

on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



FALL 2004 \$5.95

#58 vol 16 no 3

www.onspec.ca

Lance **Bond** • Pauline **Clift** • Kevin **Cockle** • Valerie V. **Deacon** • Kristopher **Horton** • Peter **Hynes** • Jeffrey D. **Johnson** • Catherine **MacLeod** • Angelo **Niles** • Peter **Norman** • Hugh A. D. **Spencer** • cover art by Peter **Thorpe**

<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society		
<i>General Editor:</i>	Diane L. Walton		
<i>Art Director:</i>	Derryl Murphy		
<i>Poetry Editor:</i>	Barry Hammond		
<i>Production Editor:</i>	Lynette Bondarchuk		
<i>Fiction Editors:</i>	Susan MacGregor	Steve Mohn	Holly Phillips
	Diane L. Walton	Peter Watts	
<i>Publisher's Assistant:</i>	Danica LeBlanc		
<i>New Media:</i>	Elaine Chen		
<i>Cover Artist:</i>	Peter Thorpe		

On Spec is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of The Copper Pig Writers' Society, a registered non-profit society. Annual subscriptions are \$22.00 in Canada for individuals, and \$30.00 for institutions (price includes GST). GST# 123625295. Full subscription rates are on Page 2, and on our website, at: www.onspec.ca

Send all mail (letters, submissions, subscription requests or queries, art samples, advertising rate card, etc.) to *On Spec*, P.O. Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Phone (780) 413-0215, Fax (780) 413-1538. Email: onspec@onspec.ca. Please note: we do NOT read unsolicited emailed fiction, non-fiction or poetry submissions. Artwork and non-fiction pieces are commissioned only. See our website for contributors' guidelines, payment schedule and ordering information: www.onspec.ca

Copyright belongs to the author or artist by-lined, and no portion of this magazine may be reproduced without consent from the individual author or artist. *On Spec* is a licensee of Access Copyright.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Arts Development Branch through The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Department of Canadian Heritage; The Canada Council for the Arts; and Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development. Our special thanks goes out to Clear Lake Ltd. for its ongoing support, and to Jena Snyder for 16 years of dedication.

On Spec is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA), and is distributed in Canada by the CMPA. Printed in Edmonton, Canada, by Capital Colour Press. Postage paid at Edmonton AB, Canada.

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40063520, REGISTRATION NO. 08148
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:
ON SPEC: P.O. BOX 4727, EDMONTON, AB T6E 5G6
email: onspec@onspec.ca

on spec

fall 2004 vol 16 no 3 #58

fiction

A Surfeit of Rabbits	Pauline Clift	4
The Ravinini Box	Jeffrey D. Johnson	18
Pornzilla	Hugh A.D. Spencer	35
Bridget's Blessing	Peter Hynes	52
Violation	Lance Bond	63
Smart Card	Kristopher Horton	75
Conservation	Valerie V. Deacon	85
Maelstrom	Angelo Niles	100

poetry

Judgement	Catherine MacLeod	51
Pianogeist	Peter Norman	80

art gallery

Gallery Feature	Peter Thorpe	82
-----------------------	--------------------	----

nonfiction

Editorial: I think we're all

Bozos on this bus.....	Diane Walton	3
About our contributors		111

cover "Rocket #56" © Peter Thorpe



www.edmontonsmallpress.org



***Don't miss a single issue of on spec!
Subscribe now and save!!***

	Canada	USA	Overseas
1 year	\$22.00	\$22.00 US	\$27.00 US
2 years	\$36.00	\$36.00 US	\$48.00 US
3 years	\$48.00	\$48.00 US	\$62.00 US
Institutional (per year)	\$30.00	\$30.00 US	\$35.00 US

All prices include GST (Canada), shipping and handling!

Send check or money order to On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6 CANADA. To pay by VISA, include your VISA number, the expiry date, name as it is printed on the card, and your signature.

You can also email (onspec@onspec.ca), phone (780-413-0215) or fax (780-413-1538) your order. Please note we do not have a secure email account, so if paying by VISA, let us know in the email, and we will phone to verify.

Please indicate whether you wish your subscription to begin with the current issue or the next issue. Thanks!

I think we're all Bozos on this bus...

