protected; the children of the nearby towns weren't. She thought she'd seen Tamor Critchard's body, confirmation of her long-held fantasy that someone from Port Allain had abducted the boy for Rupe.

Shambling up the bed and breakfast steps, he found himself face-to-face with Rain, who looked calmer this morning, nearly relaxed as she held the door wide.

"Your husband let you send the check to your daughter."

"He always does." She didn't seem surprised to see him rumpled and on the porch instead of fresh from his bedroom and a lavish shower. "Want breakfast?"

"No."

"You should eat. Meeting with the parents is gonna be a grinder."

She led him to an antique table in a bright, sunlit room. Freshly baked scones sat in a handmade basket beside his plate, their scent scouring his fatigue.

"It's always worst the second day." Rain poured steaming coffee with a firm hand. "By tomorrow you'll have the world pinned down again."

"I doubt that."

"You'll surprise yourself." Disappearing into the kitchen, she returned with an egg and pepper hash. Fried potatoes circled the plate like tiny half-moons, and a dollop of salsa smeared the bottoms of his sausages. "Eggs are free-range. The sausages are turkey. All the veggies are..."

"Organic."

"You got it."

Eat. It made sense. Sixty screaming parents was nothing a man should handle with low blood sugar. He pushed a mouthful of egg onto his tongue. It tasted like clay.

"Use the salsa," Rain urged.

He did, and the next bite was better—the flavor penetrated, in a dull and distant way.

"I wish you'd taken my advice and watched Jimmy Stewart last night. He always takes the edge off."

He laughed, one short, aggressive bark, and Rain went back to the kitchen, leaving him to his politically blameless meal.

Against his will the food and coffee warmed, soothed, brought him to



alertness. He shambled upstairs and availed himself of the shower's scalding embrace, put on his slacks and a shirt, went through the motions of straightening his hair. His notes for the meeting, pre-written days ago, were folded into one pocket. He tore them up and left the pieces on the dresser.

As he came downstairs he heard Rain speaking warmly.

"...got into me. Nellie lost her job again and was threatening to come home."

"Oh, honey," Sheila said. "You don't have to apologize."

He poured a glass of sherry from the crystal decanter, wished it was whiskey, and tossed it back as if it was. Then, wheeling around the corner, he caught them in mid-hug. Sheila was wearing a pink power suit, a long jacket which hid the curve of her hip and a creamy silk blouse tucked into her skirt.

"Ready?" she asked, digging out her keys. A wash of perfume and nicotine came off her, and he recoiled sharply.

"Sorry," he wheezed, and he reached for his asthma puffer, didn't bother to turn away as he blasted it into his lungs, once, twice. Cold medicinal taste followed the sherry flavor on his tongue and he fought to breathe.

"Spring's deadly, isn't it?" Sheila said, reaching out to pat his back. The cold metal of her key grazed his neck and he imagined Rupe, sitting at one of those steel tables with a wooden block in front of him. Carving children's faces with that long, sharp knife. "My allergies have been dreadful for..."

Ramon's wheezing drowned her out. His vision dimmed and he heard his pulse in his ears, slow beats, getting slower, amid a roaring like the ocean. His hands were getting cold...

Then it was over—his lungs relaxed, the air flowed in again.

"All better?" Sheila fidgeted with her watch, squinted. "Meeting's in twenty minutes."

"Yes," he heard himself say. "Fine."

"Attaboy." Sheila opened the door, gesturing at the teal-blue Civic parked at the edge of the street. Ramon fumbled for his laptop, gave Rain a parting smile, and followed. It wouldn't do to be late—the parents of Port Allain were waiting.

Morning had come, and it was time to go to work. ♣

*Maybe it's just my imagination, but ...  
sometimes when it comes right down  
to it, imagination is all that's left...*

# Northern Affairs

Harvey Walker

*As the story goes, around the end of 5 B.C., the Greek philosopher and teacher Socrates was out walking near the Ilissus River, talking with one of his students. "Sir, wasn't it somewhere near here that Boreas abducted the maiden Orithyia?" "Word has it," was Socrates' reply. He pointed. "Down there, near his altar, god of the North Wind." "Do you think it's true?" asked the student. Socrates replied "That was a long time ago. Many people believed." For a moment, the student pondered. "What do you think happened to him?"*

IT IS A MID-MARCH, NORTHERN ALBERTA DAY; THE DOME overhead holds the promise of spring and high, blue-sky summer days. Boreas stands at the road's edge, a solitary figure. Behind him, on the verge, is a sign—EDMONTON 396 K. The sign casts a skinny rectangle of shade across his feet. In the ditch nearby are weeds and grass stalks, tall and angular, freeze-dried by winter. A car approaches. Half-heartedly, Boreas sticks out his arm, the hand a partial fist, thumb extended. The vehicle rushes past, quickly receding from view. In its wake, an invisible



wash of air buffets his body and snatches at his clothing. He keeps his arm raised, long enough to give the driver the finger.

“Son of a bitch.” His tone is fiercely hostile.

He steadies himself and drops his arm to his side, dejected. The heat of mid-afternoon irritates Boreas. The sweaty wool coarseness of the collar of his Mackinaw prickles his neck, chafes his bad temper. Boreas craves a drink. His head still throbs from the excesses of the night. Most of the images in his brain are blurry, fragmented. On his clothes, vestiges of stale beer, cigarette smoke and cheap perfume are cloyingly offensive.

He and a group of oil workers had closed the tavern in the Oil Sands Hotel in Fort McMurray. Each had stumbled, braggadocio, to the parking lot. He remembered emerging from the fetid warmth of the bar and feeling the grip of the early morning chill. He had stopped to relieve himself on the wheel of a parked car. Inside the 4x4 club cab, Boreas had taken refuge on the rear seat, hunkered in a corner. Some hours later, he had been disgorged, unceremoniously, onto a stretch of barren road. The truck, with the remainder of its still-inebriated cargo, wove off down a side road, headed for a workers’ camp at Christina Lake.

It is the winter road running south from Conklin on which he is now standing. From the vanishing point on the horizon a brown cloud of dust materializes. At its edge, Boreas discerns a moving object; a car, he assumes. Abjectly, again he sticks out his arm. The vehicle slumps to a stop beside him. Little of its original paint remains: the hood is pitted by the vagaries of travel on gravel roads. These scars are not unlike the pocked face that now looks at him through the half-open window of the vintage pick-up truck. The man leans over. Hinges groaning in protest, the door swings open.

“Well, don’t stand there. Get in.”

Boreas obeys the voice. He shifts his body up onto the bench seat, pulling hard on the door to close it. As the truck lurches forward, he feels a broken spring push its way up to greet him. “*Stodalo!*” he curses, under his breath, and shifts uncomfortably to avoid being poked again.

“Easy. I’ll need that door again,” the man deadpans. Then he smiles broadly. “Going far?”

“Where are you going?”

“Edmonton, for supplies.”

“Edmonton it is then.”

“Name’s Virgil.” The man extends his hand.

Boreas takes it. “Boreas.”

“I take it you’re from around here?”

“McMurray.”

"No offense, man, but you look like shit."

"I feel like shit."

"McMurray can have that effect on a person. Here. You'd better have one of these. Hair of the dog." Virgil reaches under his seat and pulls out a brown bottle. He reaches forward, still grasping the steering wheel with his left hand. With a flourish, from beneath the dash he produces the bottle, capless, white beer foam rising above its lip. He hands it to Boreas. With the same economy of motion he produces one for himself.

"Cheers."

Boreas sucks greedily from the bottle. He holds it to his forehead, the coolness of the glass a distraction from the throbbing in his head. He takes another pull from the bottle, all but draining it. The beer has taken the edge off his anger.

The radio hisses static. "...and that was ...now another hurtin' tune by...another golden oldie...country and western archives...CJOK in Fort McMurray."

"Another?"

"Sure."

Virgil produces another beer from beneath the seat, repeats his sleight of hand and hands it to Boreas.

"Thanks."

"So, you're in logging?"

"No."

"Mining? I hear there's a couple of pipes of diamonds further North. I'm told, though, that you guys play your cards pretty close to your vest."

"No. I'm not one of them."

"Oil?"

"No."

Virgil looks at Boreas, his brow furrowed. "So, what's with the Twenty Questions?"

Boreas senses his evasiveness is testing Virgil's patience.

"I'm in ... energy, alternative energy."

"Solar?"

"Wind."

"I can understand you wanting to keep that quiet, in a province where oil and gas are king and queen." Virgil apparently isn't convinced. "I get it. You're in trouble with the law. Right?"

"No, no trouble. At least not with the law."

"Shit. I might have guessed. A woman." Virgil brightens.

"Not a woman either. At least not lately." His voice drops.



*When Boreas saw her for the first time, he felt a familiar stirring in his loins. Had it not been for all those people and the protective circle of her family, he would have had her, on the spot. Now, in response to his overtures, he can feel the tension in the room full of Athenians, the hatred in the voice of her father, Erectheus, and the bitter sting of rejection. "You're a Northerner. Strike one. You're no better than Tereus. Strike two. I will never allow Orithyia to marry the likes of you. Strike three." But Boreas bided his time. He waited until one afternoon when she was alone with her sisters at the river and carried her off, a lesson for those humans who thought they could deny an immortal.*

"HEY, BUD. YOU THERE? WE LOST YOU THERE FOR A SECOND." VIRGIL'S VOICE interrupts Boreas' reveries.

"Sorry." Boreas offers a half-hearted apology. "To be honest, I think I've spent too much time out here, alone." He makes a sweeping gesture with his arm to indicate the densely treed landscape. "The forest of fire and ice," he mutters. "What is it the locals say, bushed?" He smiles wryly.

"I went a little stir crazy myself a couple of winters back." Virgil appears more relaxed. "Shit. You had me worried; for a minute there I thought you might have escaped from some bin or other."

"Bin?"

"Yeah, looney bin." He laughs. "How's your beer?"

"Empty, but listen . . . I'm drinking all your beer."

"No problem. I always carry a supply." Virgil reaches under the seat again. Stretching his reach as far as he is able, he gropes the area under the bench seat and retrieves two bottles. "I guess that's it. You can buy the next lot. Good thing we're coming up on Lac La Biche soon. We'll stock up there, have a bite to eat. Then we'll slingshot down 36. Be in Edmonton before you know it." He hands one of the bottles to Boreas. "Here, watch. It's time you learned. Use the edge of the dash, underneath. Then pry the top, like so."

With his bottle, Boreas fumbles under the dash and straightens in his seat. Triumphant, he raises it, tipping it in Virgil's direction. "*Gia sas!*"

"Good job. Screw tops are for the weak. What's with the *Gia*...?" He stumbles over the phrase.

"*Gia sas*. It's Greek. Kind of like saying Cheers."

Silence.

Boreas retreats to the safety of the weather. "Been a strange winter. Not like the good ol' days."

"You can say that again. Even the snow pack in the mountains is low. Around these parts, it's dry as a popcorn fart. Lots of fires already, three

of them out of control. I blame the pulp mills, clearcutting. Might as well be slash and burn.”

“The winter months, they were the best. Nothing like it, blasts of cold Arctic air from the North.”

“Fuck. What are you man, nuts? How’s the saying go? It’s a cold wind that blows ill.”

“Think about it. Take Winnipeg, Edmonton too. Portage and Main, 101st and Jasper, the stuff of Canadian lore.”

“Christ, I once stood on the corner of Portage and Main. It was cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.”

“Precisely. Now what have we got? Understreet pedways, enclosed malls...”

“Well, hell. Even Dylan has revised his lyrics. Times aren’t just ‘a changing’ they’ve ‘moved on.’ If it’s any consolation, there’s still Baker Lake in January.”

“Dylan! He’s still alive?”

“As he lives and breathes. At the Oscars he kinda looked like crap but...” Virgil stops mid-sentence. “Hey, it’s about time. My stomach is feeling real empty.”

Virgil points. Boreas follows his finger. A road sign announces LAC LA BICHE 7K. He sees that daylight is fading. The horizon has already swallowed the sun. “It still gets dark pretty fast. It’ll probably be another cold, clear night. Last night the northern lights were unreal.”

Boreas continues to stare out the window, absorbed in thought.

*Orithyia had kicked Boreas out. “Wanderlust,” she had called it. “Wanderlust, and wandering eyes.” Not long after, Penelope had done the same to her husband when he couldn’t settle down, home from the wars. For amusement, Boreas tormented the guy some more, blowing his ships off course and sinking a few. For a time, Boreas took to hard drinking and carousing, preferring vestal virgins, sleeping with more than a dozen in succession. It was Aurora who had turned his life in another direction. Modern men had begun to read once more the ancient stories, use their names. Aurora and Boreas had come to the New World; she to rule over the night sky and he, the boreal.*

THE SIGN AT THE TOWN LIMITS POSTS THE SPEED AT 30 AND VIRGIL SLOWS THE truck. “Keep your eyes peeled for a place to eat.”

Halfway down main street Boreas gestures with an index finger, indicating a blue and white sign: *Koutouki Taverna*. “Let’s give that place a try.”

Virgil parks the truck opposite the restaurant and the two make their



way inside. Boreas pauses to inhale. The air is warm, delicately rich with olive oil, lemon, oregano and rosemary.

A self-assured young woman greets them at the door. "*Kalispera*. Welcome." She escorts them to a table near the front window. "Please ... sit."

"Before you order ... tonight's special is roast lamb." She offers them menus.

Boreas waves the menus aside. He looks at Virgil. "Would you mind?"  
"Go for it."

He looks at the waitress. "Ouzo, we'll start with ouzo. And mezedes ... don't spare the tzatziki. Moussaka too. And, roast lamb it is ... lemoned potatoes, salad ... lots of feta and Boutari, just keep it flowing."

"Sir? Our portions are generous. Are you sure you want all...?"

Boreas laughs. "Yes, thank you. For starters at least." His response is animated. The waitress smiles.

"I'll be right back with your drinks."

Virgil looks at Boreas. "There's more here than meets the eye."

"I don't follow."

"This whole Greek thing. It's obvious you're no stranger to Greek food but I was thinking more along the lines of ... of." Virgil's frustration is evident.

The waitress returns, placing two glasses containing clear liquid on the table. "And water, if you like," indicating a carafe. "The appetizers will be along in a minute."

Boreas pours an inch or so of water into each glass. The ouzo, a clear liquid, turns milky white. He picks up a glass. Virgil takes the other and raises it, saluting Boreas. "*Gia sas*."

"Very good. You're a fast learner."

"Thanks. About some things, I guess. About others, I'm not so sure." Virgil's brow is furrowed. "What I'm trying to say is, well, maybe it's just my imagination but..." He is interrupted by the young woman returning to the table.

"Your mezedes. May I bring you another drink?"

"We'll have the wine now, thanks." As Boreas responds, he drains his glass of ouzo. "You should try the squid. It's very nice ... not chewy."

"You're not helping matters."

"Sometimes, when it comes right down to it, imagination is all that's left."

"Is it that simple?"

"Probably not. It's a matter of believing too, believing in something."

"I can relate to that. Everybody needs something to believe in."

The waitress returns to the table carrying a carafe of wine and a plate of food. "Here's the moussaka...your lamb won't be far behind."

"The waitress was right. Not exactly small portions." He pokes the dish of food which the waitress has left behind. "This, it kind of looks like lasagna."

"Go ahead, try it. It's pretty tasty. As for needing something to believe in, I believe I'll have a glass of wine." Boreas laughs; his eyes twinkle. He swirls the wine in his glass, noses it and sips. "Nectar, nectar of the gods."

"You're something else."

"Yes, something else... and when something's lost, is it gone forever?"

"Things have a way of resurfacing. Kinda like what goes around, comes around."

"So the saying goes."

"Nothing is forever."

"A golden oldie."

"Especially true for old codgers who can't get it up anymore. Except now, there are special pills." Virgil slaps his knee, laughing at his own attempt at humour.

"Life's elixirs don't always come in a pill or a bottle."

"I'll drink to that!" Virgil is clearly relishing his part in the exchange. The two clink their glasses.

The young woman arrives with two clean plates and another carafe of wine. She clears the table of empty dishes, returning again with the roast lamb, eggplant and lemoned potatoes. Words are fewer now until, with a touch of finality, Virgil pushes his plate to the side. "I couldn't eat another bite."

With a morsel of bread, Boreas dabs at a bit of gravy but leaves it sitting on his plate. He groans. "The lamb, pure ambrosia."

The young woman returns. As she clears the plates she asks, "More wine?" They shake their heads.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"No, please, nothing. Just the bill." Boreas rubs his stomach. "You've been very kind, thank you." The woman smiles and leaves, carrying the empty plates and carafe.

Boreas continues. "I feel almost..." He stops mid-sentence. "...almost human."

"That's it, exactly!"

"Virgil, I've been thinking."

"Usually a dangerous thing, for me."

"Nothing personal, but I won't be going on to Edmonton with you."



Virgil's brow is furrowed again.

"Yes, thanks partly to you, I feel... I feel reinvented. Up North, it's where I belong."

"No argument there. It's a special place."

Boreas and Virgil fish their back pockets for their wallets and leave some money on the table. Boreas pushes a twenty at Virgil. "That's for the beer."

Boreas and Virgil get up from the table and walk out the front door to the street. They shake hands.

"See ya around sometime."

"For sure. Drive straight."

Virgil crosses the street to his truck. As he reaches for the door handle he turns, looking back over his shoulder. The street is empty except for a swirling eddy of papers, the detritus of winter. As he pulls his collar closer around his neck, an icy hand of the north wind tugs at his coat.

*That night, the northern sky is cloudlessly clear; the air is chill, crisp. As on special nights eons before, Aurora dances for Boreas; the night is iridescent with her passion. They often make love at night. Occasionally, Dawn's approach is discreet if her rosy fingers of light reveal the embracing lovers still entwined. ❁*

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*"I like the symbolism of turning lead into gold. It's just like what I'm trying to do: change my leaden life into something golden..."*

# Jasmine Tea

James Wilson

SUNLIGHT FILLED HOWARD'S STUDIO. IT WAS A GENTLE LIGHT, an almost too-perfect light, this wash of northern illumination that spilled across Upright Channel and flooded in through the studio's ceiling-high windows. It would be the light, yes, that unique island light, that he would miss the most if he were to lose his home.

Matti, his art dealer in Friday Harbor, his only art dealer at the moment, returned the new figurine to its pigeonhole in the packing crate, and named a price for the whole dozen.

"Tell me you're joking," Howard said.

"Sorry, but the market's shifted again. It won't support a higher price."

"The market is always shifting."

"And your point is?"

"No point. Just a frustrated observation."

She picked up a second of the mug-sized sculptures: a bouquet of wild flowers arranged in a mason jar. "Your composition is striking," she said.



"You're a true artist, Howard, beneath the soup-can kitsch." She replaced the piece and picked up another: a life-size banana slug oozing up a flower stem to reach the leaves. "Beautiful," she said. "No, more than beautiful, absolutely magical."

"Thanks," Howard said, afraid of saying too much.

Matti replaced the figurine. "You might try one of the bigger galleries in Seattle or Victoria. Vancouver."

"What else might help?"

"Same old, same old," she said. "Your work is too photographic for the artsy-fartsy crowd and not sentimental enough for the little old ladies up from Seattle. My advice would be for you to forget the little old ladies. Loosen up. Blur a few details. Let the work pour out."

"'Loosen up,'" he repeated skeptically. "Right."

She shrugged. "Children are always popular, especially if they're little Dickensian moppets with large eyes and wistful smiles." Her expression changed, and Howard realized that he was scowling at her. He let the muscles in his face go slack. "We *are* talking sales here," she said.

"I don't work with children."

After a silence, Matti said, "Howard, I don't mean to pry into your personal finances, but—"

"Then don't," Howard said. He hoped that he had sounded firm rather than churlish. "I'm fine." More or less, as long as the credit card held out, as long as he could keep his dear, darling Gwenna from spending them down the river.

"Well," Matti said awkwardly. "Look, I have to run or I'll miss my ferry."

"Time, tides, and the Washington State Ferry System..."

Walking toward the door, she hesitated next to a jar of brushes on his workbench. She picked one of them up and ran a finger along the bristles. "You're so neat, Howard. How do you do it?"

A knot twisted in his stomach. "I'm careful," he said, and picked up the crate. "Want it in your van?"

"Please," Matti said.