Diane Walton, General Editor

We're starting on a new journey here at *On Spec*. A journey without a travel companion I have grown to admire and treasure as one of my best friends. Fortunately, the friendship with Jena Snyder will continue for many years to come. But she has stepped off the *On Spec* bus, and we wish her well with her own career. And let me add that this past summer, Jena was quite radiant as the Mother of the Bride.

Jena's place as Production Editor has been taken by our former Editorial Assistant, Lynette Bondarchuk. Lynette comes to us with an abundance of skills in the design and graphics industry, and, as Artistic Director of the Edmonton Small Press Association, she is quite knowledgeable of our industry. I hope that our readers will welcome her to her new position.

It has, at times, been a difficult year for us at *On Spec*. The magazine industry seems to be taking a hit, with lowered sales and a decrease in subscribers. Our own numbers have dwindled, although every day, it seems that new readers discover us. Many times I am asked why more people don't know of *On Spec*, even in our home town. It's not for want of trying. Recently we ran an ad in a local paper, describing ourselves as "Edmonton's best-kept secret". We'd love to tell more people about us, but it takes money to advertise, and sadly, there's barely enough money to keep paying the writers and the artists, not to mention the increasing costs of production and distribution of a publication like ours. We are grateful for the support of government agencies like the Canada Council, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, and Canadian Heritage, but we depend on our faithful subscribers to spread the word—to buy gift subscriptions for their friends and relatives, and to take *On Spec* to SF conventions and other places where potential *On Spec* readers may gather. We're doing our best to bring fantastic new stories to you, but we still need your help to make it happen. If you know of a book shop that might carry *On Spec*, do let us know. And do write to us! Your letters of support and encouragement really help us to keep going. Thanks for your continued support! •

Gail glanced down at the bunnies hunched over their water bowl... She would have to get them out the front door before the dog came in.

A Surfeit of Rabbits

Pauline Clift

Gail kept the black nylon carryall on her lap during the bus ride from Montreal, sometimes peeking in to check on the two brown rabbits inside. She had stuffed them in there at the bus depot, along with The New York Times from her flight up, plus dry pet food and water in empty cream cheese containers, brought along in case of need. The smooth ride, dark interior of the bag, and perhaps her warm lap, combined to lull them to sleep. Now, she stood in jean shorts and spotless white t-shirt, a slight, pale young woman with short spikey hair bleached fashionably white, waiting at the bus stop for someone called Maggie. Gail had picked Maggie's inn off the internet for its views of mountains and the blurb saying it "overlooked a quiet lake, with high rolling hills all around." It looked peaceful, and she needed rest, perhaps even a chance to sleep, she hoped, after so many nights of coughing and constant anxiety. The latest paroxysm, in the Montreal bus depot washroom, had made her ribs and back ache again and torn at her already raw throat.

Her short wait ended when she spotted a white sports car, its front plate marked: The Fit Inn. The driver, herself a fit-looking tall blond woman with leathery tanned face and a smile full of yellow teeth, welcomed Gail. She spoke with a strong Scottish burr. "You must be Gail. I'm Maggie—hope you had a good trip."

On the way to the inn, Maggie drove fast through roads winding

uphill and around lakes, past agglomerations of cottages and alongside dairy farms with huge aluminum silos. "We're expecting another three ladies tomorrow afternoon. Three friends from Toronto," she said. "We take only a few because we tailor Fit Week to your needs." She slowed through a village of cottages with gardens full of whirligigs and whitewashed truck tires filled with flowers. "Some want to lose weight. Others need a break where they won't pack on ten pounds."

Gail said: "I mainly need a rest." With the corner of her mind ever occupied with memories of Jordan, her husband, setting out in the canoe with their toddler, she tried to recall whether or not the powerboat had been in earshot. She should've warned him.

Gail felt the warm bunnies through the thin nylon material as they shifted weight to balance on her lap. She surreptitiously unzipped the bag an inch to give them more air. When Maggie stopped at The Fit Inn Gail noted the surrounding woods with approval. All the while, Maggie told how she and her Danish husband had bought the property "in deplorrrr-able condition" when they first arrived from Scotland forty years earlier, and restored it bit by bit. To Gail, the building resembled a sprawling two-storey log cabin. Lobelia, alyssum and petunias dripped from boxes at half a dozen gabled upper windows. Maggie had assured her over the phone that the home owners around the lake banned all motorised craft.