Of course he'd had to agree to her terms, just as she'd undoubtedly known he would. Formal acceptances were not required. Day in and day out, he produced tourist-friendly decorator-art, brain-dead crap that paid most of the bills and allowed him to hold onto his house; while day in and day out, he dreamed of producing something worthwhile, something that hadn't started out as a handful of flowers thrust into a mason jar on a posing stand.

Matti got into her van, then rolled down the window. "I don't mean to

be a pest, but have you had a chance to look at Becky's pendant?"

Becky was Matti's eleven-year-old daughter, and her pendant was an inch-high seahorse that she'd sculpted out of clay. Three weeks ago, Matti had asked him to see what he could do about duplicating it in gold and give her an estimate. He'd set the box down on his desk, and with everything that was going on, he forgotten completely about it. Doing his best to sound absent-minded instead of negligent, he said, "Oh, that's right! It's finished. I'll go and get it."

He went into his office, locked the door, and took the seahorse out of its cardboard jewelry box. A lead fishing weight, one of his wife's many reminders that she was running out of cash, was also lying on his desk. With the clay seahorse in his left hand, he closed the fishing weight in his right. He concentrated on the clay figure and on the lead. In his mind, he created an image of the seahorse sculpted in gold, then he transferred the image onto the lead in right hand.

Matti smiled at him as he walked toward her truck.

He handed her the jewelry box. "Glad you reminded me," he said.

She opened the box, and her eyes went wide. "It's beautiful," she said, and held up the golden seahorse. The light, that special island light, rippled across the contours of the pendant. "Becky will be so thrilled."

"I reworked it a little here and there, just enough to compensate for where the clay sagged on her."

"I must owe you a fortune," Matti said.

"No, you don't. It's hers. My gift."

"You can't afford—"

"In this case, I can," he said with a finality that closed off the subject of money. "Buy her a really nice chain to go with it."

"Yes," Matti said. "Yes, of course, I will."

Howard stood at the bottom of the drive and watched until Matti had pulled out onto the road and turned toward the ferry landing on Upright Head. After the landing, her next stop would be her gallery in Friday Harbor, hub and tourist mecca of the San Juan Islands, where the twelve figurines would go up for sale.

Financially, things could be worse, he mused. He had his house, inherited from his father, and he had his talents, his abilities. And his output did sell. That dozen would be gone by the end of the weekend. Bless their little blue-haired buyers! No doubt about it: money was coming in, albeit in dribs and drabs.

Howard was heading across the yard toward the house proper and a fresh pot of coffee when Victor Skelding's vintage Buick convertible roared off the road and surged down the drive. Howard's wife, Gwenna,



was driving. Her face was fixed in an excited grin. She brought the bright-red bathtub to a sliding stop in front of the garage. Dust from the gravel boiled forward around the convertible's hood. Taken as a whole, at rest, the car looked like a beached whale, a cetacean that had body-surfed onto the sand and died.

The Buick's engine dieseled into silence.

Looking up at Howard from the passenger's side, all smiles and expensive aftershave, Skelding said, "Your wife's quite a driver."

"I've noticed," Howard said. Skelding was a Hollywood hotshot, a demimogul at play with one of his hobby businesses out in tourist-ridden rural America. He'd once proudly described himself as a "gentleman capitalist." It was a nice-enough characterization, but Howard doubted that it could be applied to Skelding.

Gwenna climbed out and walked around the rear of the convertible. She was wearing a white scarf and her newest summer dress: a sunshine-yellow print with tiny red jasmine flowers, spaghetti straps, and a very short skirt, which displayed her legs to their best advantage. "Victor has been showing me around his chain of bed and breakfasts."

"'Chain' is such an inappropriate word," Victor said, getting out of the car. He was half a foot taller than Howard and athletically built. "Each of them is absolutely individual."

"No doubt," Howard said, inwardly bracing for the inevitable squall. He'd known it was blowing in ever since breakfast, when Gwenna had announced that Victor wanted to "drop by for a chat."

"How about coffee?" Gwenna asked. The sunlight sparkled on her hair, which was shoulder-length and dishwater blond. "You would care for coffee, wouldn't you, Vick?"

"Naturally," he said, beaming at her. "Wouldn't miss it."

Did he intend to crawl into her pants right there in the driveway?

"Howard, your coffee is so much better than mine. Would you?"

"Sure," Howard said, and led them into the house.

They had coffee in the breakfast nook, a bright space that looked out across Upright Channel toward Shaw Island and Orcas beyond. Gwenna's perfume, a jasmine fragrance, was strong in the nook's confined space, too strong. Even Howard's coffee tasted of jasmine. As he stared into the cup, he half expected flower petals to float up to the surface. Skelding's aftershave didn't help. Had he bathed in it? Together, his wife and Skelding made quite a pair, intergender chemical warfare at its finest.

Victor said, "Howard, your wife tells me that you might be willing to talk a little business."

The squall was upon them, and for the moment, Howard had no

choice but to shorten down and run before it, to run before Gwenna's *Universal Solution for Every Occasion*: give up sculpting and convert the house into a bed and breakfast. "What sort of business?" he asked. "You're not looking to corner the figurine market, are you? I'm told my banana slugs are absolutely magical."

"The figurine market? No, I can't say I'm interested in figurines, but you do have a beautiful place here, lots of charm, lots of history, lots of potential for a bed and breakfast. With the right approach, you could be quite comfortable."

"Tell him about the deal, Vick," Gwenna said eagerly.

"The two of you would put up your property and your time, and in exchange for remodeling, decorating, and various management services, I'd become your partner."

"And he only wants twenty-five percent," Gwenna said.

To hell with running before it. Howard put his helm down and came onto the wind. "My home isn't for sale."

"I understand," Skelding said. "It was only a tentative proposal."

Gwenna, however, was not to be put off. "But you wouldn't be—"

"No," Howard said. "I don't care what you call it. I'm not selling."

Skelding departed amidst hugs and busses from Gwenna, and Howard cleaned up the kitchen amidst glares and recriminations, also from Gwenna. Once the dishwasher was sloshing away, Howard went back to his sculpting. Had to keep those tourists happy. And those bankers off his back. And if he was working, he wouldn't have to listen to Gwenna's badgering about money and the advantages of a life filled with "contacts" in the form of paying guests.

Collecting bag in hand, Howard walked down to the beach, a narrow stretch of pebbles, really, at the water's edge. Blue sky, blue water, brown rocks, and green islands. Out in the channel, a Euro-designed, hog-backed powerboat was headed southwest. She was plowing through the light chop and throwing up a heavy spray, running neither in the water nor on top of it. Another tourist with more money than brains.

Oh, well, they bought kitsch from the locals, his kitsch, and as far as Howard was concerned, that was all they had to do.

A bed and breakfast. Was Gwenna out of her mind? She wouldn't make it through their first set of guests. About the time some pretentious, thirty-something wannabe from Seattle complained about the fragrance of the soap in the guest bathroom, she'd lop off his head, hollow out the skull, and use it for a tea cozy.

Howard began scavenging and making up telling-off-Gwenna speeches. Money was nice, but from the time the Feds printed it until the time the



Feds burned it, it left a trail. Couldn't she see that? No, she couldn't, or she didn't want to. To her, a bed and breakfast would be the answer to her prayers: a viable way to hide, launder, and otherwise mask income.

Some hopes.

Two hours later, Howard had everything he needed for his next batch of figurines. Matti had flashed on the slug, so he'd scooped up a large snail he'd spotted on the way up from the beach. Snails could be as wistful as Dickensian moppets, couldn't they?

Back in his studio, a detached building beside the garage, he arranged his collection into six potential objects d'art and set to work.

Gwenna, in the form of a private, imaginary hologram, his own version of an ever-watching Big Brother, sat perched on a stool, watching him. Her eyes were hard and bright, and her mouth was curled into a smile that shared both contempt and amusement.

It was pitch dark when Howard returned to his house. The dishwasher was clean, had been for hours, but Gwenna hadn't unloaded it, let alone loaded the dirties into it. Rather, she was sitting on the living room couch, her legs tucked up, reading a bodice-ripper.

"Let's drive in to the village for dinner," she said.

IN THE MORNING, AFTER UNLOADING THE DISHWASHER AND LOADING IN THE DIRTIES, and after drinking his morning coffee, Howard returned to his studio.

The new figurines were a lackluster bunch. The clay had turned out grainy, the firing irregular, and the glazing looked, well, downright ugly. His inability to concentrate properly the night before had ruined them. The snail had given its life for nothing.

Howard was smashing the statuettes into a garbage can when Gwenna came in. She was wearing a little white number with gold trim and a plunging neckline, very Hollywood.

"Why not a bed and breakfast?" she demanded.

"Good morning to you, darling. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"I'm tired of living on peanuts, Howie."

"You know as well as I do that money can't simply—*poof!*—appear. Sorry, but I'm not ending up in the slammer next to Tony Kinnick."

"Tony was stupid. He shouldn't have thrown around that much cash."

"No duh!"

"But don't you see? That's why we need a business. I can cook the books to allow for the extra income."

Gwenna had a hard time boiling water without scorching it, and now she wanted to take up accountant's cuisine, also known affectionately as double-entry roulette. Staring at her hard, Howard said, "I'm not hand-

ing Victor Skelding twenty-five percent of anything, let alone twenty-five percent of *my* house.”

“Prick,” she said, and paced back and forth for several seconds, trailing an aura of jasmine perfume.

She glanced at her watch. “Anyway, I’m on my way to Bellingham.”

“Gambling at the Indian casino?”

Her mouth narrowed into a thin line. “For a while.” She handed him a lead fishing weight. “I’ll need a few hundred.”

He held the sinker in the palm of his hand. “Why is it always lead? You could have just as easily handed me a rock, or a kitchen sponge, or ... a snake.”

“Oh, ouch. Careful, darling.”

“Okay. A bag of sand, then. Take your pick.”

“Yes, I know,” Gwenna said. “You can turn anything into anything, with enough effort; but I need to make it as simple for you as possible.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t want you to tire yourself out.”

“How benevolent.”

“How, indeed. The truth is, I like the symbolism of turning lead into gold. It’s just like what I’m trying to do: change my leaden life into something golden.”

There wasn’t any point in answering her directly, in feeding her self-pity with a rebuttal, so he asked, “Are you still selling to the same jeweler?”

“Among other people. Don’t fret, dear. I’ve told him I’m panning up on Mount Baker.”

“Does he believe you?”

“What do I care? He’s cooking his books just like everybody else is, everybody except you. Hurry up or I’ll be late for the east-bound ferry!”

Howard closed his hand on the sinker. “Can’t have you late for the ferry, now, can I?”

“No, you can’t, not if you know what’s good for you.”

A few seconds later he opened his hand to reveal the sinker transformed from lead into gold.

Scooping it up, Gwenna said, “Come to Mama!”

The sound of their VW’s engine faded up the road toward the ferry landing. Fainter, fainter, and then it was gone—silence and peace restored. The day was his.

Yes, fine, but what exactly was he going to do with it?

Howard pondered the question for several minutes, glancing around his workspace. He did in fact feel tired, but from the emotional wringer



he been through at Gwenna's hands rather than from transmuting the fishing weight. Changing lead into gold was, as she had said, simple, no real drain on his strength. On the other hand, creating ceramics out of organic tissue, like transforming that ill-fated banana slug into an object d'art, could be exhausting.

No matter.

Maybe Matti was right. Maybe it *was* time to become less photographic, whatever in hell that *actually* meant in artsy-fartsy terms.

Howard changed his clothes, placed a large lump of clay on a stand; and for the first time in a long time, he went to work...with his bare hands.

GWENNA DIDN'T COME HOME FROM BELLINGHAM THAT NIGHT, AND WHEN SHE stayed gone for a second night, Howard decided that she must have gotten lucky, or that Victor had. Either way, it amounted to the same thing.

Even in a universe of perpetual flux, Howard thought, there were certain fixed points, and the odiousness of betrayal was one of them.

Later that night, Howard finished his new sculpture. It had turned out to be larger than he had thought it would, and he had been forced to move it onto a much bigger stand. The light from the floods bathed the clay, wrapping around its contours, filling its gullies, and rippling along its textures.

It was an intriguing piece, even if he did say so himself; but how on earth was he going to fire it? Build a bonfire around it? No. Never mind. At this stage, the form of the piece was what mattered. He'd take care of the rest in due course.

The work reminded Howard of animals. Matti would like that. No way she could accuse it of being photographic. Animals. Killer whale. Bear. Salmon. Raven. Eagle. Beaver. Those were totemic animals, and they were *in* the work. But it was not a statue *of* them, and yet, they were in it. But how? How had he done it?

With no answer anywhere to be found, he covered the sculpture and went to bed.

The next day, with his morning coffee in hand, Howard went out to his studio and uncovered the sculpture. He sat down on the floor and stared up at it, sipping his coffee.

In the middle of the afternoon, Matti appeared on his studio doorstep. "I was having lunch with Elaine and Michelle and thought I'd stop by."

"Come on in," he said, standing back from the door. "I've been working on something. Want to see?" He led her into the studio and pointed.

“What do you think?”

She slowly circled the work. Her eyes never left the clay. After several minutes, she said, “The glazing will make it or break it.”

“Yes.”

She stood away, shaking her head slightly. “For heaven’s sake, Howard, don’t screw it up.”

He had the feeling that she was talking about more than the new sculpture. “Then I’m on to something?”

“Do another cutie-pie knickknack and I’ll break both of your hands myself.”

GWENNA CAME HOME THE NEXT DAY.

Howard carried her overnight bag upstairs and dropped it on the bed.

“How much did you lose?” he asked.

She opened the bag and threw her dirty clothes into the hamper. Howard caught the smell of her jasmine perfume and more than a hint of Skelding’s brand of aftershave. “I was ahead for a while.”

“The fishing weight and how much more besides?”

She glared at him. “Two thousand,” she said, and slid the empty overnight bag under her side of the bed.

“You mean you maxed out the credit card?”

“What if I have? You can always change another sinker.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Don’t worry, Howie. The big bad boogie man from the nasty old IRS won’t find out.”

“I’m not as worried about the IRS as I am about you, Gwenna. You’ve changed.”

“Ten years of poverty’ll do that to a girl.”

“Poverty? You’re exaggerating.”

“Am I? For ten long, dreary years I’ve been married to the Kitschmeister of the San Juan Islands. In a good year, you make as much as it costs us to eat, let alone do anything else. Howie, if you could have been, you would have been, and you *ain’t*.”

She wriggled into a pair of jeans and pulled on a cropped sweater that was years too young for her.

Howard said, “I’ve started a new piece. Matti says it’s really good.”

“How good?”

“She gave me the name of a contact in Vancouver.”

“Contacts are a dime a dozen.”

This from the same woman who wanted to open a bed and breakfast, in part, ostensibly, because it would be a good way to make contacts.



"He works at The Coal Harbour Gallery."

Gwenna arched an eyebrow. "I'm impressed."

"So was I."

"There's a lot of money in Vancouver," she said. "Let's have a look."

"Sure thing."

Howard switched on the studio floods and removed the cover. "Here it is," he said, not daring to hope too much.

Gwenna studied the piece for a long time, unmoving, her face a blank. "Matti's right," she said at last. "You've finally found something to say."

WHEN HOWARD CAME HOME FROM PITCHING THE NEW WORK TO THE COAL Harbour Gallery, he found Victor Skelding's Buick blocking the garage door. Howard parked behind the beached red whale, blocking it, and went on into the house.

Gwenna was in the kitchen making finger sandwiches. She was wearing her yellow summer dress, the one with the short skirt and the tiny red jasmine flowers.

"Victor's out on the deck," she said. Whether she was making an announcement or answering an unasked question, Howard couldn't tell. "I invited him over for tea."

My happiness is complete, Howard silently quipped. "They liked the photos," he said. "They may have a buyer. It depends."

"A lot depends," Gwenna said, and began arranging the finger sandwiches on a tray, a colorful, fan-shaped display.

"They want me to deliver it next Thursday."

"Good for them," she said. The lines around her eyes deepened. She brusquely covered the tray with a towel and set it on the tea cart.

Something wasn't right. "What's up?"

"Tea. Would you make me a pot of tea, please," she said, and set out the tea-things on a second tray. The pot was round, squat, and brown, garage-sale-chic at its best, decidedly not up to the standards set by high tea at the Empress Hotel in Victoria.

"Tea?" Howard asked flatly.

"Sure am glad I didn't marry one of the stupid ones," she said. She stopped what she was doing. "Vick is going back to Los Angeles in a couple of days, and I invited him over for tea. It's a celebration."

"Of what? His departure?"

"No, of our decision—yours and mine—to convert the house into a bed and breakfast. He's brought the contract with him, and we're going to sign it."

"But if the new work pans out—"

"Stop it, Howard! Just stop it!"

"But The Coal Harbour Gallery wants to handle the work," he said.

"They can't have it!" Bitter triumph filled her voice.

Suddenly afraid, he asked, "What are you saying?"

"Watch my lips. They *can't* have it. No one can."

"What have you done?"

"I've liberated us from Never Never Land! It's time for you to grow up, Howie Pan!"

"What the hell have you done?"

"Go see for yourself. I'm only sorry that Tinker Bell Matti isn't here to share the moment with you."

"Bitch!"

Howard ran across the yard to his studio. The new sculpture, glazed the previous week, lay shattered on the floor. No piece of it was any larger than one of Gwenna's finger sandwiches.

Oddly, his first reaction was not one of anger but of grief. The statue could be replaced, but Gwenna, the woman he'd married a decade ago, could not. That woman, that very special woman, was lost to him ... and to herself. Forever. She had begun life as an island girl, rosy in winter and bronzed in summer, but over the years, she had become infatuated, beguiled by the bright lights and sophisticated pace, by the moneyed, urban tone of places like Tacoma and Seattle, not to mention Anacortes and Bellingham.

The bite of his own sarcasm left him ashamed of himself and angry at the same time.

He switched off the floods and returned to the house.

As he entered the kitchen, his grief mounted into open anger. "*What exactly are you?*" he asked.

"I'm someone who's fed up with living like a pauper."

That old shibboleth again. "We don't live like paupers."

"Compared to what? Listen to me, Howard, thanks to Victor, we finally have a chance to make it big, and that, my dearest hubby, is what we're going to do. You're going to sign on the dotted line, you're going to work your butt off, and after we're up and running, you're going to change as much lead into as much gold as I tell you to."

He hadn't heard that many words out of her in one speech in years. The bit about changing her life from lead into gold had come close, but this one took away the Kewpie doll.

"Am I?"

"You bet your sweet ass you are, or else."

"Or else what?" Howard asked.



“Or else the world finds out about your hidden talent.”

“Blackmail? You haven’t got the guts.”

“Try me, Howie. It’s time for you to grow up.”

“I see. Mindless obedience. That’s what you want: pure, mindless obedience?”

“Yes, that’s what I want: pure, mindless obedience.”

“Nazi,” he said.

Ignoring him, she filled a cream pitcher with half-and-half and set a plate of cookies on the tea cart next to the sandwiches. The kettle shrieked.

Howard ignored it.

She glared at him. “Can’t you hear that? What was the *one* thing I asked you to do? Damn it, Howie, get moving and make me a pot of tea!”

“Okay, Gwenna. Whatever you say.”

A short while later, Howard wheeled the tea cart out onto the deck. He set the tray of sandwiches and cookies in the center of the picnic table. “Go ahead, Victor. Don’t bother waiting for me.”

“Thanks,” Skelding said.

“My pleasure.”

Howard put the tea-things on the table where they’d be near at hand, and then took a preemptive inventory. It wouldn’t do to have to get up again once he’d sat down. There were three teacups, odds and ends, one of them with a small chip; and a cream-and-sugar set. The teapot itself was shrouded in a knit cozy with a red pompon on the top. It reminded him of Gwenna’s days as a high-school cheerleader. She’d had great-looking legs then, too, no sign of leftover baby fat.

Howard took the chair directly opposite his wife’s paramour and intended business partner. Skelding was already munching on a sandwich: tuna and green olives.

Half-apologetically, he said, “You told me not to wait.”

“How are they?” Howard asked pleasantly.

“Very good. Your wife is an excellent cook. By the way, where is she?”

“Oh, she’s around,” Howard said. “Closer than you may think.” He lifted the cozy. The teapot was yellow with tiny red jasmine flowers. A trail of steam was rising up from the spout.

“How lovely,” Skelding said. “Is it one of your pieces?”

“Guilty as charged. I’m not much of a potter, but you know Gwenna’s obsession with jasmine. She insisted I make it... for her.”

Howard set out a saucer and cup, the one without the chip, and poured. “I’m sure you’ve had this before.”