Stepping out of the car, Maggie apologised for not providing meals until the next evening, when Fit Week kicked off, but Friday was her husband's only night free. She pointed out two cafés up the road where Gail could eat dinner and lunch. "Your windows overlook the lake," she told Gail.

Gail's room, three down from the communal bathroom, was panelled in vertical pine planks, even the built-in closet door. Hand-woven red, yellow and blue striped habitant woven cloth curtained the windows and covered the two double beds and a small tub chair. She hauled her suitcase up on the spare bed by the window, unzipped it to open like a book and pulled out a large bag of rabbit food. She set the carryall on the floor and opened it enough to pull out the newspaper and the plastic containers. The rabbits tried poking their heads out, but she pushed them back in. She needed time to put down sheets of newsprint under the sink and in the opposite corner behind the door. She filled one container with fresh water and topped up the other with food pellets. Finally she took out the rabbits. They went first to the newspaper opposite the sink, where they emitted a few round turds and some

dampness. Then they hopped to the food and water. Satisfied with a few mouthfuls, they loped around the room, sniffing and wiggling their noses.

Gail went over to the window. Down on the apron of grass at the water's edge, Maggie was smoking a long cheroot and throwing a ball for a dog, an overweight black and tan thing, bow-legged, stumpy tailed, droopy of eye and jowls, some sort of Great Dane, who limped after the toy on arthritic hips, but with boundless enthusiasm, whether it bounced high off a rock or careened into the lake. Gail glanced down at the bunnies hunched over their water bowl. Their tails looked like balls of cotton batting stuck to their rear ends. She would have to get them out the front door before the dog came in. No. Maybe she should wait until everyone was in bed. No, not that. They would lock all the doors and she'd get stuck outside.

She stood to one side of the window so no one could spot her, then went and sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating the rabbits rooting about the room. Yes, she would run outside and across the road. Maybe go up the hill a bit, and release them into the woods. They looked healthy enough to survive. She dug into her suitcase for a package of small plastic bags and ripped one off the roll. Moving fast, she filled it with a handful of pet food. The bunnies made no fuss about returning to the carryall. She opened her door, made sure the hall was empty, then locked up and ran over to the stairs. She was about to go down when she heard the unmistakable clicking of a dog's claws on the hardwood floor and heard Maggie say: "Och, you've had your fun, now go back to Brent."

Gail turned back to her room. This time she put down many sheets of fresh newspaper on the closet floor, plus food and water, and locked the rabbits in. Then she rolled up the soiled paper in a plastic grocery bag, stuffed the bundle into her black carryall and left her room, locking the door.

At the bottom of the stairs the tan dog wheezed out of the television room to greet her. Close up, he was the size of a small Shetland pony. He was instantly interested in the black bag, shoving his face into it as if it held a dead squirrel. A man's voice said: "Dane, you ugly old thing, don't scare the nice lady." The dog wagged its rear end and poked its nose deeper into her bag. She held it up high and Dane's head lifted to follow the movement. His eyes shone silver, and grey hair speckled his muzzle. A man considerably taller than Gail, and at least a hundred pounds overweight, emerged from the dimness of the TV room. He wore

black cotton pin-striped pants, a white chef's coat and kerchief around his neck and, on his swollen feet, red and black tartan carpet slippers slashed open above the instep. His face, including the greying whiskers, drooping jowls, red-rimmed eyes and sad expression, mirrored the Great Dane's.

The man pulled the dog off by the collar. "Oh, he's far too friendly, this wretch," he wheezed. "We're both old and ugly, but harmless, completely harmless." He pushed the dog behind him and blocked it in the TV room with his body. "Outgrown our usefulness. When he goes, I go." He bowed slightly. "Welcome to The Fit Inn young lady. My name is Brent. It's Danish for, like my dog, I am a Dane, although not so great these days. I hope you enjoy eating, because I love to cook. Have you had supper?" In spite of the wheeze, his baritone voice had an earnest note of some beauty.

She said no, and indeed she hadn't eaten all day, far too engrossed in her problems with rabbits. Now for the first time in months, or so it seemed, she felt hungry.

He continued: "If you hurry, you're in time for Le P'tit Café up the road. They serve an excellent *tourtière à la mode du Lac Saint-Jean*, with strips of rabbit meat." Gail flinched. "Not your dish? Then I recommend their *poulet chasseur*. Quite delicious. Tell the owners you're staying here. Better eat a good dinner tonight with lots of empty calories. I must give you healthy food the rest of the week, although I hate it. I'd much rather pile your plate with my crisp French fries accompanied by a huge steak swimming in sauce *bearnaise*, topped off with trifle loaded with cream and sherry but my wife won't let me. Now, off you go."



Gail ate her first real meal in almost a year. Indeed, she felt inordinately stuffed with pasta, vegetables and some kind of maple syrupy dessert. She returned to her room, unpacked her blue suitcase and hung her clothes in the closet, letting the rabbits out for their nocturnal exercise. She washed and climbed into bed to fall asleep instantly, until a wracking cough wakened her around three in the morning. Oh, no, she thought, sitting up and reaching for tissues. She felt the familiar furriness in her chest and nearly coughed up on the bed-clothes, but made it to the sink in time. There, amid the slime from her lungs, came a small whitish cotton-tail rabbit. Within minutes,

amid the paroxysms, she heaved up another two, both mainly grey and brown, except for their white tails and underbellies. Relieved of the sensation in her throat and lungs, she rinsed the creatures under the tap and dried them off with tissues. They hopped to the food plate, then over to the water bowl, and then started playing together, chasing and rolling over one another as she watched, pale and red-eyed.

"Dear God," she prayed. "No more. Please, please no more. At least until I release these five." She lay back on the bed, trying to get her heartbeat and breathing back down to normal.

She slept a couple of hours, dreaming of Jordan and the baby in their orange life jackets waving from the canoe. Around dawn she woke coughing. She ran over to the sink in time to catch two more bunnies before they hit the hard pink porcelain. Outside, she heard something whine and scratch at the door. Dane!

Then Brent's voice asked if she was alright. "Stupid Dane keeps sniffing at the door," he said.

"No... no," she said, without opening the door. "I'm fine, thank you. Just the tail end of last winter's, um, pneumonia. Tell Dane everything's fine."

Brent said to call out if she needed anything. "Walls thin as paper," he said. "I'll hear you." She heard him shuffle off.

Seven bunnies. Two were no problem to get rid of, but seven. How would she ever get them out safely and into the woods? At home, she had managed to drive out to the Taconic Parkway. There'd been only one or two a night, but they'd proved even harder to heave up. At one point she feared she'd cracked a rib. She had thought that the country air would make her better, the coughing would stop. She shouldn't have eaten so much. Eating always brought up the bunnies. And now her chest felt sore from heaving and coughing them up. Even her back, her diaphragm, the muscles between her ribs, everything ached.

The next morning, she was glad to see that the bunnies had relieved themselves on the paper under the sink. She needed only to wrap it up and... She'd forgotten details like maids coming in to clean. She put a "Ne pas déranger" tag on the outside doorknob and went back to bed until noon.

She felt better for the morning's rest. She decided to slip out while Maggie went to the airport to fetch other Fit Weekers. Gail rounded up five rabbits, their food and water, spread fresh newspaper on the closet floor, locked the bedroom door and put the key in her purse. The sharp smell of rabbit urine on the soiled newspaper made her

gag, but once again she wrapped it and stuffed the package in her carryall, this time adding the two brown bunnies she'd arrived with.