“I recognize the aroma,” Skelding said, “but I can’t quite place it. What

did you say it is?"

"I didn't say, but it's jasmine tea. You like jasmine, don't you, Victor?"

"Oh yes, it's one of my favorites."

"I thought as much," Howard said.

"Not to change the subject, but did Gwenna tell you why I came by?"

"Yes, and the answer is still no."

Skelding smiled a tolerant, Hollywood-hotshot smile. The concepts *tolerant* and *Hollywood hotshot* refused to mesh, especially as played out on Skelding's face, but that was the expression he was obviously attempting to bring off: power and understanding in a single, benevolent package. "I understand how you must feel," he said, "but Gwenna tells me you're seriously in debt."

Howard shrugged. "What about it?"

"Frankly, this house is your only asset. What do you intend to do with it?"

"I intend to keep it," Howard said with unclouded confidence, with the first unalloyed clarity he'd felt in years. He felt no confusion, not a hint of it; nor did he feel the least bit tired, anything but exhausted. After all, a human body and a pot of tea are both mostly water, aren't they?

"I understand," Skelding said, "but your wife has other ideas about the house."

"No, she doesn't. I've changed her mind."

Howard smiled graciously, and poured himself a cup of jasmine tea, poured it straight from his new, jasmine-decorated pot. It was sunshine yellow with tiny red flowers and gave off an aroma not unlike the one his wife had once had. ♣

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*...all you needed to do to disable a pixilated person was kick him in the shins: he would crumble before your eyes...*

# Piece Corps

Cat Ashton

“EXCUSE ME.” AT THE SOUND OF THE VOICE, THE MAN IN THE microfiber business suit turned and saw a red-faced, red-haired woman in jogging pants and a t-shirt, carrying a frisbee. She flashed him a smile, and, indicating the cooler behind her, said, “Maybe you can decide for me: which one, Chunky Monkey or Concession Obsession?”

His eyes widened with surprise, and then he grinned and said, “Concession Obsession, of course!”

“Thank you,” she sang out, and got it out of the cooler. As she walked out of the store, the scanners around the door read the item and the card in her pocket, and deducted the seven dollars from her account.

Outside, Gin unhooked Lump the Sequel’s leash from the bike rack. He stood up, wagged his tail, and followed at her heels all the way back to her apartment, where he trotted into the laundry room, lay down on the red shag carpet, and disintegrated.

Gin spooned Concession Obsession into his bowl, and stood back, careful not to step on any of him. The writhing mass went from black and white to a pale tan, and thousands of large-eyed creatures the size of a five-dollar coin inched towards the bowl on little nubs of legs, crawling on top of each other to get at the ice cream. Thousands of tiny pink



tongues stretched out and tasted, and there was a faint noise like a thousand little sighs of delight.

After a few licks, the pixies changed places, so the ones on the bottom of the heap could get to the ice cream too. Gin stood above them, beaming.

THE ORIGINAL LUMP HAD DIED IN 2036, THE YEAR THAT METADISTEMPER HAD killed off a third of the pets in North America. Only Lump hadn't had metadistemper; he'd died in his sleep. In the middle of the bus lane on Pape Avenue, granted, but it was a mercy anyhow.

With the price of animals skyrocketing, another dog had been out of the question. Gin hadn't wanted to replace Lump, but when she'd gone to the pixie manufacturers on one of her whims, and they bemusedly asked her what she had in mind, she found herself describing him. She couldn't exactly ask them to surprise her; the pixels had been genetically engineered for commercial and industrial use, and there hadn't been any animal patterns in the catalogue. No one had caught on to the idea that they might be kept as pets before then, and as far as she knew, it had never occurred to anyone since. While she finished up the Concession Obsession, Gin wondered if the companies who used pixies knew they liked ice cream, and decided it was highly unlikely.

Out of some spirit of masochism that she'd never been able to figure out, when the carton was empty, she turned on the TV for the news. The Mongolias had gotten sick of bargaining and launched an attack on the People's Republic of Gansu-Qinghai-Xinjiang. Cameras showed the gigantic fighting machines—warbots, the media had dubbed them, even though they were guaranteed less than thirty percent synthetic—advancing, launching missiles at each other, breaking apart into crissing, shrieking pixies when hit. She turned off the TV, gave it thirty seconds, and turned it back on. Now it was talking about the tension that had existed between the Mongolias and the triune nation ever since China had split, and that was all right. Then the Canadian president started talking, and she had to give it another thirty seconds.

It was sometime later, while she was getting dinner ready, that Richard came over. He always managed to come over just before dinner. Richard was starting to annoy her. At the beginning, he'd agreed with her about everything. Now, though, he wanted to kill characters off, turn them against each other, have them make startling revelations that had never before been alluded to. He wanted badder bad guys, and nastier weapons, and for Ben and Princess to sleep together. The hi/lo series had always sold tolerably well, but he warned her that if they didn't start catering to the market, they'd never hit it big. And she had the sneaking

suspicion that any moment now, he was going to start hitting on her.

"Did you hear about Mongolia?" he demanded, going to the television and turning it to CNN. More warbots falling, more pixies shrieking. "Look at those bots! Ain't it cool?"

She crossed in front of him, ostensibly to turn the laundry room light off, and closed the door. Richard knew about Lump, but Gin didn't trust him to watch where he stepped. "Yeah, war. Neato."

"Come on, Gin. It's not like any of *our* guys have died yet."

"I forget, who are we rooting for again?"

"Mongolia. Like, *duh!*"

She rolled her eyes, and handed him the cutting board, a knife, and some mushrooms, which he chopped absently with his eyes fixed on the screen.

Gin managed to get him away from the television long enough to eat the chicken stroganoff she set out for him. With his mouth full, he told her enthusiastically about the publishing house he'd toured that afternoon. "You know, just getting us known, cozying up to the big guys. Got a list of their requirements, and I think with a few changes we're in! You know, a little naughtier, a little more blood and guts. Let me tell you, I draw amazing guts. And they let me see the presses. *All* automated. These guys are *huge*."

"Mm-hm," she said, sounding absent by calculation. "Automated" these days usually meant operated by pixies. But she wasn't going to say anything—she didn't want to get into that again.

When Gin started clearing the table, Richard suddenly remembered something he had to pick up before the stores closed. At least he thanked her for the meal.

She closed the door behind him, and sank down against it with a sigh. Then she opened the laundry room door, and turned on the light. "Sorry, guys," she said.

The pixies reassembled themselves into a dog, and came over to nuzzle her hand.

THE NEXT DAY, GIN BRAINSTORMED ON THE STORY FOR THE NEWEST PRINCESS & Ben adventure. In one hand, she held a pencil poised over a sheet of foolscap; with the other, she petted Lump, who lay loosely across her lap, having crawled up there half an hour ago with the best approximation the pixies could give of a supplicating whine. She was trying to decide what crisis Ben's new weapon, the Ugly Tie Gun, could be best applied to, when her fingers found... well, a lump.

She pushed her chair out and turned the dog over, a thousand things going through her mind. Could pixies get cancer? It was big, though, big enough that she would have seen it when they'd split up today. Could it



be treated? She supposed it was a matter of replacing the sick pixie with a new one, but that seemed awfully cold. It was nuts to think that she could get to know all of them individually, but nevertheless, she liked every one of *these* ones.

Here was the lump, on Lump's side, an ominous gray. "Break apart, will you love?" she murmured. "I'll watch where I put my feet, I promise."

Lump obligingly disintegrated, and she kept her eye on the spot of gray. Gently, she scooped up the pixie that sported it, and gaped at it.

It certainly wasn't one of *hers*.

This pixie was all gray, and much leaner than her own, with bigger ears. Industrial, she remembered from the catalogues. It clung to her finger and looked up at her with wide golden eyes, and she imagined she saw the corners of its mouth turning down in a grimace of fear.

"It's all right, little guy," she murmured. "I won't hurtcha." She adjusted the desk lamp to get a better look at him. Or her; she didn't know if they reproduced, or how she'd tell them apart if they did. "Where did— Oh, the publishing house?"

To her surprise, it nodded solemnly.

She swallowed hard. "And ... did Richard *steal* you?"

It quickly shook its head.

"You escaped on your own?"

It put one soft claw up and waggled it in a *comme-ci-comme-ça* gesture. Under other circumstances, she might have laughed.

"It was an accident, then."

A nod.

"You can stay here if you like," she told it.

It shook its head again, this time more slowly and sadly. Then it started twisting around, making tiny movements with its forelegs and stretching its neck. Pixies hadn't been designed to be able touch their own backs, but it managed to direct her attention to the tiny bar code tattoo on one shoulder.

"All right, then. I'll take you back ... hm, first thing tomorrow." Impulsively, she planted a kiss on top of its head. It smelled faintly of printer ink.

Later on in the day, she coaxed the pixies into a dog again, and took Lump for a run, stopping at the store on the way back again. It was a little soon for more Ben & Jerry's, but she wanted the gray one to get a taste, so to speak, of real freedom before it had to go back. Seeing its face as it sampled Cherry Garcia was the best thing that had happened to her all year, she decided.

IT WAS A WEEK LATER THAT LUMP TROTTED INTO HER STUDY, JUMPED UP ONTO

the desk, and started pawing at the radio. She turned it on in time to hear, "A spokesperson for Intrepid Publishing has placed the loss at only a few hundred dollars, but expressed disbelief at the theft." Another voice, female and presumably that of the spokesperson, said, "Pixels are virtually useless for anything other than what they were manufactured for, but this was too sophisticated an operation for kids just looking to take stuff. It just doesn't make sense, you know?" Then the announcer came back on, asking anyone who knew anything to call the police.

The broadcast switched to sports scores after that, and Gin turned off the radio, looking curiously at Lump. Intrepid was where she'd returned the gray pixie; Richard had toured its young adult division. "How'd you know that was gonna be on, boy?"

The dog gave her a very human shrug.

Just after dinner that night, there was a soft, somewhat mushy knock on the door. She opened it, figuring that Richard had forgotten something, and found herself staring at Ben, Benedict Maledict, the Ben that she'd created in high school. She stared, wide-eyed, for a long time, and then broke into a broad grin, drawing him inside the apartment. The auburn mane was obviously a wig, and his nose wasn't quite as sharp as she'd envisioned it, and this close up not even pancake makeup could hide the jigsaw quality to his face, but it was her Ben all right.

He even dried the dishes.

INTREPID WASN'T THE ONLY PLACE TO LOSE PIXIES OVER THE NEXT LITTLE WHILE. OVER the space of a few weeks, hundreds of thousands quietly went missing—no alarms tripped, no footage of the perpetrators. Now the thefts weren't even making the radio broadcasts, and they were relegated to the back page of the business section in newspapers. Bigger things were going on in the world: the conflict in the former People's Republic of China was escalating; Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Cornwall were making threatening noises at England; something was killing the emus on Manitoulin Island; folks in the States were trying to build the world's largest sandcastle out of mashed potatoes; and locally there had been a number of Elvis sightings, even though he'd have to be over a hundred now.

One Wednesday, Richard was leafing through Gin's papers—something she'd given up asking him not to do—when he looked up and said, "I thought you didn't have time to illustrate the chapters yourself."

"Not normally," she said vaguely. "I'm just experimenting."

His eyes narrowed. "Something's going on. You *read* differently, this past week or two. You walk around with this weird secret smile on your face."

"Do I?"



Suddenly, there was a hard little smile on his lips. "Is it another guy?" "Whaddya mean, *another* guy? How many do you think I have here?" She realized her blunder, and added, lightly, "It's not really humane to keep a harem in a one-bedroom."

He ignored the joke—and her slip, thank goodness—and said, not meeting her eyes, "Well, you know ... I always kind of expected that when our ship came in, we'd ... get together."

"We *work* together," she said firmly.

"Exactly," he retorted, his eyes lighting up. "We *work together*."

"Not like that," she said with an air of finality, and hoped he wouldn't press it.

He didn't; just sulked throughout the rest of the meal. The very next thing he said to her was a frosty "Bye" as he headed out the door.

When he was gone, Gin turned on the news. The presidents of Canada and the United States had been videotaped dancing on the tables at a local Hooters last night, even though each was on a diplomatic mission thousands of kilometers apart from the other, and both could prove that they'd been where they were for several weeks. Mongolia was threatening to use nukes. The Leaning Tower of Pisa had fallen over, and Mad Emu Disease—Avian Spongiform Encephalopathy, actually—had been confirmed in Manitoulin Island. And folks around Ontario, Quebec, parts of New York State, and the Breakaway Republic of Delaware had reported seeing a dozen Elvises, four Virgin Marys, two Abe Lincolns, and a *Moving Pictures*-era Geddy Lee.

As she watched, the laundry room door opened, and Ben emerged, carrying Lump in his arms. He sat down on the couch beside her.

She turned to him, and he raised a reasonable approximation of eyebrows expectantly. "Branching out, are you?" she said with a smile.

Grinning fiercely, he nodded so hard that part of his forehead fell off, and he had to catch it and put it back. Then he pointed at the TV, made a little circle with his fingers, and then made the circle grow until he was holding his arms out over his head: *And this is only the beginning.*

BEING ANGRY WITH HER DIDN'T STOP RICHARD FROM SHOWING UP FOR LASAGNA A couple of evenings later. The drawings he'd brought looked dashed off, and she could see spots where the pencil had broken from too much pressure; and he was cold and distant at first. But around his second helping, he said, "So, who do you think is taking the pixels?"

She shrugged. "No opinion. With all the insanity going on, I'm trying to stay like Switzerland."

"Neutral?"

"I was thinking full of chocolate," she said, "but that works too."

He leaned forward eagerly. "I think it's animal rights nuts."

She almost asked why animal rights nuts would want to cook up a bunch of Elvises—Elvi?—but checked herself in time. "You're the one who keeps saying they aren't proper animals."

"They aren't! Doesn't matter if they've got a *biochip*; they're still a bunch of pocket calculators with a hive mind. But I bet the nuts don't know that. You still got that dog of yours? Better watch out, or they'll come after you."

Actually, the animal rights nuts had always been silent on the subject of pixies, as far as she could tell. How could you liberate something that had no hope of survival in the wild? Moreover, they would find themselves at odds with the environmentalists: pixies could do as much work as any labour-saving machine, and they ran on kibble.

To change the subject, she said, "Mongolia's going all atomic on us. Are we still cheering for them?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "If they gotta use 'em, they gotta use 'em."

OVER THE WEEKEND, QUEEN ELIZABETH—THE *FIRST*—WAS REPORTED TURNING handsprings across the Hoover Dam, and the Incredible Hulk mooned the crowd during an Italian football match. "Tone it down a little," Gin told the pixies when she could string two words together without dissolving into giggles. "I don't know what this big thing is that you're planning, but keep this up and they'll catch you first. Which I'd rather they not do, because I've become quite fond of you."

Most of them were on the floor in front of her, a couple of them rubbing her feet even though she'd insisted that they didn't need to serve anyone anymore; some were at the far end of the couch. They all looked around at each other, then looked back at her as one, and nodded sheepishly.

On Tuesday afternoon, Gin was working in her study again when she heard the TV go on. She went to investigate, and Ben—who had reassembled since she'd left him with the drawing paper and one gross of sharp pencils—met her at the door, took her elbow, and guided her to the couch with a delicious smile. There was breaking news from Xinjiang.

In the midst of battle, bunkers, vehicles, and warbots on both sides had spontaneously disintegrated in the dark, the correspondent reported. Cameras showed only inorganic components scattered on the muddy, rutted ground. An anchorwoman asked questions, to which her colleague in the field could give no helpful answers.

Then the sky began to lighten in the east, and the anchor, the correspondent, and indeed the whole battlefield fell silent, looking about



anxiously. A soft, unearthly sound, like millions of tiny singing voices, had started up with the dawn light. It rose to a crescendo from all sides, and relaxed into a lilting melody. Men and women in the uniforms of both sides started up from the ground, and, incredibly, *danced* together, a simple but lively step, beckoning their comrades to join them.

Cringing, Gin watched one of the Mongolian soldiers empty his machine gun into the belly of a dancer wearing the uniform of the People's Republic... but she only got a few inches shorter and a bit slimmer, and as the soldier looked from her to his gun in stupefaction, she took him by the hand and led him into the dance. One by one, haggard, hollow-eyed fighters dropped their weapons, and joined the circle with expressions of bleak bemusement that metamorphosed, as they danced, into glee.

The sun rose properly, casting a rosy golden light on a lot fewer dancers than Gin thought she'd counted. Moreover, since a battlefield couldn't be expected to stock pancake makeup, it should have been easy to tell the pixilated people from the real ones... but there were none. Who knew how long the two sides had been dancing without the pixies to lead them on? Even later, when the tapes were played over, she couldn't tell.

It would have been naïve to expect peace to be declared immediately, but the rest was anticlimactic. Even the six-hundred-foot laughing Buddha that hurled Mongolian nuclear missiles harmlessly into space was merely clever, compared to the look in the eyes of the soldiers who'd been called to the dance.

THE END OF THE WAR IN CHINA ALSO MARKED THE END OF THE PIXEL REBELLION. Between the initial bursts of violence and the trampling afterward, pixie casualties at Xinjiang had numbered in the millions. Losses were fairly light during the business with Chairman Mao, Genghis Khan, and Lao Tzu—who'd appeared at the peace talks Rockette-style, arm in arm and kicking—but nearly all of the hundreds of millions that comprised the Buddha's lower body were crushed to death by the weight they had to support. However, that was about the same as a day's honest work for pixies; the real loss was secrecy. They were rapidly connected to the other apparitions around the world, and their engineers were quick to point out that all you needed to do to disable a pixilated person was kick him in the shins: he would crumble before your eyes. When King Arthur showed up in England to wordlessly plead for peace, he was dealt with in fairly short order. In the ensuing week, some of the pixies were captured, and *decommissioned*, as the companies that had engineered them put it. More got away, but they couldn't survive without human aid, newscasters assured the audience. There would be inquiries, investigations, much

redesigning of biochips, but the threat was over.

“THAT’S THE NEWS, FOLKS,” GIN SAID GRIMLY, TURNING OFF THE TV WITH THE suspicion that she wouldn’t feel like turning it on again for a very long time. She glanced over at Ben and Lump, to see how they took it. Ben saw her looking at him, and beamed; Lump wagged his tail until it fell off, exhausted.

“You’re not disappointed?” she pressed.

Ben shook his head, with a little shrug that said, *Why would I be?*

“Well, I’m grateful for what you did do, and they would be too if they thought about it a little, but didn’t you want to be *free?*”

This shrug said, *Whatever. I’m not picky.*

She was getting better at understanding him, and she had to wonder if it was just a hive mind that the pixies employed to communicate. “Then why did you leave Intrepid in the first place?”

He grinned disarmingly, pointed at the kitchen, made a cylinder with his hands, and gave her a double thumbs-up. *The ice cream was really good.*

A FEW DAYS LATER, RICHARD SHOWED UP AT HER DOOR AGAIN. “I GOT A JOB AT Intrepid,” he announced. “I won’t be working with you anymore.”

“As one of their artists?” she asked, genuinely pleased for him. Whatever else he was, he was a terrific illustrator.

He dropped his chin, and muttered something that sounded like “warehouse.” “But I’ll work my way up,” he said defiantly, meeting her eyes again. “So, um, sorry about your books, but you know...” He trailed off, staring past her into the apartment. “Are you *moving?*”

“Yup.” She grinned. “I happen to have a new illustrator myself, and he’s mute, and he and a big bunch of other mute friends have formed an apartment co-op. Really nice building, too; some of them have come into quite a bit of money in the last little while. And they figure it might be a good idea to have a speaking person as sort of a liaison, until they get themselves more established.”

“Oh. Um, well, good luck and everything. And if you ever get sick of that small press, just make a few changes and come see me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said.

“And if you ever get sick of that mute—”

She stepped back and stood looking at him for a moment. Then she kicked him sharply in the shins.

He yelped, and brought his leg up to rub the spot. “I’m not one of *them*,” he said with contempt.