She checked out the window to see Dane busy jumping for a Frisbee in and out the water while Brent shifted his bulk from one foot to the other on the grass verge. Gail ran down the stairs and out the door, turning right towards Le P'tit Café. She unzipped her bag and shifted the rabbits gently so she could get out the dirty newspaper. She remembered spotting a couple of hinged boxes big enough to hold two garbage cans, and secure enough to resist onslaught from racoons, skunks or even bears. She would need more paper soon, she thought. Better buy the Saturday editions from the dépanneur. She had no time for the path up the hill and, dammit, she had forgotten to bring food pellets with her. Back home, she threw out handfuls of pet food to compensate for abandoning them, then rushed back to the car, heart beating with the terror of imagined gangs waiting to kidnap her. Here, these two rabbits must subsist on berries and whatever green stuff they could find. She crossed the road and went into the underbrush, where she dropped them down. "God speed, little rabbits," she whispered. They stayed stock still, as if terrified at all this freedom. She shooed them away, clapping her hands and calling: "Hoy, hoy, hoy," until they scampered off to hide motionless in the vegetation. If she didn't know they were there she could not have spotted them, so well did their coats blend with the surroundings.

Her task complete, she walked to the café for a bowl of consommé and some crackers.



Back at the lodge, the three visitors had arrived: two short dumpy sisters called Cissie and Dorothy, and Sarah-Jane, a tall hefty woman who asked whether she played bridge. Gail managed a polite smile. "No," she said.

Cissie, whose prominent green eyes made her look like an enthusiastic frog, told Gail that she and her sister were fraternal twins. "But we have lots in common, as you'll see. For instance, we both teach children with special needs, need to lose ten pounds..."

Dorothy cut in, "... at least..."

"... and enjoy a game of bridge. And Sarah-Jane is our good friend, school nurse and the person who found this place for us." She rolled her eyes archly and confided in a loud whisper. "Sarah-Jane is a published

author. She writes the Mainly Misty children's books. At school, our principal calls us The Three Graces, because we've worked together for over fifteen years—and we always travel together."

"... whenever we can get away from our husbands," Dorothy said.

Cissie cut in, laughing: "... who call us The Three Witches."

Sarah-Jane, in a surprisingly deep voice cried out: "Oooh, look at that water. And do I see paddle boats, three? I can't wait to get into my bikini."

Maggie called out that she had left an empty room between each of them so they wouldn't disturb one another. Dorothy giggled that it was just as well since she snored so loudly that her husband refused to sleep in the same room with her. "Oh, bubble, bubble, toil and trouble," she laughed.

Gail shuddered at the thought of the week ahead hearing the intimate details of these women's lives. All three bounded upstairs, sister elephants making the lodge shake. Gail followed, thinking maybe she needed another nap to stay away from them.

She unlocked her door to find that the sun's heat had brought out a pungent smell of rabbit. She hauled up the window and secured it with one of the wooden wedges lying on the sill.

Gail opened the closet: all five remaining rabbits slept. She wanted to lie down on the bed, but the room felt too hot. Instead, she pulled on her one-piece racing swimsuit, took a towel and, after locking the closet and her room door, joined the ladies in their stretched-to-capacity two-piece swimsuits. They had found wooden loungers on wheels and thin plastic mattresses which, after some discussion about taking out the paddle boats now or later, they set up in a row between two tall cedars facing the lake. The Graces chattered about the merits of various sun-blocking creams, passed tubes around and basted one another before lying flat on the loungers like 'burgers on a grill.

"My, Gail, but you're thin," said Dorothy.

"You put us all to shame—you don't need to lose an ounce," echoed Cissie.

"In fact, you could do with gaining a few pounds," added nurse Sarah-Jane.

Gail said: "If you think I'm thin, you should see the fashion models I work with."

This set the three off on how unfair it was. "You can't enjoy the fashion magazines any more," said Sarah-Jane. "I hide them from the girls at school. They're all underweight and terrified of looking fat, even

the ten year olds."

Gail wandered off into the shallow water, scaring away schools of minnows and six-inch mutant tadpoles. Her feet sank to the ankles in the muddy bottom while slimy algae clung to her legs. She felt like retching in disgust but held back, alert to any sign of furriness in her chest or throat. Further out the soup-warm water still came only to her knees. As soon as it reached higher, she flopped face down and swam out using a breast stroke to avoid stirring the mud with her hands, and finally her strong, rhythmic crawl, honed in summers working as a life-guard. She went two hundred yards before feeling the welcome chill of a spring. She let herself sink, feet down, to test the depth, but shot up at the slimy touch of kelp-like algae. Here, she estimated the water was at least three metres deep. Coming up she swallowed a few drops of algae-tainted water and started to choke, floundering as she did so. She retched while sharp searing stomach acid burned her throat and nose. "I do not panic," she told herself. "I am at home in the water." Still, she was coughing and starting to feel the familiar hint of hair deep in her body. Not here, she thought. Please God not here. God must've been busy elsewhere, for two rabbits shot out of her mouth and splashed into the water. She tried to grab them. They floundered around, still slimy in their after-birth of mucus, sinking down. She took a gulp of air, spewed out water, and ducked after them. They were almost white this time, easily traced even in the black, choppy water, yet out of reach. She made several grabs at them before having to come up for air and dive once more. They seemed to be trying to flee from her, but how long could they last without oxygen? She had to come up again.