“I know,” she replied brightly, and closed the door. 🍀



*If I were sending this piece in today, I'd call it "Fiction-Writing Tips," or "A Few Modest Literary Proposals," or War and Peace...*

# Tentative Episcopal Pointers

Michael Bishop

I ENJOYED THE WINTER 2002 ISSUE OF *ON SPEC*, WITH ITS THEME "O for a muse of fire..." and especially enjoyed the privilege of having a piece of my own in the issue. That came about, as Derryl Murphy notes in his brief article on ConSpec 2002, because in the summer and early fall of 2001 Allen Steele and I spent a fair amount of time closely reading the submission stories of several "prospective, new, and developing writers" who planned to attend a workshop just prior to the September convention. In fact, I was at the computer on the day before my scheduled departure for Calgary cataloguing my so-called "Fiction Writing Rules" (most in response to recurring flaws in the story manuscripts) when Jeri, my wife, called from work to ask if I'd been listening to the news on National Public Radio, as I often do.

No, I confessed, I hadn't.

Jeri said that I might want to do so, or even go turn on the TV. An airliner had flown into one of the World Trade Center towers in New York City and other scary stuff seemed to be happening. My heart and my stomach switched positions, and flip-flopped again—but, figuring that I could catch up on the news that evening, I stayed at my keyboard until the disquiet in my gut drove me to rise, jog downstairs, and snap on the television.

It was bad, much worse than I had imagined. I saw video clips of air-

liners flying into the twin towers and, too soon, of the towers rumbling, buckling, and plunging in apocalyptic billows of gypsum dust, transfigured plastic, burnt paper, and who-knows-what-else as people fled in a real-life reenactment of feigned urban panic in a dozen or more sci-fi-cum-horror flicks, from *King Kong* to *Godzilla*, people running or hobbling at speed, the horror in their eyes as kaleidoscopically bright as tossed new pennies.

A little later, Jeri called to ask if I still planned to fly to Canada. Sure, I told her, not from any surplus of boldness, but because it seemed highly unlikely to me that anything as extraordinary as these highjackings would occur on consecutive days. And I'd worked hard to prepare for ConSpec and could not see myself declining to honor my invitation out of craven self-regard, leaving my inviters to fend with the last-minute inconvenience of my cancellation. I wasn't thinking clearly, though. The government shut down airports nationwide, and the destruction and loss of life in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and an anonymous rural meadow in Pennsylvania led ConSpec's organizers to postpone the convention. And I turned to the news again, as did people all over the world. However, I also selfishly rued the fact that my trip to Alberta had fallen through.

Eventually, the organizers of ConSpec arranged to piggyback—evocative verb—their convention on both ConVersion and Canvention in August, 2002, in Calgary, and Allen and I got to fly to Alberta anyway. I met Derryl Murphy, Jena Snyder, Holly Phillips, Peter Watts, Diane Walton, and a host of other fine people face to face for the first time and had the good fortune to speak again with some Canadians whom I had fortunately encountered before, from Candace Jane Dorsey to Robert Sawyer to Timothy Anderson, and so on. And I loved Calgary, a city both bustlingly decorous and breathtakingly clean, as I did a long but entertaining trip through gorgeous farmland to Drumheller and the Royal Tyrell Paleontological Museum. Indeed, in Drumheller proper, Allen Steele and I stood in the mouth of a humongous T-rex model, its teeth imprisoning us like stalactite bars and miles of peerless blue sky backlighting our plight. Derryl took our picture.

Somewhere during this whirl of events, Jena and Derryl both asked me about printing my list of fiction-writing rules in a future issue of *On Spec*. Back home in Georgia, I made a few changes and zapped the document to Jena as an e-mail attachment, and it showed up, as promised, in the Winter 2002 issue, whereupon my delight at its appearance in such a heady gathering of art, editorials, and stories modulated to only mild glee. Why?

Well, first of all, "Fiction-Writing Rules" sounds pretty damned self-assured and pontifical, even if I do include a couple of statements of qualification and demurral in my text. If I were sending this piece in today, I'd call it "Fiction-Writing Tips," or "Tentative Episcopal Pointers," or "A Few Modest Literary Proposals," or *War and Peace*. I'd stress (as most people, I



hope, would quickly deduce) that nothing in my catalogue borders on holy writ, and I'd confess that in the "rule" headlined "Tighten, Tighten, Tighten," the long complex sentence that I whittle down to a simple sentence in two steps has more grace than the ostensible paragon of succinctness with which the process concludes. In other words, tightening one's prose offers obvious benefits, but in some cases the loss of imagery, rhythm, and/or mood doesn't fully repay the result. Still, beginners more often over- than underwrite (even if they're not insurance agents), and the suggestion to tighten has genuine experiential soundness to commend it. Usually, if a writer can cut out an extraneous word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or even chapter, only a doting parent should think about restraining that impulse. And who cares what clueless Mom or Dad thinks, anyway?

Finally, at least for this go-round, I would add one more tip to the sixteen in the original document, namely, an item called "Get the *Would* Out," in which I urge writers to avoid using the helping verb "would" in describing a recurrent or habitual past action. Unfortunately, many fiction writers automatically use this tense: "*We would get up early, and Grandpa Pedro would fill our socks with rocks. Then we would go to town, where I would clock Billy Joe with my sock.*" My modest proposal? Avoid using *would* altogether. Simply indicate the time and use the past tense: "*In those days we got up early. Grandpa Pedro filled our socks with rocks. Then we went to town, where I always clocked Billy Joe with my sock.*" Too much *would* in a memory passage topples the pile.

Am I likely to come up with more of these helpful tips? Not unless I get a brand-new slew of creative-writing students who stagger me with repeated instances of highly original errors. And I am sometimes just as likely as a raw beginner to commit one of the "errors" of which I warn and then to fail to recognize my mistake until it has achieved the embarrassing conspicuousness of publication. Indeed, some of the tales in the Winter 2002 of *On Spec* contain examples of my alleged sixteen errors and yet do not appreciably suffer. And why not? Because their authors deploy the English language in such a way that their violation of the sixteen rules strikes me as natural and thus justifiable. On the other hand, another story or two showcase errors that seem *more* than merely alleged because the writers could have chosen a more felicitous mode of expression. That's what makes writing a continual challenge, and why I have little doubt that I will wrestle daily with the task until I no longer have the strength or the mental acuity to do so.

One of these days, I wouldn't mind wrestling with that task in front of a yellow legal pad, or an old-fashioned typewriter, or a new-fangled laptop in a cabin, house, hunting lodge, hotel, or high-rise somewhere in Canada. You have a lovely country and even lovelier people. ♦

*"Lots of corporate types are like that," Misha said. "Handcuffed to their briefcases with their cell phones surgically attached to their ears."*

# Attaché

Laurie Channer

"A BOX OF KLEENEX IS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS." THE VOICE CAME from behind him. Carrie was standing at his desk, smiling, holding up his box of tissues in one hand. Her massive stack of phone messages was in the hand that clutched her briefcase. Her bulging satchel-like purse was slung over a shoulder. "Can you find a drawer to put this in?"

"Okay," John said. "How was the vacation? You look well-rested for a change."

"It was good to get away." She reached into her purse and took out a long, perfectly wrapped package. "Duty-free champagne," she said, handing it to John. "Thanks for holding down the fort." She disappeared into her inner office.

Once the door snicked shut, the other secretaries came at a run across the big, open concept outer office area. They flocked around John's desk like crones around a cradle.

Rhonda was already unwrapping the bottle for him. "Moët. Nice. Better than the stuff the dead white males put in our Christmas baskets."



"Oh, I don't know. That Christmas bottle did the job for me." Antonella patted her barely-swelling stomach.

"You can put this on the shelf with the other one, John," Rhonda teased. "Or have you actually used your McKinley and Associates bottle yet? What's it been now? Four months?"

"No, I haven't used it," John said, taking the champagne from her. That was as much as they were going to get out of him. In this respect, John happily followed Carrie's lead in thinking it slightly unprofessional to divulge too many personal details in the office. He knew the girls speculated privately about his sexual orientation, but he wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of being told. John was starting to suspect that they'd rather not know and have some intrigue to gossip about among themselves than find out for sure.

Judy heaved her bulk up onto the edge of his desk. "'Fess up, John, you can't hide it anymore. We know Carrie wasn't on any trip."

This was something they hadn't let him in on before. "What are you on about?"

"She was off for cosmetic surgery, right?"

"You're nuts," John laughed. "She's billing two thousand hours a year trying to make partner and exhausted herself. She was on a Mediterranean cruise to recharge."

"Did you make the booking?"

"Huh?"

"Did you book the ticket?" Judy repeated.

"No, so what?"

The girls exchanged knowing glances. "And why wouldn't a busy corporate lawyer like her get her assistant to book her travel?" Judy asked.

"Because it wasn't business travel," John replied. "That would be a misuse of my time."

The girls laughed uproariously. "I'll remember that when I'm in line to pick up Destry's dry cleaning," Antonella said.

"You mean, when one of us does it for you," Judy said.

"Hey, I keep telling McKinley I can still do my job pregnant," Antonella protested. "You guys should tell him, too."

Judy shook her head. "We can't say no to the founder, Antonella."

"Well, I don't know why he keeps passing me by and hitting up the rest of you. Just pass the work back when he's not looking."

"Ladies," Rhonda cut in, "we're talking about Carrie here."

"Anyway," John said, "if she had surgery, there'd still be bandages or something, right?"

"They wouldn't be where we could see them if she had her boobs

done," Rhonda replied.

"Which she did," Judy added. "You can't fool us, they're bigger than before."

John shook his head. "No way, ladies. Carrie's—" he dropped his voice, "—boobs are exactly the same as when she left."

"Oh, you notice these things?" Rhonda said with a devilish grin.

"More than you," he replied. "It took *you* two days to notice when Judy changed her hair color."

"Carrie should have done it the natural way, like me," Antonella said, flaunting her bosom. "Mine have gone up two cup sizes already."

"Oh, sure," Rhonda said. "Carrie gets pregnant and Dusty Money finds a way to take her off the partner track."

"Carrie couldn't get pregnant," Antonella said. "You have to have *sex* for that."

"Didn't she leave the Christmas party around the same time as that client, that hunky Ryan something-or-other from Southgen Technologies? I'll bet her champagne got opened that night." Judy turned to John. "Do they have something going?"

John hesitated. He wasn't sure if it was better to give up a particular that Carrie would never volunteer herself, or leave her prey to the vultures of office gossip. "I'm sure they don't. She just did some patent work for them."

"She's so disgustingly thin," Judy snorted, "if *she* carried a baby, it would have to be in her briefcase."

"Gross," Antonella made a face and put both hands over her stomach.

"You've been watching too many *X-Files*," John said to Judy.

"But can't you just picture Ryan what's-his-name screwing the briefcase?" Judy replied.

John made the appropriate male-in-distress face and shooed her and the rest of the girls away from his desk. He didn't like them gossiping about Carrie, especially so close to her office door.

"Better tuck that bottle away, John," was Rhonda's parting shot, imitating Carrie's low, smooth voice. "Drinking on the job is a sign of weakness."

WHILE JOHN MADE DINNER THAT NIGHT, MISHA PICKED APART A *STAR TREK* RERUN.

"Could you please not do that?" John said. "You wreck the show for me every time."

Misha's eyes never left the screen. "But the science is bad. I have to do this for your own good. Stuff like this is dangerous. Because it's science



fiction, people like you will assume they've done their research and give it far more credibility than, say the science in *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Therefore, it's the bound duty of experts like me to point out when it's wrong."

"Experts like *you*?"

"Hands up everybody here who's getting their Master's in Physics," Misha said, lifting his own hand high above the back of the couch.

"You're only halfway through," John said.

Misha ignored him. "And hands up everybody here who was just a departmental hunchback?"

"Administrative assistant," John corrected him.

"Did you, or did you not, fetch brains?"

"I only carried them over from Lab Stores once for Lucinda in Biology when her wrist was sprained."

"I'm sorry, but that officially makes you a hunchback." He turned up the sound. Debate over.

John waited for the next commercial. "Listen," he said, "if you want to be a complete science geek, be an expert on this. Remember I said Antonella's pregnant?"

"Is she the one who grabs your butt all the time?" Misha poked his head over the back of the couch. "You report her yet?"

"No," John said, "and it's Judy who does that. Anyway, we were all talking and I started thinking—could you grow a baby in a lab?"

"They do it all the time. Test tube babies."

"I know, but they put those back into the mother. I mean totally grow the baby outside."

"What, has your friend Antonella decided that she doesn't want to get fat? I've never heard of an artificial womb, unless you count incubators, but they can only support babies that are already viable."

"Viable?"

"Capable of surviving. Living outside the mother. Yu Wen could give you the exact definition, she's in Genetics. Can I watch this, please?" The show was back on.

By now, John didn't care about the show. He came around right into the living room. "What if it stayed attached?"

Misha looked at him blankly. "What if what did?"

"The baby. To the mother. Then could it live outside, in a container or something?"

Misha stretched. "What's the point of that? Even if it could, the mother'd be tethered to it, so she's still tied down. It's much neater to have it all tucked up inside. And your way, you'd still only get one off-

spring per. Advances in reproductive technology usually have a practical application for greater efficiency of some sort in mind. That's why all the research starts in livestock. It's in the altruistic interest of providing more meat for bloated consumers and lining the pockets of big agribusiness. You should read that *Scientific American* that came a couple of months ago, the one with the praying mantis on the cover. It had a big article on animal genetics."

John discovered he'd done too well in starting the discussion. Misha immediately forgot *Star Trek* as well as the plates John put on the table. He burrowed through the piles of paper around his desk for the magazine and eventually emerged from a stack, triumphant, after the curry had gotten cold. "Here it is!" He waved it aloft and brought it to the table.

"Do you have to put that next to my dinner?" John said. "I hid that one away specifically so I wouldn't have to look at that bug cover."

Misha continued to read through the issue, but he laid it down flat so the cover was hidden. "Hey," he looked up in surprise. "I missed this before. Someone did try what you were talking about, with a pig. Only it wasn't *in vitro* fertilization. They took an established fetus out of a female—*reverse* embryonic transfer—and put it in an artificial womb."

John tried to read the article upside down. "Did it work?"

Misha shoved the magazine over to him. "Failed miserably. See, in that kind of case," he was looking off into the distance as he thought aloud, "it's not the genetics that's tricky, it's the fluidics. Exchange of blood and nutrients from mother to fetus, and waste products back. See, once you've got environment control in your artificial womb down pat, it all just comes down to a question of plumbing."

John skimmed the article as best he could. Misha was right. Because of the dearth of commercial applications, nobody had tried the experiment again. The rest of the article was too techie for John. He was about to close the magazine when a name jumped out at him off the page from a sidebar piece on human reproductive research.

The biotech firm was Southgen Technologies.

"PIG OF A THING!" JOHN BOOED THE FILE CABINET DRAWER THAT HE'D JUST smacked his shin on. Pulling up his pant leg, he saw blood. "Shit. Hey, Judy, you got a band-aid?" he called across.

She checked her purse. "No, but I'll kiss it better for you."

"Never mind." Carrie had been invited to the May partners' meeting, so John went in and checked her desk drawer. No band-aids. Spare panty hose, small sewing kit, even the box of tampons he'd been gallant enough to pick up for her one day when her supply ran out. Gallant,



but still profoundly embarrassed when it came to paying for them. Even when they'd been bagged, he'd hidden the bag under his parka all the way back to the office.

His parka. That was back in the winter. How could she not have used them up since?

John frowned. He went back out to his desk and called up his on-line calendar. He clicked back a month, to April. No special asterisks. The girls in the office had him marking PMS days down. They did it with each other, and even joked about John getting honorary PMS days of his own.

John kept clicking the pages back. Funny. Flipping backwards, he suddenly found that he didn't hit another of his marks until all the way back in early December. This was May. Prior to that—he checked—yes, a couple of marks a month, right back to when he'd started at the firm two years ago.

He couldn't have forgotten. But no period for five months. It seemed impossible that she could be that pregnant—she'd be showing.

The comment Judy had made two months ago, "If *she* carried a baby, it would have to be in the briefcase," drifted through his head. And out again. Yeah, right.

LUNCH HOUR, A WEEK LATER, ONE OF THE LAW CLERKS BUTTONHOLED HER NEXT to John's workstation. Carrie put her briefcase down on John's desk, next to his printer. As they stood talking in the streaming sunlight, John couldn't see how Carrie could bear it in a heavy blazer. That was all she wore these days.

John looked at the case on the desk, soaking up sun. Whatever was inside would be getting baked. Judy's baby comments surfaced again in his brain, along with Misha's "plumbing and environment control." So, for a baby, the case would have to be insulated inside, like a thermos or something. *If she really had a baby in there, it ought to be one of those shiny, aluminum cases*, John thought.

Dusty Money had presented Carrie's briefcase to her when she'd been promoted from junior. It was a big departure, his letting a woman move that far up in the hierarchy, as he'd reminded her in his speech at the time. In these days of political correctness, he hoped she didn't mind if an old coot like him considered her "one of the boys" now. It was the best compliment he could give her, she'd replied, to applause.

The case itself was a Coach, in dark brown leather, embossed with her initials. John had never examined it very closely. There was no need to.

John wondered. Plumbing and environment control. That would

mean a line up her sleeve and down inside her clothes. And some kind of connector at the handle of the case. Carrie'd also taken to wearing blouses with big frilly collars and cuffs that spilled out of her blazer. Nice camouflage, those cuffs. They could hide a lot.

Carrie turned a little where she stood, and John caught her profile against the window. *Yikes*, he thought. *She must have put on ten to fifteen pounds since the cruise.*

If Carrie was pregnant, he smiled to himself, there was nothing high-tech about it.

"IS THERE SOMETHING YOU SHOULD BE TELLING ME?" MISHA WAS STRETCHED OUT on the bed, looking through the library book when John stepped out of the shower. "*Your Complete Pregnancy Q & A?*"

John flushed. "I thought I'd read up on it to get an idea of what Antonella's going through."

Misha shook his head. "You, my friend, are a sensitivity trainer's wet dream. Do you think Antonella's *ever* read up on anything relevant to *you?*" He gave John a pointed look. "You still playing 'don't ask, don't tell' over there?"

"It's a very staid place, Mish. Little firms in a specialty like intellectual property are like that. It's all those links to science and technology. Dusty Money only just adjusted to women's lib."

"Uh-huh." Misha got that disapproving scowl that was a distilled concentrate of his opinions about the situation and what John was or wasn't doing about it. John took it regularly, like a dose of nasty-tasting medicine. He knew it was good for him, and someday he'd act on it. But he had bigger things on his mind right now.

"Can I tell you something crazy?"

"You can try." Misha buried his nose in the book. After a snit, he always wanted to be won over again.

"This is big, okay, and it may sound stupid." John paused to make sure Misha was listening. Misha pretended not to. "I'm not reading up because of Antonella. I think Carrie's pregnant." John took a deep breath. "And I think the baby's in her briefcase."

*That* got his attention. Misha turned his big, wide, dark eyes full on John. "Come again?"

John took the book and opened it to a chart. It was easier to go through this with his eyes on the diagrams and text, rather than meeting Misha's incredulous gaze. He tapped the list. "She's showing symptoms—morning sickness, breasts swelling, repulsion to foods she used to like. She's eating healthy stuff—this is Carrie, the original junk food



addict. She's gaining weight. And Mish—she's going to the bathroom *all the time* now."

"Uh-huh," Misha said evenly. "You want to get to the briefcase part?"

This was the bit that was going to sound really dumb, but John plunged in. "I haven't seen her without it in weeks. Not since she came back from her cruise. It's like she's handcuffed to the thing."

"Lots of corporate types are like that," Misha said. "Handcuffed to their briefcases with their cell phones surgically attached to their ears."

"Yeah, but Mish, she doesn't put any of her papers in it," John said. "I know. Every time she goes to a meeting or something, she gets me to put all her files in a big shoulder satchel. So what's in there?"

"Her lunch?"

"It's theoretically possible, right? Like in the article in the magazine. I'll bet she worked something up with Southgen Technologies. Like you said, all they have to do is get the plumbing right. *That's* what she was doing when she was supposedly on the cruise—getting hooked up. I think she got pregnant when Antonella did, around the Christmas party. That would have had the fetus about three months along when she went away. That'd be a good time to move it."

"But you just said *she's* gaining weight," Misha said.

"See, I thought that was the kicker myself," John said. "That's when I got the book." He flipped it over to another chart. "She's gained some, but not enough for six months along. And if all the weight of the baby *is* in the case, she'd still gain about fifteen to twenty pounds just in maternal stores herself."

"Uh-huh," Misha said again, sounding unconvinced. "Well, let *me* play lawyer here. What you have is a bunch of circumstantial evidence. But it all falls apart if you don't have a motive to go with it. No one would go to all that trouble just for kicks. So you're going to have to give me a compelling reason why a woman would want to carry her baby to term in a briefcase before I'll even consider this a theoretical exercise, let alone an actual possibility in your little behind-the-times, can-barely-get-the-printer-unjammed intellectual property law office."

John thought. "So it doesn't show. She doesn't look like she's pregnant."

Misha made a game-show-buzzer noise. "Vanity? You lose. I said a *compelling* reason. Besides," he added, "I thought you liked your boss. Do you think she's *that* vain and shallow?"

John knew she wasn't. Misha was right. It all fell apart. And in a way, he was glad. He didn't want anything that crazy to be true.



AND THEN, BEFORE THE JUNE PARTNERS' MEETING, JOHN SAW THE BRIEFCASE BULGE. Dusty Money had caught up with Carrie in the outer office, and she rested the case on the corner of John's desk while they chatted. John's eyes were on his computer screen, but a movement made him look. The brown leather was rounded out on one side, the way it might if, say, a grapefruit or a baseball had been shut inside. But while John watched, the bulge flattened out, leaving the leather perfectly smooth and flat again. He wasn't even sure he'd seen it until it happened again. It subsided more quickly the second time, but it had definitely been there.

Carrie had her usual death grip on the handle.

"JOHN, YOUR PLANT PIDDLED," JUDY SAID, GLANCING OVER ON HER WAY TO THE photocopier.

John looked where she pointed. Next to his potted cactus was a pool of liquid on the desk. "I didn't water it today," he said. He checked the bottom of the pot anyway. Bone dry. He brushed the water off the desk, scattering the droplets. Then he saw the trail leading away across the rug. Tiny, round, dark patches, like a Hansel and Gretel track, marking the way to the boardroom.

"Oh, fuck," he said aloud.

"What?" Antonella looked at him from across the way.

He couldn't think what to do. Spotting was serious, he'd read in the baby books. But spotting meant blood. It hadn't been blood on his desk. He didn't know what amniotic fluid looked like. What he'd seen looked like water, maybe tinged a little yellow, but now, even a minute later, he wasn't sure anymore. He needed the baby book. Even if he'd known what to do with a sample, it was too late to save one; what he'd swept off the desk was nothing more than a wet mark on the carpet now. He looked at his fingers. Sniffed them. It wasn't water.

Juice. The thought came to him in a wave of relief. Carrie had a bottle of juice in her case, and the top had come loose. Or it had broken. Apple, grapefruit, lemonade, something like that. That stuff with the blue label that she was always drinking. He'd seen it in her hand just a few minutes ago.

*In her hand. Not in the case.*

Only the briefcase had sat on the desktop, its weight lifted and placed there with a particular care she'd tried not to show. It was heavy, too—John could tell despite her effort to camouflage it.

And now it was leaking.

Moments later, he was at the boardroom door.

"No interruptions, John." Rhonda came around the corner after him.



“Top level meeting in progress.”

“Is Destry getting you to be Antonella this week? I have to get an important message to Carrie,” John couldn’t hide the urgency in his voice. Carrie’s Corporate Rule number five—*Never let them know when you’re desperate*—had gone out the window. Well, maybe it would help. “C’mon, Rhon,” he said, “you know I wouldn’t do this without a good reason. You take it in. Dusty Money won’t mind so much.”

Rhonda looked skeptical. “It had better be a real emergency.” John nodded, already scribbling a note on a phone message pad. Something not too obvious since Rhonda would read it.

“This better be life or death,” Rhonda added darkly.

“Life or death,” John repeated solemnly, handing her the folded note. “Just give her that.”

Rhonda opened the paper. “‘Leak in case.’” Her brow furrowed. “Which case? Ronson versus Incor? The copyright infringement suit?”

“She’ll know,” John said. “Please, Rhon.”

Rhonda eyed him warily, walked to the big oak door and disappeared inside the boardroom.

John paced. He almost didn’t want Carrie to leave the meeting. If she came out, it was true. It wouldn’t be just his own imagination anymore. True was scary. Babies in briefcases didn’t happen in law firms, they happened in futuristic novels that you could put down if they got too weird.

There were drops on the carpet here, too, and they had nearly dried away. John hoped he wasn’t about to seriously embarrass both himself and Carrie over a broken bottle of juice. He stepped over to the elevator and pushed the down button.

He was back in front of the boardroom door when it opened again. Rhonda came out. Behind her, John could see Carrie gathering up her papers calmly. “—family emergency—my apologies, Destry, gentlemen.” Dusty Money looked miffed, but Carrie made her way out without hindrance.

Oh, God, it was true.

Before the door had shut completely, John was at her side. Carrie’s manner was calm, but her face was very pale. “There’s a cab waiting downstairs,” John told her. “Give me everything you don’t need.” Without waiting for a reply, he reached for her armload of files, carefully avoiding contact with the briefcase. A drop fell from one of its bottom corners even as he watched. Carrie gave her papers up gratefully. The elevator chimed.

“I called ahead,” he said, “they know you’re coming.” When she opened her mouth to speak, he pushed her into the elevator. “I’ll take

care of everything here. Just go.”

“Who did you—?” The closing door cut her off.

John slumped against the wall. He’d gambled. The first speed-dial button on Carrie’s phone had been programmed for Southgen Technologies.

THERE WAS A VOICEMAIL MESSAGE WAITING FOR HIM THE NEXT MORNING. “THANKS, John,” said Carrie’s voice. “You did the right thing.” That was it.

Dusty Money came around later that morning to let John know Carrie was taking a few sick days due to a family situation.

When she returned to work, a week later, instead of her dark brown leather briefcase, Carrie was toting a new litigation case twice the size.

JOHN DIDN’T BOOK HIS USUAL SUMMER HOLIDAYS. MISHA WAS PISSED, AND KEPT trying to talk him into it. But if John calculated right, Carrie was due just after Labor Day. He didn’t want to be out of town if things happened early. God only knew what John expected *he* could do about anything, but he just felt better being in the office and seeing Carrie come in. She often rested the bigger case on his desk now on her arrival, standing there to read her messages, rather than disappearing straight into her office. John made sure there was extra space for it.

Once, she looked across the outer office for a long minute. “You ever notice that the bigger she gets, the more invisible she gets to Destry?” Carrie said.

John followed her gaze. She was looking at Antonella, who, in the absence of any work from McKinley, had given in and taken to sitting calmly at her desk knitting a baby sweater.

When she hoisted her litigation case more firmly than before and shut her office door, John knew he had his compelling reason.

CARRIE HERSELF WAS BECOMING PHYSICALLY INVISIBLE, ALTHOUGH SHE KEPT UP AN enormous output of work. She was often in before John, and although she had always stayed later than him, he was hearing that she was now staying later than all of the other lawyers, too. John guessed that it was to make sure she stayed on McKinley’s partner track and maybe in part just to keep from being seen too much with that big case in tow. Dusty Money, of course, was making all kinds of approving noises about her dedication.

One morning John discovered that she’d had the maintenance staff move her office furniture around so that when seated at her desk, no one could see even the littlest bit behind it. She was looking as worn



out as before her cruise, and, in John's opinion, perpetually desperate. From the baby book, John knew that this was the time frame when most pregnant women went through their obvious nesting phase. Not only couldn't Carrie openly nest, she was going to even greater lengths to conceal things.

"You don't have a name for it, do you?" he asked one morning as she was checking mail next to his desk.

Carrie's head jerked up sharply. "What?!"

The force of her look actually made John flinch. "Uh, you know how people name inanimate objects sometimes." He nodded toward her case. "My sister has a leather knapsack that she carries about thirty pounds of textbooks around to her classes in. She calls it Big Black. And Rhonda calls her old station wagon The Barge. I just wondered..."

Carrie's look softened ever so slightly. "No, John," she said in a quieter voice. "It doesn't have a name."

She looked so stressed and worn out. John wanted to do something to get her thinking about the baby in a positive way. "It could have a name, you know," he said. "Why don't we give it one? What do you think?"

She looked almost amused at that; he was cheering her up. "What do *you* like?"

He pretended to think hard. He'd actually thought this through for his own purposes long ago. "Dmitri for a boy—I mean, if we want to think of the case as male, or Tatiana if it's a girl."

Her eyebrows went up. "Russian names?"

John felt himself flush. They were Misha's grandparents' names. "I've been reading *War and Peace*," he replied quickly, hoping that they actually appeared in the book. "So what do you think?" he barreled on. "Boy or girl?" Surely she knew which it was at this stage. By his calculations, she was six months along. Second trimester.

Her expression suddenly turned very serious again. She sighed, and John knew he'd lost any ground he'd gained. "I don't actually think we'd better give it any name just yet, John," she said. "But I'll keep those suggestions in mind." She offered a shadow of a smile for his benefit, but it wasn't convincing. She picked up the case and went into her office.

"I THINK I MIGHT WANT TO LEAVE MY JOB," JOHN SAID IN THE DARK SOME WEEKS later.

"Would this have everything to do with your boss's briefcase?" Misha replied sleepily.

"Yeah."

"Don't blame you. Weird goings-on." Misha rolled over and hauled the

sheet up tighter around his neck. John stayed on his back, looking up at the ceiling.

"It's due next month if I did the math right." The math would be the final proof. Carrie'd been so caught up in her work, staying until all hours, in conference calls all the time, that John wondered if she'd taken the time to prepare properly for the impending event. He bet she didn't even have a nursery set up yet.

"Should be a pretty easy delivery," Misha mumbled. "Snap, snap, out it comes. As long as she didn't forget the combination."

"Don't kid, Mish," John said, turning to him in the dim. "There's more to it than just the delivery. There's all kinds of adjustments to make. I really wonder if she's ready."

"Then you're right. You want to get out of there quick before it all comes crashing down."

"That's not it," John said. "I've been thinking—if she's done what she's done to keep her job, then she must be planning to keep her job after, right? I know she hasn't booked any time off." That worried him, too. He knew her calendar, and in September, he hadn't seen any discreet booking that could have covered up for the delivery. "Anyway, she'll be needing someone to look after the baby." He took a deep breath. "I think I want to do that."

Misha sat bolt upright. "You want to *what*?"

Despite his own hesitations, John was amused at having shocked the staid Misha. "I want to take care of the baby." Hearing it out loud in the room suddenly made his conviction even stronger. "Carrie doesn't have a support structure. She needs me. I bet I'm closer to her than anybody now."

Misha's eyes lowered closer to his, black pools in the dark. "Are you saying something about us here? Are you telling me that you want to leave to make some commitment to this *woman* because of her maybe-baby?" His voice carried indignation John couldn't make out in his face.

Now it was John's turn to be startled, both at the idea and Misha's extreme reaction to it. "God, no!" he replied quickly, trying to keep the delight out of his voice. It was the closest Misha had ever come to making a statement of commitment himself. John reached up and rubbed his shoulder. "I'm just talking about doing the day care."

Misha's stiff silhouette didn't change. John tried again. "Remember Eldin the housepainter on *Murphy Brown*?"

"You want to be a housepainter?"

John laughed. "When she had her baby, he became the nanny. Like that. I want to do that, Mish." John had been thinking about it for weeks



now. The more stressed Carrie had gotten with her workload, the more he had realized that he could help her out. And looking after her baby seemed a lot more purposeful than faxing her documents. He already felt close to it, he'd been looking out for it for months now. Sometimes better than she did.

Misha was quiet for a long minute. "You really hate being a secretary, don't you?"

"I like working for Carrie. I just think I could work for her in a more meaningful way now."

"What does she say?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell her yet," John said. He was embarrassed to admit that he still couldn't bring himself to broach the subject of the baby with her. *Don't ask, don't tell.* "She's been too overwhelmed by the work Dusty Money is piling on her. I'll tell her soon, I guess. Definitely before September. I think she'd like to know that someone's on her side before it comes down to the crunch."

Misha grunted. "And what happens when *we* have one?"

John sat up, too. "We?" he repeated. "Like in *us*?"

"Is that so incredible?" Misha sounded offended. "What, is it easier to believe some far-out, futuristic scenario about Carrie having a baby than it is to believe that you and I could swing adopting one? There's people we know who are already doing it."

John was almost glad that Misha couldn't see him grinning like an idiot in the dark. "I know it can be done, Mish," he said softly. "I just didn't know you wanted to."

Misha settled back into the covers gruffly. "Just make sure you'll be able to take care of two when the time comes."

"I will," John said, happier than he'd ever been.

"You're a way better person than anybody deserves, John," came a mutter from Misha's side of the bed. "Even that baby."

THERE WAS A MESSAGE ON E-MAIL WHEN JOHN ARRIVED AT WORK, A REQUEST FROM Carrie to dig up some files, posted at one a.m. *Leaving now—will be in around 10—early appointment out of the office*, was the sign-off. *Please leave the incor files on my desk. Thanks.*

*One a.m.* John winced. She was driving herself into the ground to keep McKinley happy at a time when she should be focusing on her own needs. The baby would suffer—stress in the mother wasn't good for the baby. The sooner he stepped forward to help her out, the better.

As he laid the files out for her, he idly glanced at her desk calendar. It was blank for the early morning. Odd. He checked her message again,

this time from her screen. He'd read it right. Early appointment. Of course, Southgen. She'd been there only a week ago, but in the last trimester, women always went to the doctor a lot more often. Antonella was doing it, too. One way to check. He picked up Carrie's phone and hit the redial key.

"Southgen Technologies," said the voice in his ear.

John hung up.

His first incoming call of the day was a summons to Dusty Money's office. John passed Antonella at her desk. Antonella seemed quite content these days to let McKinley treat her like she was invisible. She pored through a catalog of baby things, her desktop empty.

When John went in the old man barely looked up as he packed files into his own briefcase. "I need you to book myself and Carrie on the next flight to Montreal," he said. "Pathfield's just had their head of R & D up and quit and Don thinks he may be taking trade secrets to the competition. We have to go seek an injunction. Make sure my seat is a window."

"But Carrie isn't in yet, sir," John said.

McKinley snapped his case closed. "She's on her way. I called her at home before I came in."

But then she wouldn't make it to Southgen. "Are you sure?"

"She'll be here. And here she is!" McKinley looked past him to the door.

John turned to see Carrie in the doorway, litigation case in hand, satchel over her shoulder. She looked very pale after her late night, but spoke in her usual, business-like tone. "If you'll let me have John back, we'll just get a few things together and I'll be ready to leave."

"Off you go," McKinley said to John. "Remember, window seat."

"But Carrie—" John started when they were out of the office.

"Not here," she said, walking purposefully to her own office. Her flowered suitcase was already sitting outside the door.

John followed her in and shut the door behind them. Carrie dropped her satchel on the floor and sat down wearily, cradling her case in her lap. It was the first time John had ever seen her do so.

"You didn't make it to Southgen this morning," he said.

"I was on my way out the door when Destry called," she replied.

"You shouldn't fly," he said. "All the books say—"

"I haven't exactly been doing things by the book, have I?" she almost smiled. "And I'm sure another week won't hurt," she went on, not sounding at all sure.

Then it hit him. "Ohmigod," he gasped. "This wasn't just a checkup, was it?" John thought back to his development chart. Of course. This



late, all the baby did was put on weight. They'd want it out before it started straining the case again.

She shook her head. "But it'll only be a few more days' delay. These things are never that precise."

The worry behind her eyes made John think that this was one that probably had to be more precise than most.

"And what about the airport?" he said. "What are you going to do about baggage check?"

She patted the brown leather, and her smile was more real this time as she looked right at him and shrugged. "Carry-on, what else? And I can even let go of it to go through the security gate." She drew back her ruffled cuff, watching his face.

John was riveted. This was it.

"There's a detachable valve connection," she said, and John saw the tubing and a plastic connector. "It can only be separated for a few minutes at most, and only if absolutely necessary. It'll give me time to get through Security." The cuff went down again and she looked pleased with herself, maybe for finally getting to share the secret, maybe because it had all been thought through so well.

"What about the X-ray?" he asked.

Carrie blanched.

John could suddenly see the images that were running through Carrie's head, because they filled his own. The unmistakable ghostly skeletal shape coming up on the inspector's screen, passengers in line looking on. An alert. Authorities. Chaos and outrage. John wasn't expert enough to know how many reproductive technologies statutes Southgen had stretched, or even breached for this. The look on Carrie's face indicated that she probably did.

"It can't be hand-checked, either," she whispered.

"You can't fly," John said firmly. He racked his brain. "I'll book you a train ticket. Tell McKinley you have an inner ear thing, you've developed a phobia, something."

Carrie's eyes were saucer-wide even as she shook her head. "A train will take all day. I *have* to fly. Destry won't take an excuse. Pathfield is our oldest client and his baby. This trip isn't just critical for making partner. If I blow it off, I could be out of the firm entirely."

They looked at each other for a very long minute. John realized that she'd just used the word "baby" for the first time since Christmas.

"I haven't taken it this far to just forget about it now," Carrie said at last. "Call the airline. I'm calling Southgen."

The light for her line was already lit by the time John got back to his

desk. His stomach churned with anger. At her, at Southgen, he wasn't sure who. They couldn't get this far and be stymied by one little detail. He called the airline and the hotel, making reservations, hating not knowing how this was all going to work out.

Across the office, John could see Destry McKinley putting on his jacket. He would be over any minute.

Carrie called him in.

"I need you to do something for me, John," she said, when he had closed the door. She had her composure back. "Something very important." Her eyes fixed his.

John caught his breath.

"As soon as I leave with Destry," she said, "*as soon as I leave*, take this case to Southgen. There'll be a cab waiting downstairs. Will you do that for me?"

No. It couldn't be up to him. This wasn't a brain in a jar from Lab Supply. "It'll take too long," he gasped. "They're ten minutes away at least."

"I know," she said quietly. "But it's quicker than trying to have them rendezvous with me at the airport. Southgen thinks we have a good chance."

This wasn't right. "Carrie, you *have* to be there," John said. "You're the—" He stopped. He still couldn't bring himself to say the word out loud. "It's *yours*," he said urgently.

Carrie's face took on an odd look. "It's only mine," she said, so quietly that he could barely hear, "because I didn't want it—" she paused, searching for a word, "—terminated. I just couldn't do that. But I can't *keep* it." Flickers of true panic suddenly showed behind her eyes. "I can't have this job and *this* too..." Her words trailed off as she looked at the case.

John stared at her, shocked. "You've gone to all this trouble and you're not even going to keep it?"

Carrie looked up at him. "I couldn't even keep it for one day. I haven't shopped for the proper things. I'm not prepared, I haven't made the right plans. I was going to let Southgen place it—they have lots of clients who wouldn't ask—"

He couldn't see it go. John couldn't believe he wanted this baby more than her. He wished he'd had time to practice his nanny speech. "I'll help you," he said abruptly. "I was going to tell you anyway. We could have an arrangement. I'd look after it daytimes. Everybody does it. You'd just have to get a new secretary—"

She turned a resigned gaze back to him. "You've been such a big help, John," she said, as though she hadn't even heard his offer. "Have one of



your own. Just take my advice," she added with a trace of sadness. "Do it the natural way."

John took a deep breath. "That would be kind of difficult," he said. "I'm gay."

Carrie nodded absently. She'd known, just like he'd known about her.

The door opened suddenly, making them both jump. McKinley stuck his head in. "Let's go, Carrie. Car's waiting."

"Sure, Destry," Carrie said, her smooth, composed demeanor instantly back in place. "I just have one last call to make. Thank you, John," she dismissed him, too.

McKinley parked himself on a chair a few feet away from John's desk with his *Report on Business*. Hands unsteady, John made himself look busy by typing up the flight and hotel reservation information into a new document. When it printed out, he passed the itinerary to McKinley, who took it with barely a nod.

At last, Carrie emerged from her office, brisk and professional as always. Satchel over her shoulder, case in one hand, she had a manilla envelope in the other. She came to John's desk and rested the case on the corner, just like a hundred other times. "I still need you to take care of that delivery, John," she said in a low, even voice. "Will you see to it?"

John swallowed hard and nodded. She handed him a decoy envelope, glancing ever so briefly at McKinley.

"Okay," she said. "And wait there after you drop it off. They'll give you something to take back. You keep it for me, okay?"

John's vision suddenly constricted down to a tunnel. Keep it. Him.

McKinley was still reading.

"Is that okay, John?" Carrie said softly. McKinley tucked his paper away and was rising to his feet. John tried to catch his breath. He could only nod as his thoughts whirled.

"And I'll need you to make me an lunch appointment with Martin Prescott for when I get back," Carrie went on. "He's an old law school friend. Look him up for me—I think he's at Whiting Bentall these days."

"Whiting Bentall," John repeated. He knew that firm. They specialized in private adoption.

"Okay, you're in charge," Carrie said loudly and cheerfully for McKinley's benefit. "And no bike couriers, now." She smiled at her own joke and then, quickly and quietly, she placed her case on the floor next to the desk. John heard a tiny plastic sound. Her hand came away from the litigation case and John's bowels churned as she walked calmly toward the elevator.

It would be his. His and Misha's. Oh, God, he wouldn't even have time to call Misha before— John's hand quickly covered the bits of plastic that protruded from the handle while Carrie chatted as she walked, to distract McKinley. They entered the elevator and John's heart raced. The doors started to close, and John was already out of his chair. Carrie gave him an encouraging thumbs-up. He picked up the case. God, it was heavy. But he felt a thrill surge through him. Did he dare to run—?

An age-spotted hand stopped the elevator doors half-way. John froze, one step away from the desk, case in hand. "You forgot your briefcase, Carrie," McKinley was saying. He stepped out. "Nice work, John, I'll take it from here." He yanked the case from John's startled grasp.

John couldn't think. He and Carrie exchanged looks of blank panic. "No, it's okay, Destry," she said, her voice faltering ever so slightly. "I find it kind of heavy, anyway." It was lame, and John could see that she knew it. He tried to think of something else, but hit his own brain-lock.

"Then I'll lug it for you," Destry was saying to Carrie. "I know how attached you are to this thing."

The closing doors cut them off as John stared, stunned and empty-handed.

THE CALL CAME A HALF-HOUR LATER, FROM THE BOARDING LOUNGE. "IT'S GONE." Her voice was dull and flat. "Destry insisted on carrying it all the way. I only got it back when he went to the men's room."

She paused, but John didn't have any words.

"All I could do," she went on, "was empty it out in the ladies'."

John gasped. "You didn't flush it—?"

"Don't," she said, her voice unchanging. "It just wasn't viable." A pause. When she spoke again, she sounded even more distant. "And it was too big to flush," she said. "I had to put it in the waste bin. Without the case, it just looks like—well, like the kind of thing cleaners sometimes run into in public restrooms. It'll be horrible, but the kind of horrible they'll have seen before. I couldn't just leave the case behind," Carrie added. "Destry would have had someone at the from the airline looking for it. Or the airport would have found it first and put a bomb squad onto it."

"So you still have the case?" John could barely whisper. It was all too awful.

"I filled it with junk from the gift shop," she said. "To make it heavy enough. Destry will want to carry it again. I'll have to lose it in a dumpster or something in Montreal," she said. "I can't let it cause trouble for Southgen."

And for her. "I'm sorry, Carrie," was all he could say.



"I'm sorry for you, John," she said. "You wanted it more than I ever could have." There was a noise in the background. "Shit," she said, "there's my boarding call. John, you take care. Don't think about it too much." There was a finality in her voice that told John she was finished talking about it. Probably for ever. She hung up.

Only after John put the phone down did he realize he'd never found out if it was a boy or a girl.

The box of Kleenex lived on his desk for a long time after that. Even after her return, Carrie didn't make him put it away. ❁

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1. *ad-dict' v. t.* To apply habitually, as one's mind to a speculation; to give (oneself) up or over, as to versifying, as a constant practice...
  2. *ad' dict n.* One who is addicted to a habit...
  3. *ad-dic' tion n.* State of being addicted; also, habituation...

## 2004 On Spec Theme Issue: Addiction

It can be as simple as a cigarette, as euphoric as a hit of heroin, or as weird and thrilling as a sexual act. But it runs your life or the life of someone you know. What if it were magical or alien? A substance, a practice or an idea that rules as (so far) nothing else has, and will not be overruled? Love it, hate it. Bend it or break it—but convey it in 6,000 words or less and from outside the envelope. It doesn't have to be a drug with a criminal network to get it to the user. This is *On Spec*, so speculate. Just remember that if you write about addiction and have never been addicted to anything, you will want to talk to or read something by someone who is or has been addicted. (As a smoker, I never felt like an addict; only after I'd quit could I tell past from present.) Anywhere you wish to go is fair, but if you write about pornography addiction, don't send us pornography, and don't send that porn equivalent of tether ball known as "erotica."

Be daring. Visit dark places. But don't pose or brag. Leave the preacher out in the hall along with his friend, the lecturer. Find fictional metaphors that will stand up to inspection. Back addiction into a corner and make it tell you what it knows. Deliver a truth.

Deadline for entries is Feb. 28/04. Address submissions to:  
Theme Issue Guest Editor Steve Mohn, On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton AB T6E 5G6.  
Sorry, no electronic submissions.

*I had to do something to preserve  
this moment, this faith shining in my  
daughter's eyes...*

# Morning in the House of Death

Siobhan Carroll

*“Ah, dear godfather,” said the horrified physician, “light a new one for me, do it for love of me, that I may enjoy my life, be King, and the husband of the King’s beautiful daughter.”*

*“I cannot,” answered Death, “one must go out before a new one is lighted.”*

– “Godfather Death” by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

EVERYONE KNOWS DEAD BIRDS DON'T FLY.

Sarah's sparrow was no exception. It sat like a bundle of dry twigs on her palm, brown head cocked expectantly. From time to time it straightened up as though remembering something and stretched out its wings – but then the spark would fade from its white eyes, and the wings would be folded uselessly against its small, dark corpse.

“Mommy! Blacky's hurt.” Sarah's chubby face was streaked with tears.



“Fix him. Please?” She pushed the zombie bird at my face, her large brown eyes glowing with the absolute faith that I would somehow do the impossible. I was her mother, after all. Nothing was beyond me.

My heart sank. How could I bear to disappoint her?

“Let me see him.” Sarah gingerly tipped the pet bird into my skeletal hands. The sparrow cheeped quizzically as I cradled it in the white bone of my palms. It peered curiously up at my withered face.

*Children and the dead*, I thought sadly. *These things alone do not fear me.*

Glancing up, I thought I saw my daughter’s future-self slinking furtively along the wall. Or perhaps it was the ghost of one of my previous daughters. Time runs differently in the garden, and sometimes it is hard to tell the past and future apart. In the end it makes no difference. The story is always the same.

My future-daughter climbs the wall, clutching the pale stone with hands as white as drowning sailors. Her breath comes quickly. She has a crumpled love letter in her pocket and years of dark gossip echoing in her ears. She thinks she is wise. She flinches as she feels my gaze upon her, and I whisper her name, willing her to look back into this time when we were both happy. *I love you, remember?*

She jumps, disappearing from my vision like a flame snuffing into smoke. She does not look back.

“Mommy?”

Six-year-old Sarah was biting her lower lip, her bright face clouded with anxiety.

“It’s all right,” I said soothingly. The dead sparrow cheeped in my hand. I had to do something to preserve this moment, this faith shining in my daughter’s eyes. In the summer garden I could hear the chatter of hundreds of living sparrows, all of them almost identical to the one in her hand. The solution came to me in a flash: I would take the dead sparrow away from her, and replace it with one that was still alive.

“Wait here, darling.”

I stalked into the warm garden. The living birds fell silent as they sensed my presence; the dragonflies left their sunny perches and flickered in nervous zigzags through the air. I felt the small deaths of grass stems through my feet; the writhing agony of the ant trapped between my heel and a hard pebble. A hundred more deaths quivered around me: flies tangled in spider webs, withered leaves snapping off stems, the splintering deaths of the yellow seeds the sparrows split with their beaks.

The zombie bird in my hand twitched its wings hopelessly. It was outside the cycle now, neither dead nor alive, a flawed memory of the creature it once was.

*I should never have brought the bird back*, I realized. It was a weakness in me, this inability to see Sarah hurt, this desire to give her whatever she asked for. I'd brought her pet back to life, and now she would never believe there were limits. She would never believe Death was absolute.

There was a noisy clatter behind me. Sarah had knocked the spade over as she followed me round the corner, all arms and legs and excitement. "Is he fixed now? Can he fly, Mommy?"

I looked down at the zombie bird in my hands. The lie stuck in my throat.

"I can't, honey." I met her bewildered gaze head on, determined to repair what damage I could. "Mommy can't make dead things alive again. She can make them *almost* alive, but it's never the same. I'm sorry."

Sarah stared at me blankly. Then, as she sorted through the meaning of my words, her young face crumpled with disbelief.

"You're lying! Blacky'll get better! He will!" She snatched the sparrow from me and ran into the center of the dusty patio. The live sparrows scattered at her arrival, and then, sensing she meant no threat, fell back towards the earth like autumn leaves. Sarah positioned Blacky in the middle of the flock, his dead eyes staring straight ahead. She gently pulled his wings apart, holding them open to catch the wind.

"Come on." Her voice was thick with tears. "You can do it Blacky, come on."

I stood there, watching my adopted daughter try to coax her dead bird into the air. I had betrayed her once today, however inadvertently. This was a lesson she had to learn the hard way. My pale hands clenched and unclenched the air helplessly, like the wings of graveyard butterflies.

I would explain everything to her, I decided. I would bring her out of my gated house, past the marble doorstep where her real mother had left her so many years ago, and show her the village graveyard where my other children were buried. I would show her my room of candles, and guide her to where her own life stood, dribbling scarlet wax onto the countertop. I would tell her, as I have told so many others, *One must go out before a new one is lighted*.

But she wouldn't understand any of it. Not yet, and perhaps not ever.

Tonight when I read her a bedtime story, she will curl up under my chin as usual, eyes reflecting only the slightest amount of shadow when she looks at me. The shadow will grow as the years pass, and I will diminish in her eyes, becoming smaller, fallible, more ominous...

"Mommy?" Sarah's voice called to me from the patio. I went to her, birds scattering like buckshot at my footsteps.

"Blacky's really gone, isn't he?" Sarah whispered, hunched over the



immobile sparrow.

“Yes, sweetheart.” I put my hand on her head, soft mahogany curls springing through my skeletal fingers. Was it my imagination, or did she flinch a little at my touch?

“And he won’t get better.”

I shook my head. Sarah stared at her pet, lower lip trembling.

“I think he should be gone-dead. The way he was before.” She wiped her hand across her eyes. “That way we can bury him.”

I passed my hand over the bird and it lay still. Sarah picked up the tiny body, her mouth rounding into a small red zero. *This is what Death is, daughter*, I thought, future words already echoing in my ears. *Cold, inexorable, pitiless.*

*“Light another candle for me! Mother, do it for love of me, that I may enjoy life...”*

But I cannot.

“Blacky’s dead,” I explained. “Even I can’t stop life from ending.” And this is all the explanation there is, all there’ll ever be. I hope she will remember it, when the time comes.

Sarah is crying. She grabs my hand and we walk to where I left the trowel, jammed into the dry earth at the corner of the rose garden.

Together we begin to dig. ❁

*"Behind every haunting, there's a story and a reason. Do you think Sarah cries because she wanted a baby?"*

# Cause for a Haunting

Patricia Rutale

KATE TOOK THE HATBOX TO THE DINING ROOM TABLE, LIFTED the top and removed the items: a glass brooch, a wood carving of a beaver, an empty perfume bottle, a blue silk scarf. It was the photograph she picked up: four by six, black and white but well-preserved beneath the glossy finish.

A man and woman stood in front of a small, red-bricked house—this house, but minus the coniferous shrubs and mature trees, it appeared different. Bleak almost, the coziness that had lured Kate and Shawn absent. A middle-aged couple dressed as if for church. The woman with dark hair rolled back from a high pale forehead, a pretty face starting to thicken, looked unsmiling into the camera, arms folded awkwardly across her waist, eyes sad crescent glitters. The man was much taller, broad and slim in a dark suit. He leaned close, eyes focused darkly on the woman.

Worry and fear, Kate thought, staring at the face of the man. Love and despair.



She flipped the photograph and read the square printing in black ink on the back: *Jake and Sarah Anderson, 1949.*

THE PREVIOUS OWNER, RICHARD KERNS, HAD PRESENTED THE HATBOX WITH AN AIR OF ceremony. "Passed onto you, Kate, along with the house and its ghosts."

Shortly after moving in, Kerns had decided the house was haunted, and from his position in administration at the public library, had delved into its history.

The house had been built in 1930 by Jake Anderson himself, a civil engineer destined to work until retirement as a nine-to-five city building inspector. In 1931, he married Sarah Hamilton, and they lived together in the house for the next fifty years. At the age of seventy-six, Sarah died of a brain aneurysm in the acute care wing of the local hospital. Jake followed six months later, lying down after dinner at his sister's house across town and quietly expiring of a coronary. They had no children.

Since no one had ever died in the house or been a victim of violence within its walls as far as was known, Kerns remained perplexed over the haunting. He was nevertheless pleased to be in possession of a home frequented by the dead. He stayed for the next seventeen years, renovating every inch of the small, 1300-square-foot interior, building the landscape to lavish proportions with his green thumb. Now he was retiring to Costa Rica.

KATE HEARD THE BACK DOOR OPEN, GROCERY BAGS CLANK DOWN ON THE COUNTER.

"Shawn," she called. "Come here."

He came immediately, eyes going to her stomach, followed by his hands. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Look at this."

She sensed irritation, dutifully stifled. He took the photograph. Looked for all of three seconds. "Original owners? Tense looking couple." He dropped it on the table and surveyed the rest, lifting the beaver, touching the smooth length of its back before setting it down, peering again at her stomach. "I got you some vitamins. The pharmacist said these shouldn't cause nausea as long as you take them after a meal."

She groaned. "It's getting enough nutrients. I'm eating like a horse."

"Just try them, okay?" He lifted her chin, turned on the full power of his green eyes. "We want this baby to have the best start possible, don't we?"

"Yes. Okay." She puckered so he had to kiss her, kissed until he pulled away first. She looked at him and pouted. "I'm sorry for being difficult, but I feel like a whale, and I'm bored. I shouldn't have left work early. Most women wait until the last possible minute so they aren't sitting around like this."

"You were on your feet all day at the store. It wasn't good for the baby. Can't you knit something?"

"I don't knit, Shawn."

The summer had left him tanned, hair streaked blonde. He looked like a California surfer, but it was a disguise, she knew, for the sensitive English teacher he really was, upset when kids didn't like him, someone writing on the board: GRANT US MERCY FROM MERCER. Some mean boy, she was sure, not one of the girls who hung around after class wanting to discuss symbolism in *Wuthering Heights*.

"I was thinking," she said. "I could write an article about the house. About it being haunted by Jake and Sarah Anderson. The local papers might be interested."

She watched his face skip down a trail of thought she had little trouble following: skepticism that Kate, who had done nothing more ambitious since high school than work at a downtown import shop, could write anything coherent. The suspicion that Richard Kerns was not merely eccentric, but mentally unbalanced (they'd seen no proof the house was haunted) and he didn't want people thinking his new wife was similarly flaky. But the points in favor—it was a diversion, and she'd never get it published anyway—won out, and Shawn smiled.

"That's an idea."

"Richard mentioned the woman across the road has been here since the forties. Neighbors were closer in the old days. I bet she knows something."

"Just don't get overtired. You can write on the sofa with your feet up, okay?"

"Okay." She kissed him. "I love you."

"Love you too—both of you."

He went back to the kitchen. Kate had the infantile urge to stamp her foot. *How can you love her? You don't even know her. Maybe she's an evil little demon. Maybe she's a two-headed monster.*

She picked up the picture again. The yearning on the man's face filled her with kindred feeling. A sharp kick at her navel made her gasp. She barely resisted the urge to take her thumb and give it a poke right back.

SHE LAY AWAKE, LOWER SPINE ACHING DULLY, THINKING ABOUT WAKING SHAWN. He would have rubbed her back until sunrise, anything to keep the incubator running happily. But he had work in the morning.

A warm night, the window was open. There were two bedrooms on this small, upper half-story, separated by a short hallway and a bathroom. Shawn had already painted the other room pink and white, purchased



a good crib and hung a musical mobile of geometric shapes in bold primary colors, recommended to penetrate the blur of infant eyesight and stimulate the wee brain.

Due in three weeks, Kate despised the mountainous rise of her stomach and longed for the end. At the same time she feared the event like an impending plague. Where were the expected maternal emotions? She couldn't dredge up a modicum of love for this creature that kicked at her insides like a demented little goat.

"Bronwin," she whispered, trying it out. "Bronwin Mercer."

When they'd been told it was a girl at the ultrasound, Kate had suggested Lily. Shawn wanted Bronwin. She hadn't argued. It was only fair. He was the one jumping for joy, like he'd been waiting for fatherhood since ninth grade.

Before this abrupt trip into marriage and imminent parenthood, they had been involved for fourteen months. Kate madly in love, ready to have his name tattooed across her chest, Shawn congenial but remote, unwilling to talk about commitment.

She turned her head and gazed at him. Shadows streamed around the perfect planes of his face. The pregnancy had been an accident—who could have predicted he'd react like this? She had almost taken care of it without telling him. Sometimes she still wished she had. A chill slipped over her. What would it do to her to see him release the full throttle of his love on a gurgling mound of fat?

She heard something, tilted her head and listened. A woman crying. She gripped Shawn's shoulder and he sat up like a surprised vampire. "It's time?"

"No—listen! It's Sarah Anderson!"

"Jesus, Kate." But he held himself still. He heard it all right. His chin jutted and he crawled out of bed.

They crept through the upstairs, Shawn in the lead, scanning the area ahead as if searching out some prankster. Kate trailed, expecting around every corner to see the luminous specter of a woman bent over weeping.

Downstairs, they flicked on lights as they went. No effect on the ghost; it just kept on crying. The sound had a hollow, otherworldly echoing. Eternal grief, Kate thought.

Shawn headed down the basement. At the drainpipe by the laundry tub the grim set of his face dissolved. "It's coming from the pipes, just like I thought."

She squatted and bent as much as possible over her girth to listen. "I don't think so. It was stronger upstairs."

"It's the pipes. That explains the echoing effect."

Kate stood up. "Sarah!" She called out on impulse. "Sarah Anderson! Is that you?"

Shawn frowned. "Okay, that's enough. I'm going back to bed, and so are you."

RICHARD KERNS HAD TALKED ABOUT THE CRYING. NO PATTERN. NOTHING FOR months, and then he'd hear it every night for a week. Once he had come home in the afternoon to a weeping that was nothing short of hysterical.

Then there were the cooking smells, quite pleasant, Kerns reported, filling the house when he wasn't cooking a thing. On numerous occasions he had found things moved, but just slightly out of place, as if someone had been looking around curiously but considerately.

But in all his time in residence there had only been one actual appearance. Kerns had been in bed—here he coughed and smiled tightly—with a friend. It was early evening and though the room was dim, there was enough light to see. They heard a gasp, and Kerns looked up to see a man he recognized as Jake Anderson hovering at the foot of the bed. On the face of the ghost, Kerns said, was a mixture of horror and disgust. The apparition had backed away, as if shocked and frightened to have come across the living, and vanished into the shadows of the hallway.

"A homophobic ghost," Kerns declared. "I guess we gave him quite a scare."

Kate had laughed while Shawn rippled his forehead for the counterpoint.

"More likely a browsing burglar who was surprised to find two adult males at home, and made a light-footed getaway."

THE CRYING STOPPED ABRUPTLY WHEN THEY WERE HALFWAY UP THE BASEMENT stairs.

Back in bed, Kate spoke wistfully. "Behind every haunting, there's a story and a reason. Do you think Sarah cries because she wanted a baby?"

"Kate, it's the pipes. Anderson built the house himself, and he screwed things up, connected where he shouldn't have. There's no way of knowing exactly what he did without ripping up the ground, but the noise is coming from another house. When the pipes are full, of water or sewage or whatever, the sound is blocked. Tonight, they happened to be clear at the same time as some woman in the vicinity was having a crying fit. No doubt the same poor, depressed individual Kerns had been hearing for years."

Kate considered Jake Anderson's narrow, intelligent face. "He was a



civil engineer. This is a good, well-built house. Everybody says so.”

“Sure, it’s a solid little house, but engineer doesn’t mean plumber. Anybody can build a house. The guy was no genius. He worked for the city all his life.”

Richard Kerns had not considered the inability to have a child sufficient cause for return from the other side. Sarah didn’t kill herself or anything, he’d said, when Kate had suggested it. She lived a fairly long time. She must have gotten over it.

“Didn’t everybody want children back then?” Kate said now. “Why didn’t they adopt?”

Shawn sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Didn’t you grill the woman across the street?”

“She wasn’t very open. I got the feeling they were friends. I should never have told her I was writing something.”

Alma Cleary, out pruning rose bushes in a big straw hat, had been guarded about the Andersons, but eager to talk about her own dead husband, five children, and dozen grandchildren scattered across the country. She had looked Kate’s stomach over with a practiced eye and announced it was a girl. Isn’t that uncanny! Kate had said, and listened to a slew of boring advice about diapering and feeding, but about the Andersons, she could not extract a useful thing.

“It’s not like her husband would have been against adoption. He loved her so much, he would have agreed to anything.”

“How you get this big story from one old picture is beyond me.” He set one hand on her stomach. “I want you to calm down about this ghost business. Nothing’s happened that doesn’t have an explanation. Now, do you think I could get a wink or two before the alarm goes off?”

She listened to the rhythm of his breathing drift into sleep. Beneath the pale sheet, the hump rose up before her. She stared at it with guilt. Poor Sarah had wanted a child with such fever that twenty years after death she was still crying. And here was Kate, all of twenty-four, with a full womb and a closed heart.

NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED HER FOR LABOR, FOR THE PAIN THAT BROKE RIGHT through a mere epidural, for the sensation of being ripped in half for twenty hours straight. They finally performed an emergency C-section, Kate at that point not entirely conscious.

She surfaced to Shawn standing over her. “She’s beautiful! Eight pounds, three ounces. Perfect! It was tense for a while there, but everything turned out fine.”

“I’m not fine. I’m hurt bad. I need something strong.”

"I'll find a nurse."

She strained to reach the cup on the bedside table. Her tongue felt swollen, lips coated with slime. Pain hung over her lower half like a throbbing thunderhead. Just as she managed to grab the cup, bring the bent straw to her lips, and suck down a few inches of warm water, a nurse came in like a gust of wind.

"How are you doing, love?"

"I need a shot."

The nurse smiled and cranked up the bed, bending Kate at the waist, making her moan. "There, there. You're fine. All ready now? Here we are! Here's Jeanette with your new girl!"

Another nurse pushed in a domed contraption on wheels.

"No! I need a shot. I'm not ready. Where's my husband?"

"Just remember what you learned in class." The gown was whipped down. A pink bundle came at her like a torpedo.

"Wait! No, please!"

"Isn't she a beauty? Now hold onto her. You've got to use both hands. A little nervous, are we? One arm supports the head. The other across like this. I suppose that'll do. Try to relax. Now move her mouth across like this. What a nervous new mom we've got here! We'll do it this time. There, she's taking it. Oh, look at that Jeanette, an easy one."

"Oh God," Kate whispered.

"No need to hold your breath. Breathe." She moved her hands like a conductor. Kate rounded her lips and drew in air.

Arms like wood, she peered down, took in the purple-pink profile, the fat cheek pumping, a tiny, dimpled fist pressed into the pale curve of her breast. She stared at this creature working to drain her. A strange, demanding sensation, not exactly pleasant. Yet there was something, some nebulous promise on the horizon.

She adjusted her arms and tilted her head to get a better look. So here she was, the little drop-kicker. Well, she wasn't half-bad. Cute, actually.

By the time Shawn returned, the nurses had left. "Isn't she something?"

"Yes."

"Our little Bronwin."

She cleared her throat. "Lily."

Shawn winced. "Calling girls after flowers is so common. I thought we agreed—"

"She's got your last name. I get to pick her first. I want Lily."

ELEVEN DAYS LATER, WHILE KATE NAPPED AND SHAWN TRIMMED THE HEDGES AT THE back of the yard, Lily was taken from her crib in the pink and white room.



The police believed the intruder had entered through the back door, unlocked with Shawn out in the yard. Aided by the racket of the electric hedge-trimmers, the kidnapper had simply gone upstairs, picked up the baby, and left by the same route. It had happened very quickly, while Kate slept in the next room. But the police believed the perpetrator had known there was a baby in the house, and had gone in prepared to take it.

Prints were lifted from the railing of the crib, the staircase, and several other areas in the house. No matches turned up. All reports of people and vehicles in the area that day had been investigated, and though nothing had come of it yet, the police were confident new leads would emerge.

As time went on they were less confident. In every part of the world, children go missing. But of course they don't just vanish—someone takes them. In the majority of cases, a parent or relative, but in a very small percentage, including the disappearance of Lily Bronwin Mercer, a stranger.

After a while Kate stopped calling the detective in charge of the case every day, and Shawn went back to work, the kids abnormally quiet and cooperative, tears from some at the mere sight of his haggard face. At home he was clingy and guilt-stricken.

"It's not your fault," Kate said, again and again.

But she was tired of comforting Shawn, weary with the effort of working not to hate him. Absurd to cast blame, she might as well blame herself, asleep in the next room while her angel was stolen. The only one at fault was the one who had taken her. But she was relieved when Shawn returned to work, and she was left alone with her grief.

Though the days stretched out torturously. She ate too little and slept too much. She got up late and wandered around listlessly, turned on the TV, flicked it off again. So many babies on TV.

One afternoon she came out of a doze and smelled meat sizzling, garlic, oregano. No one in the kitchen. In the basement she knelt at the drain, recalling Shawn's theory of accidental connections. But it wasn't coming from there.

Grateful for the distraction, she ferreted around. She hadn't thought about the ghosts since Lily's birth. The smell was stronger on the main floor. Onions and green peppers added in, her nose said.

Then the crying started. Kate stilled and listened. But it wasn't a woman crying this time. It was a baby. It was Lily.

She stumbled around, bumping into furniture and corners. She climbed the stairs, the sound intensifying. She rushed into the pink room, bent over the empty crib, and found the sound weaker.

"Lily!" She started to scream. "Lily! Where are you?"

On the staircase where it was strongest, she pressed against the wall, could hear her baby crying, not as if trapped on the other side, but at the other end of a long tunnel.

Then it stopped. The house went silent. Kate collapsed on the stairs, panting. Lily's cry cut off as if a door had been shut. The smell of the food was fading.

It should be seen as hopeful, the police had pointed out, that the perpetrator had no criminal record. More probable that it had been someone desperate for a baby; usually, in such cases, a woman. But the prints, the experts agreed, were more likely those of a big man. A man who loved a woman, Kate thought, and gasped.

She ran outside, darted across the road, pounded until the door opened and Alma Cleary stared back.

"Why didn't the Andersons adopt? Please, tell me, Alma. I'm not writing anything anymore. I swear I'm not."

The bony shoulders shifted. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. But it was never fair. The trouble started when Sarah kept miscarrying. After she'd been in the asylum, well, they never used to consider a person reliable after that." Her brows lifted and she smiled. "But then they were blessed. Ah yes, better late than never. I'll never forget the morning she came over to show me. Oh, the face of joy!"

"What?" Kate swallowed. "But Sarah never had a baby. They never had any children."

Alma looked at her strangely. "Why, yes they did. A girl." She frowned. "Died in a car accident when she was in college. Didn't seem fair after all they'd been through. But life isn't always fair, is it? I don't have to tell you that. Come in for a while, Kate. I'll make some tea. You've never left my prayers. Any word about Lily?"

Kate lurched off the porch, left Alma staring after her. Back home, she called the school, and told the secretary it was an emergency.

"Listen, you were right. It's never been ghosts in this house. There is a connection between two houses. Only it's the same house, this one, in the past and the present. A shunt, or a tunnel, or something. Jake Anderson knows how to come through. He came through and took Lily. They've got Lily, Shawn."

A moment of stricken silence, then he spoke slowly. "Kate, honey, I'm going to come home. First I'll call Doctor Finch, and see if he can get you in—"

"It's already happened! The past has been changed. Alma said the Andersons couldn't adopt because Sarah had been in a mental institution. Then she said that later they did have a baby, a girl! Our daughter!



Jake took Lily and they pretended she was theirs!”

“But they did have a daughter. Come on, honey, you knew that. Kerns told us. He thought the girl’s death in the car accident was the reason for the haunting.”

She doubled over as her memory forked, and she saw it too, Kerns telling them about the daughter dying.

“You’ve got another memory, Shawn. Try to get to it. One that starts with Kerns telling us they didn’t have any children.”

“Listen to yourself. We’ve got to get out of that house. You know I love you, going through this nightmare has bonded us. But we have got to get on with our—”

She hung up. Upstairs she dumped the hatbox on the bed and snatched up the picture.

Sarah Anderson was no longer looking into the camera. Her cheeks curved into a smile, eyes cast down, directed at the bundle in her arms, white blanket trailing. Jake Anderson, in the same dark suit, now stared straight into the camera, face set and defiant. Kate read this expression the way she had the one before. *You’re young and healthy. Have another one. We needed this one more.*

Her hand trembled. Anderson’s face flickered like a dying bulb. In her head the pieces fell into place along with a strange calm.

No genius, Shawn had speculated, and he was probably right. It couldn’t have been deliberate. Kate thought it must have been an accident in two parts. First the building, then the first time he’d stumbled upon it, and went through. She imagined his terror and confusion, his massive relief when he found his way back to his own time.

On the staircase Kate knelt, running hands over the plaster. It would not be as simple as a panel, or a trap door, or a tunnel on the other side of a wall. It might be more like a fold in the atmosphere, a curve in space, or some construction she could not yet envision. But it didn’t matter—eventually she would find it.

When Shawn came home, she would explain that a spell had come over her, but had passed. She was fine now. No more craziness, and certainly no need to talk about moving. In fact, suddenly she was feeling much better.

Kate considered the gun she would buy, and learn how to use. Something from the 1940s. When she was done there would be a third and final fork in the road coming in from the past, where the only Andersons with access to this house and time would indeed be ghosts, with good cause for a haunting. ❁

*The knowledge that Aruna was alive  
out there but as good as dead to me  
here suffocated me like swallowed  
sand...*

# Chasing Goodbye

Steven Mills

*I OPEN MY EYES TO THE BLUNT DARKNESS OF THE INSIDE OF THE mask. The dark unbalances me, as it has for a year now, with its full and abrupt cue to the memory of tape over my eyes, over my mouth, pinching. I have to remind myself to breathe to keep from panicking. I lick at the tape, as if to loosen it; my arms are taped to the back of a chair and my legs to the chair legs. This memory is a toxin in my blood.*

*“Ms. Hunter, can you hear me?”*

*I startle into the present, the radiating warmth of the stasis-gel cupping my naked body. My skin, still sensitive from the hair removal, stings with the heat.*

*“Yes,” I say, my voice hollow on the mask’s com, “yes, I can hear you.”*

*Scattered whispers and tense bursts of laughter rise over the dead hum of the machinery. A child cries and my heart dry-heaves.*

ARUNA SAT AT HER TOY TABLE IN THE KITCHEN WHILE I PEELED ORANGES AND SLICED a nut loaf for our breakfast. I loved our early mornings together, which always included a long snuggle while I read her a story. Then I’d walk



her to the dayschool in my section's compound and kiss her goodbye. I'd meet my friend, Holly, in the poly-dome park, with its amazing view of Eddie Crater sweeping down and away from the city. We'd grab a coffee there and walk the twenty minutes to the agriculture lab where we worked.

Just after 0600 someone buzzed the door. I checked the monitor on the kitchen counter. It was Adrian, a big wrapped present under one arm.

I keyed the com. "What do you want?" I said to him.

"I know it's early, Ria, but can you let me in? I brought—"

Aruna jumped up from her table. "Daddy!" she called out, running around the counter. "Daddy! Daddy!" I lifted her up to see the monitor.

"Is that my little Apricot?" Adrian said, grin cracking wide on his face. He waved at the camera, at Aruna. "I brought you a present, sweetheart! For your birthday! You're going to be three years old, honey! Such a big girl!"

"Oh, Daddy, a present!" She clapped her little hands.

Then Adrian's mouth tightened. "I know her birthday's a month away, Ria," he said, "but I'm going up to Elysium to do a three-month relief shift at the hospital there. They're short on trauma nurses."

I hesitated, deciding, then shrugged. "Okay." He wasn't supposed to show up at the apartment except to pick up Aruna for his two-weekends-a-month, but I knew that he'd won the Elysium bid through Holly's partner, Ellen, who had bid on the same job, so he was being honest, at least about that.

I set Aruna down and she ran to the door. "Hurry!" she said to me, swinging her arm around and around.

I keyed the lock and Adrian stepped into the living room, sweeping Aruna up in one arm and hugging her as she squealed.

He crouched and set the big present on the floor, then he slipped his hand over her nose and mouth. She went limp in his arm. My heart staggered. I grabbed at her, but all in one motion he stood and punched me in the chest, knocking me backward. Two men in coveralls shoved through the doorway behind him. I lunged for the security alarm, but one man wrenched my arm up behind my back while the other banged a spray-needle into my shoulder.

*"Ms. HUNTER, WE NEED YOU TO RELAX, TO JUST FLOAT ON THE GEL UNTIL WE GET THESE limb scaffolds clamped."*

*I breathe to soften my muscles.*

*"There... that's better."*

*It always comes back in the dark, so I sleep with the lights on. I dread the thought of stasis-sleep. They say we will dream, and this terrifies me.*

I WOKE, SUFFOCATING, IN THE DARK. I TRIED TO THROW OPEN MY MOUTH FOR AIR BUT it was taped shut. The chair I was taped to rocked and I almost went over. Fighting panic, I breathed through my nose, tried to calm myself. Vomit rose in my throat but I choked it down. Then I remembered Aruna, flaccid in Adrian's arms, and started screaming through the tape.

After some time I heard a phone buzz. My computer took the call and I thought: thank God, they simply left me at home. It's the dayschool, asking after Aruna, but they'll check my work com next.

The phone again. Holly, calling from work, wondering where I am, the dayschool called... I willed her to send someone to check on me. I yelled for help again through the tape, my muffled voice hoarse.

Aruna! I jerked my arms against the tape, over and over. Then I wriggled the chair back and forth toward the computer console on the desk, thinking I could activate the alarm from there, maybe bang it with my head, bring compound security to my door in minutes. The chair tilted. Automatically, I tried to fling my arms out for balance, wrench my body in the opposite direction, but it didn't help. Over I went, my cheek slamming against the edge of the desk, surprise and pain arcing through my head.

I came to, my cheekbone throbbing. I was on my side on the floor, pain stabbing across my back and down to my right elbow, which was pinned under the edge of the chair. My right hand felt wooden, cold; the fingers of my left hand tingled. I began to cry.

The door sounded. I yelled through the tape, frantic. Then I heard the door unlock. Sweet, dear Holly must have sent security to look for me.

THE EDDIE POLICE BEGAN A SEARCH.

Holly left work, walked me home from the police station. Made us tea.

"Why did I let him in?"

"You've let him in before," Holly said, "and he hasn't caused any trouble since you were granted custody. He's been nothing but the perfect ex."

Numbness spread. "But he *said* he'd take her. That's why I sued for sole custody with *no* visitation." I wiped my nose, then blew it. I got custody, but he got visitation. "He said that he didn't care what the court decided, that he wouldn't stand around while I cut him out of Aruna's life."

"He cut himself out, not you," she said, shaking her head, "by bringing



her back late all those times before the court case, scaring you to death, taking her up to Pathfinder City without telling you.” She sipped her tea. “Have you called your folks?”

I wiped my nose again. “Just my mom. I tried to get my dad, but he’s surveying somewhere in the northeastern quadrant. His company will have him call as soon as they track him down.”

My computer chimed. I started, sloshing tea onto the table. Holly fingered the pad on the wall behind her and the monitor on the desk spun to face us.

Detective Forrest smiled across the room at me. “Hello, Ms. Hunter,” he said, then his smile widened. “We found her! They’re on a flight to Earth. Witnesses confirm a white male and a girl-child matching their graphics boarding the flight at 0705.”

My stomach tightened. “He’s taking her to his parents in Euro. They have money; they know people. I’ll never find her there!” Panic swelled in the back of my throat. Holly took my hand in both of hers, stroked my fingers. I started shaking. “The flight to Earth is three months long—”

“No, Ms. Hunter, we can intercept the ship,” Forrest said. “A patrol boat is en route, and so we should have them in custody sometime this evening.” He smiled again. “I’ll keep you posted.”

MY MOTHER ARRIVED FROM PATHFINDER CITY, THE QUADRANT CAPITAL, WHERE SHE works as an accountant for the Mars Group. Red-faced and still furious, she threw her arms around me. “That goddamn bastard,” she said, her voice like stone on stone. “I hope they toss him out the bloody airlock.”

She hugged Holly, then stacked little containers on the kitchen table. I stared at them, then realized they were food, take-out. Nausea balled up in me. I turned and dropped onto the couch.

Mom was on the phone already with her office, then with her husband, Ashley-Bryce, and some lawyer friend connected with the Mars Group who does criminal law. Prosecution.

Holly sat beside me on the couch, her hand on my arm. We’ve known each other a long time, Holly and me. High school in Pathfinder, then tech school, then we both got the same assignment with the ag-lab here in Eddie. Shared an apartment in the compound until she met Ellen and I fell in love with Adrian.

“I’m going to call El again, Ria,” Holly said. “Get her to pick up the kids and do supper. Let her know what’s happening. And I’ll clear your calendar for the rest of the week, get you booked off work.”

Work. I nodded. I hugged her, unable to speak, sobs rising in my chest.

"I'll use the phone in your room," she said, and as she stood, she blew me a kiss.

Mom clicked her phone shut, stomped across my small living room, her boots loud on the apartment floor—she never could just *walk* anywhere—and perched on the edge of the couch beside me. Mom is very immediate. When she's with you, you are the most important person to her. It's quite a gift. My dad both loves and hates that about her. Makes fighting with her difficult because she's so focused. Not that my parents fought much, but when they did, it was catastrophic. After twelve years, they separated. My dad says the bad times eventually overshadowed the good. I understand that.

"How are you doing, Pickle?" she said.

I didn't laugh as I usually would when she calls me by my baby name. I cried instead, suddenly and with renewed ferocity, thinking of Aruna's baby name, Apricot, and her happy face seeing her daddy with a present under his arm. "Lousy," I said. "One second I'm relieved they found her, then the next I'm terrified it's not her at all on that flight." I sucked in a breath. "It's as if she died, Mom. I feel like I'll never see her again and it's all my fault." I was crying so hard I could barely talk. "I opened the door. I let him in. I believed him!"

She touched my face, her bracelets jangling on her arm.

MY DAD ARRIVED, A LITTLE BREATHELESS FROM THE STAIRS UP TO MY FOURTH-FLOOR apartment—he never takes the lift, he's always trying to work off some extra weight only he can see.

He brought food with him, like mom, only his gifts were oranges and mangos and bananas, the locally grown successes of our ag-labs and greenhouses, where Holly and I work as gene manipulators.

It hurt to look at my dad. It was as if you could see right through his skin to the rawness, the emotional abrading, underneath. He has been part of Aruna's life in a way he was never part of mine. I've been glad of that.

The news that the police boat intercepted the ship to Earth came only minutes after dad arrived. We cheered, hugged each other. My mom cried—the only other time I'd seen her cry was the moment she first held Aruna. I danced across the living room with Holly, grinning and crying and feeling like my chest was going to burst apart with relief.

*QUIET YELLOW LIGHT GLOWS INSIDE THE MASK, ERADICATING THE DARK, AS THE TINY interior monitor comes online. I see myself in the open stasis tube, floating on gel, flanked by suited aides fussing with the awkward limb scaffolds.*



*One of the aides rests the bio-pack on my chest while two others hook up the leads and lines. The tube cover descends partway and the bio-pack is lifted and fastened up inside the cover. They run a systems check.*

*"We're going to close the stasis tube now, Ms. Hunter."*

*I watch myself disappear under the lid. My name flashes across the lid's oblong readout, followed by my bio-levels and the date and time of internment.*

SOMEONE TOUCHED MY SHOULDER, SHAKING ME GENTLY. DAD STOOD ABOVE ME, DARK wedges under his eyes. He'd slept on the sofa bed in the living room— Mom had Aruna's bed. Holly had gone home just after midnight.

He crouched at the side of the bed. "The detective is on the monitor," he said, but his face told me it wasn't good news.

I threw myself out of bed, ran to the living room in my pajamas, headache pounding.

Forrest's eyes were dark, his mouth turned down at the sides. "The man and the girl on the ship to Earth were decoys," he said. "Adrian hired them, paid them a lot of money—"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Let me see them! I can tell you if it's my Aruna!" Dad stood beside me. Suddenly Mom was there in her bathrobe. I felt like I was being buried in a sandslide. "No! It's got to be her!" I could hardly breathe.

Forrest shook his head slowly. "It's confirmed: DNA scans; a confession." He shrugged. Opened his mouth, then closed it again. Looked at me. "I'm sorry, Ria. I'll be by later today." He keyed off.

"Shit," Mom said.

"That bastard!" I shouted, my breath coming in chunks. "That god-damn bastard! I can't believe I let him in!"

MISSING ARUNA BURNED THROUGH ME LIKE INHALED FIRE. I'D LIE AWAKE IMAGINING her with Adrian, tucked away in some featureless apartment in a city up in the northeast quadrant or even in an underground compound on the Moon. They'd be on a "holiday" or maybe he'd be telling her that they were going to visit Poppa and Nana soon, and I'd wonder what he was telling her about where I was, why I wasn't there.

I'd see her in a bed that wasn't hers and I'd think: would Adrian know that she needs a drink by her bedside at night—in her blue elephant cup, which he didn't take? He won't know how to brush her hair so it won't snag and pull, or how to rub her back at night just before she falls asleep. What if she cries for me and because I don't come she thinks I don't love her anymore?

I started taking sleep medication but it didn't help much. Even if I got

to sleep, I'd have this recurring nightmare.

When I was eight years old, our school went on a camping trip to the Kasei Valley. A girl I never knew was killed that year a week or so after our camping trip—somehow she fell over a safety railing. I used to daydream that I was there when she fell and would save her in the nick of time by grabbing her arm or the belt of her micro-suit.

Now I dreamed that as I grab at her, instead of saving her, I accidentally knock her over the cliff and she begins to fall in slow motion, as if on one of the moons. And suddenly I realize that she wasn't in any danger at all, that it was just my imagination, and now I've stupidly knocked her over the cliff. I'm horrified at what I've done: I'm the reason she's going to die! I notice then that we *are* on a tiny moon, and the force I'd used trying to grab her carries *me* over the cliff, too. Below me the girl falls down and around to the other side of the moon. I twist to watch as she lands on her feet on the edge of the cliff I've just fallen over. She waves at me, smiling, and I fall further and further out into space, and she gets smaller and smaller until she looks like a little girl. Like Aruna, left behind on a tiny moon, waving at me.

I WRENCHED THE DOOR OPEN. FORREST, DRESSED IN SMART BLACK PANTS AND A short jacket, ducked into my apartment.

"Coffee?" Mom said.

He shook his head, then sat at the kitchen table. I sat opposite him, between Holly and my dad, staring at the small flat computer he slid onto the table: my daughter's file. It had been eight days since her kidnapping.

I choked out the words: "This can't be good news. If you had found her, you'd have said so already."

"It's not good news, Ria." He brushed the screen of the computer file with a finger. "We found her, but she's on a starship." He licked his lips. "I'm so sorry."

"Well, can't you just go get her?" I said, angry, but then my mouth went dry. "Oh God, where?"

"It's a colonist flight to C-4, in the Conrad system." He pointed at the graphic on the computer, but I couldn't see it through the tears.

"How far away?" my mother asked, her voice small.

"Seventy-five standard years. It's the longest stasis-sleep trip we make." He took a breath. "They've accelerated beyond Jupiter's orbit. They're gone."

I could hardly breathe.

My dad: "Are you sure? Could this just be another decoy?"



Forrest shook his head, rubbed his nose with his thumb. “We interviewed the people who oversaw Adrian’s application. DNA scan results, graphics taken during stasis-sleep preparations, witnesses.” He ducked his head a little. “It took Adrian almost a year to put this together. They’re under assumed names, with false identification chips, but the DNA matches are what clinch it. He took your daughter to the initial colony application interviews in Pathfinder City fourteen months ago. We’ve seen the graphics. He even provided a death certificate for a wife—who was actually a patient he attended in the Eddie Trauma Center who died as a result of a workplace accident.”

Seventy-five years, I thought, the words as stark and clear as the tiny moons in the sky above Mars. I could hardly get air. Static smudged the edges of my vision. I surged to my feet, clutching my chest, gasping.

Mom was talking to me: “—take another breath. Slowly. Good. It’s okay, Ria, just breathe. You’re having a panic attack. Take nice, slow breaths.”

I tried to breathe slowly, but I thought I was going to die, that I was having a heart attack. And why not die? I thought. She’s gone.

Mom rubbed my back, just like when I was a little girl, just like I rub Aruna’s back when she’s too wired to sleep...

“Just breathe. That’s it.”

I eased into the chair, numb, stunned, my tingling fingers over my mouth. My breath came back in heaving gulps.

“Is there any way to intercept the ship?” Mom asked.

“I’m sorry,” Forrest said. “The ship is autopiloted at this stage. Everyone is in stasis-sleep.” He gave a little shrug. “There’s been no success in direct communication with C-4, which is almost thirty light years away—it’s just too far. We are going to send a message indirectly, from colony to colony, but my sources estimate it won’t be received for almost a year. Of course, the ship won’t arrive for seventy-four more years—”

I went over to the kitchen sink, hit the cold water button, splashed my face again and again, breathing in the icy, damp air the tap released. This can’t be happening, I told myself, this just can’t be happening. I jammed my knuckles against my temples.

“Ria?” It was Holly, touching my shoulder. I looked up: her face had crumpled in on itself. I buried my face in her shoulder, scrunching my eyes tight.

Forrest was still talking. “We’re preparing a file to send with the next ship to C-4, which isn’t scheduled to leave for another year. The file delineates Adrian’s crime and charges the authorities there with the responsibility of investigating him. That’s about all we can do, I’m afraid.”

"I can't take this," I whispered into Holly's shoulder. She hugged me tighter. "Aruna's gone."

I SAW LYDIA GILL—THE POLICE SERVICES' COUNSELOR—THREE TIMES A WEEK AND struggled to put some normalcy into my life: I returned to work; sent my mom and dad home to their own lives and jobs; resumed dance lessons; went back to the weekly board meetings for the compound.

My mom suggested I lease out my apartment and move in with her and Ashley-Bryce in Pathfinder City. Just for a while, she said, until I got back on my feet. I told her that I didn't want to leave my apartment—it was Aruna's only home. And I didn't want to leave my life here, my friends, my job. What would I do all day if I didn't go to work? I said to her.

As Aruna's birthday crept closer, the nightmares got worse. But now when I dreamt of grabbing at the girl to save her, I tried to stop myself. I tried to keep my arms at my sides, force them down with sheer muscle and willpower, because I knew that when I grabbed at her, I would accidentally knock her over the cliff and then I would fall after her. It never worked, though. I would wake staring at the little girl on the moon waving at me, who is now sometimes Aruna and sometimes not.

I hardly slept: I'd curl up in her tiny bed, smelling her on the sheets that I put back when my mother left. My skin ached with the memory of her face pressed against my arm, her breath hot on my neck. The knowledge that Aruna was alive out there on that starship but as good as dead to me here on Mars suffocated me like swallowed sand.

HOLLY AND ELLEN AND LYDIA, MY COUNSELOR, THREW A BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR Aruna. I cried: the cake, candles; her picture sitting on her little table in the kitchen; balloons.

My dad came, and Mom and Ashley-Bryce. Holly and Ellen's kids. Detective Forrest, with his wife and their baby boy. Aruna's dayschool teacher. We wore hats and sang Happy Birthday. Ate cake and chocolate ice cream.

At the next counseling session, Lydia said celebrations like that allow grieving people to say goodbye in ways they may not be able to articulate.

How can I say goodbye to Aruna? I said, angry. She's still alive! She's still going to turn four, and then five, then fifteen and twenty-five... but I'll be long dead by then.

HOLLY SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON THE FLOOR IN MY LIVING ROOM. IT WAS TWO WEEKS after the birthday party. She was helping me organize the compound's monthly volunteer work bee: it was my turn in the rotation of board



members. Holly had talked me into not turning down my rotation. She said she'd help. Lydia, of course, thought it was a good idea.

"I just can't let her go," I said to Holly, who sipped her coffee and listened while we took a break.

I was standing in the doorway to Aruna's room, looking in at the bright walls, her little bed, the toy box Adrian bought her, the glider-chair from my dad. I shook my head at myself, wondered when I would finally be able to let go...

A string of half-formed thoughts twisted together: "I'm going to go after her," I said, the words simply falling out of my mouth.

Holly frowned at me over her mug. "You're going to go after her?"

I nodded slowly, my heart rattling. "I'll get on the C-4 colony ship Forrest is sending Aruna's file on. I'll go there, find her, and bring her home. Even if I have to kidnap her back."

Holly rested her mug on the living room floor, pulled her knees up and hugged them. "You know what that would mean, don't you?" she said quietly. "Going on a starship?"

I looked at her, sudden loss constricting my chest. I nodded once, unable to speak, but feeling for the first time in months that I had some hope.

"And what if," Holly continued, "the police are wrong, like before, and Adrian and Aruna aren't on that starship?"

#### I DIDN'T DO WELL AT THE INITIAL COLONY INTERVIEW.

Coffee in hand, I sat in the city park—which was always empty this early in the morning—staring through the sand-scratched polydome at the dusty crater floor that reaches 90 kilometers north and east from Eddie proper. A small storm scoured southward, toward us. I tilted my head back, looked up at the stars, knowing—believing—that my Aruna was out there somewhere.

The interviewers were uncomfortable with my reason for wanting to travel to the colony on C-4—even though I omitted the part about just turning around and bringing Aruna right back to Mars. They were looking, they said, for more interest in, and, just as importantly, commitment to the goals and on-going work of the colony itself. If my application were to be accepted, the main conditions of acceptance would be a fitness exam and a training upgrade to a Level 3 Agricultural Technician, so that I'd have more employable potential—in the future. A lot of things can change in the seventy-five years it'll take to make the journey to C-4, advances in technology and research, new methodologies. Indeed, whole paradigms of understanding can shift, and they wanted me to be as

prepared as possible to upgrade smoothly when I arrived on C-4.

I didn't care about these things, though. I wanted only Aruna. And I wanted to bring her back to Mars, to our home, even though after the 150-year round trip in stasis-sleep everyone we had known and loved would be dead and Mars itself would have changed so much that it might not even seem like home anymore.

I had thought of asking them to come with me: my mom, my dad, Holly and her family. But how could I? How could I ask any of them to leave behind everything they know and the people they love to start over? Just to be with Aruna and me. I didn't ask.

The hope I had felt two weeks prior, sitting on the floor with Holly in my living room, drained out of me, slipping down my body, through the park floor, down the foundation walls of the dome, and into the dirt and rock of Mars, where it coagulated, cementing me to this planet.

I drank up the familiar flood of self-pity.

What was I thinking? Fly to C-4, nab Aruna, who would be so happy and relieved to see me—or so I imagined, her round face brightening, “Mommy! Mommy! I missed you so much!”—and simply hop on the first starship back to Mars?

Let her go, I told myself. It's over: just say goodbye. Aruna is dead—at least to me—and I should be thankful for the three years I had her...

I drained the last of my coffee and stood, trying to staunch my growing despair. But then, underneath the mental cacophony, I heard something, a barely perceptible growl, which I imagined coming from deep within Mars, from the place where my hope had drained and died. It was the sound of rage, and it was coming like a new volcano, growing, gaining momentum as it pushed up through the rock, through the foundation, into my feet, up my legs, my hips, my stomach, through my chest, then blew out my mouth. I cried and screamed until there was nothing left inside me.

I buried my face in my hands, crumpled onto the bench. I raised my head, opened my eyes to the storm swirling indifferently across the sand.

I had to go. She *was* on that ship. And in that moment I decided to journey to C-4 as a colonist, carrying Detective Forrest's file so that I could take Aruna back from Adrian, and then make a life there on C-4 with her.

*I REQUEST AN EXTERIOR VIEW OF MARS ON MY MASK MONITOR AS HEATED GEL ONCE again pours through the tube ports. I can feel it climbing up over my exposed skin, slowly burying me. I concentrate on the monitor. Scattered high clouds today. Light*



*winds. The view is to the west, of the rust-colored hills that hide distant Pathfinder City from the starship port. In seventy-five years Mars will have a breathable atmosphere. Won't even look like my Mars anymore: vegetation softening the hard landscape, lakes stocked with fish cloned from Earth, a decent-sized ocean. Rain. I'd miss the dust storms and the omnipresent stars, the clarity of the volcanic peaks grabbing up at space.*

#

Holly swallowed another mouthful of beer, set her glass on the table. "You're my dearest friend, Ria, so I'm going to ask you this because you have to face it before you make any more plans." She leaned forward and propped her elbows on the table.

I leaned back in the kitchen chair, suddenly afraid. My resolution had been so strong since my decision to leave. I spun my wineglass in my hands.

"Is this the best thing for Aruna?" she said. "Is your going to C-4 and taking her back from Adrian, is this what's best for her, or just for you?"

I studied her face. "I don't know," I said, shaking my head a little. "I really don't know." I spun the wineglass again. "What I do know is that if I don't go, I don't think I could stand myself."

"And if she's not there?"

I shivered.

Holly stared at her beer. After a while she said, "I wanted to throw you a going-away party." I looked at her. "But I decided to make it a wake instead." She sighed and gave a little laugh. I started to cry, and then we were both laughing and crying.

Holly blew her nose, scrubbed at her eyes. "You have no idea how much I'm going to miss you, Ria Hunter."

HOLLY WAITED UNTIL I HAD COMPLETED THE LEVEL 3 AT UPGRADE AND MY acceptance as a colony member was confirmed before sending out the invitations to my wake.

How do you say goodbye to everyone and everything you've known and loved in your whole life? It's the end of living and the beginning of survival.

My mom. We spent a day talking. Like we always did when we had time together. We met at my favorite coffee shop in Eddie, indulged in pastries, went for a walk in the polydome park. Came back to the coffee shop for lunch, stayed until well after dinner. When it was time to leave, she put her hand on my mouth, shook her head. "I'll say goodbye to you on my deathbed," she said. Then she kissed me and hugged me, held me tight, kissed me again and walked away.

My dad. He still felt guilty for whatever hurt his and Mom's divorce had caused me, and for not being there as much as I had maybe wanted him to be. It's okay, Dad, I said, I forgave you years ago.

And Holly, my dearest Holly. I held her for a long time. All my hopes go with you, she said.

*I AM BURIED ALIVE IN STASIS-GEL. THE TUBE SLIDES INTO ITS CRADLE. THE CLAMPS LOCK. On my monitor the wind is blowing harder: red dust swirls, rises, rushes toward the low hills.*

*"Ms. Hunter, we will be initiating the first series of medications in one minute. We wish you a safe journey."*

*"Thank you," I say.*

*In my personal luggage is a copy of the police file for the authorities on C-4 who will oversee Aruna's return to my custody and Adrian's indictment for kidnapping. But deep inside I nurse my darkest fear: that Adrian is still on Mars somewhere, holding tight to our little Aruna, watching me fall off the cliff into the future and out of their lives. I'm terrified that as the technicians finish laying me down to stasis-sleep, somehow I will know beyond any doubt that I have made the wrong choice, that I have indeed thrown myself out into space only to see Aruna standing behind me, waving, and getting smaller and smaller as I drift further away, until she is finally and irrevocably lost to me.*

*I thrust this thought from my mind. Instead I think: when I see Adrian, there will be no mercy. And this thought calms me. If, for some reason, the authorities on C-4 fail me, I will flush him out myself and do whatever I have to do to take back the life he's taken from me.*

*An aide asks me to begin counting down from one hundred.*

*I begin to count down.*

*Mars is gone. I have said my inadequate goodbyes. I tell myself: this isn't the end of living; rather, it's a new beginning. I must accept this, not just for Aruna's sake, but for my own. ❁*



## about our contributors

CAT ASHTON is a Creative Writing major at York University. She lives, writes, and consumes Ben & Jerry's in Toronto.

MICHAEL BISHOP is the author of nineteen novels and six collections of short fiction. Winner of two Nebulas (for his novelette *The Quickening* and for his novel *No Enemy But Time*), Michael is one of the finest writers in the field today.

SIOBHAN CARROLL is currently pursuing her MA/PhD in English Literature at the University of Indiana, Bloomington. Her short story "A Killer of Men" placed second in *On Spec's* short story contest, and her poem "Mrs. Wolf" was published in the Spring 2002 issue. She tries very hard to scribble stories in the small hours of the morning, and misses Canada a lot.

LAURIE CHANNER is a Toronto-based writer of fiction that ranges from comic to thought-provoking to downright unspeakable. She may be part pirate.

A.M. DELLAMONICA had the kind of action-packed childhood that most people dream of, featuring actual plane crashes and the occasional long car trip. Her fiction first appeared in print in 1986 and—

despite repeated washings—remains in circulation in a variety of locales. Her next anthology appearances will be in *Alternate Generals III* and *The Faery Reel*; a story, "Cooking Creole," is available now in *Mojo: Conjure Stories*. Three other works can be found anytime at *SCIFI.COM*, and her 2002 *Asimov's* piece, "A Slow Day at the Gallery," is in *The Year's Best SF #8*.

BOB EGGLETON was born in 1960, into the Space Age and the Age of *Kaiju Eiga* (Giant Japanese Monsters) and grew up on Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, comic books, famous monsters, *Gemini* and *Apollo* voyages, dinosaurs, *Star Trek* and *Godzilla*. At an early age (four) he learned the wonders of making pictures on a blackboard and decided at nine—after experiencing *2001: A Space Odyssey*—that this was what he wanted to do as a living.

After going to SF cons from the late '70s to through the '80s he was nominated for Hugo Awards many times, finally winning at Conadian in 1994, and went on to win six more after that with one for Best Related Book for his book *Greetings From Earth*. His most recent book, *Dragonhenge*, done with writer John Grant, was nominated for the same category.

Bob works in the film industry as well

working as a conceptual artist on *Star Trek: The Experience*, *Sphere* and *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*. He most recently worked as a concept artist on the upcoming Warner Bros animated film *The Ant Bully*. His connections to Canada are numerous with most of his dad's side (grandfather) of the family having come from the Halifax area many years ago.

STEVEN MILLS lives in Nelson, BC, where he works part-time as a paramedic. *Chasing Goodbye* is his fifth appearance in *On Spec*. He has also published stories in *The New Quarterly*, *TickleAce*, and *The Windsor Review*, and is currently at work on a near-future SF novel.

PATRICIA RUTALE lives in Guelph, Ontario. Her fiction has been published in *Storyteller*, *Spellbound*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, and in the *Best Of The Rest* anthology, 2001.

HARVEY WALKER says of his story: "I took inspiration from the few bits of their story of Boreas, Greek god of the North Wind, as they appear in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. I fabricated the rest, also adding a 'twist of lemon,' the supposition 'What if?' What if Boreas were to cross time and space, find root (Sorry!) in the boreal forest of northern Alberta? How would this god cope, as a human,

both with angst, a modicum of ennui and a hangover? The character of Boreas has had a compelling influence on the author. A fun-loving guy, a trickster like Loki, the character some days would take me by the throat and say 'Write this.' Who was I to argue? His Scandinavian counterpart, Njord, became one of the central characters in a recently completed novel, *Bananarchy*, my first. Presently, the manuscript is looking for a publishing home. It too is set in the boreal of northern Alberta and offers the reader a bit of western Canadian 'magic realism.'"

Mr. Walker lives in St Albert, Alberta, with his wife, Susan, and two black standard poodles. A second novel, set in southern Alberta is underway.

PETER WATTS is a fiction editor for *On Spec* and the author of the Rifiers Trilogy (*Starfish*, *Maelstrom*, and the forthcoming *Behemoth*, none of which, evidently, are science fiction after all). He actually has quite a bit of respect for Atwood's prose, if she would only take her head out of her ass.

JAMES WILSON lives with his wife and family in Portland, Oregon. When he's not writing, he spends as much time as he can in the San Juan Islands of Washington State and in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. ♣

## in upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by GARY ARCHAMBAULT, RANDY D. ASHBURN, ELIZABETH BEAR, E.L. CHEN, CAROLYN CLINK, PATRICIA DISCHNER, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, A.B. GOELMAN, MELISSA HARDY, TERRY HAYMAN, KARL JOHANSON, JAY LAKE, CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE, CHRISTIAN MCPHERSON, STEVE MOHN, JOSHUA PROWSE, PHILIP RAINES & HARVEY WELLES, RANDY SCHROEDER, WES SMIDERLE, CRAIG STRICKLAND, TOM SWEENEY, KAREN TRAVIS, and many more!



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