She surfaced so fast, she nearly hit her head on the boat paddled by Dorothy and Cissie. "We got scared you went out so far," they said, pulling on her arm and nearly upsetting their craft. "Here comes Sarah-Jane. Yoo-hoo, Sarah-Jane, over here."

Gail pushed them off and dived again, looking everywhere for the rabbits. They had vanished. Her mind flashed back to the day she dived to find the baby, leaving the people in the power boat to drag Jordan's body ashore. She never found the child, only Jordan's bloodless arm, torn off at the shoulder. The wedding band on his pale hand shone through the water. She had cradled it in her own arms, swimming on her back to the boat, with its weeping, screaming occupants. One of them, a teenage boy, had wrapped the arm in a garish beach towel. This time, she didn't want to come up. She wanted to breathe in

the water in great lungs full. But she couldn't do it. Disgusted at herself, she resurfaced, half expecting to see confetti-like bits of the baby's life-jacket floating around the two halves of the canoe bobbing apart on the waves, until she became aware of the paddle boats.

Dorothy and Cissie were laughing and calling out. She squinted up at the women glistening in the sun. Each held a dripping rabbit by the ears. "Look, look what we found," they were saying. "They were swimming for their sweet lives."

Appalled, Gail sputtered: "Please don't lift them by the ears. They need their back paws supported." The women hurriedly put their hands under the bunnies.

"The poor little things," said Dorothy. "Let's dry them out." They patted the bunnies with their towels and then wrapped them up, leaving the heads exposed.

Sarah-Jane, in the other paddle-boat, said: "See that sandy spot under the cliff? We'll dock there so Gail can climb in my boat."

Cissie said: "Come on, Gail, you can hang on to us and we'll tow you in."

The lake bottom turned sandy near the beach and easy to walk on. Gail felt exhausted and, again she ached from the retching. The sisters and Sarah-Jane discussed what they should do with the bunnies.

Cissie looked around. They had landed on a narrow strip of sandy beach at the base of sheer rock cliffs rising at least ten metres. "No use setting them loose here," she said.

"Well," said Sarah-Jane. "With that monstrous dog, they won't have much of a chance at the inn."

"I never knew rabbits swam," marvelled Dorothy. "Where did they come from?"

All three looked at Gail. "I... was swimming and all of a sudden they appeared," she said.

"It's quite simple," Cissie said. "We'll drop them off in the woodsie area on the way back." She held up a bunny in her towel and wiggled her nose back at it. "Cute little critters, though, aren't they?"

Dorothy said: "Those black patches on their heads remind me of teenagers in baseball caps with the peaks turned to the back."

Gail smiled and shivered. The wind had freshened, and her skin was coming out in goose bumps.

"Here," said Sarah-Jane. "Better dry yourself off with my towel and keep it around you." Gail climbed into the paddle boat and wrapped herself in the huge, thick beach towel bearing the picture of an obese

sunburned woman with lobster-pink flesh overwhelming her bikini.

They navigated over to the forest, calling back and forth, the three companions seeming excited by their adventure. The water became shallow again and the bottom looked spongy and full of algae. The two boats kept close together. Gail smothered her disgust at walking in the ooze again and jumped into the water when she estimated it at waist deep. "Here," she said holding out her arms. "Pass me a rabbit."

Cissie passed her the first one and when Gail unwrapped the bunny from its cocoon it snuggled close to her breast as she cradled it to shore. With both animals on shore, Gail yelled: "Hoy, hoy, hoy," and they shot away into the woods.



Back at the inn, Gail ran upstairs to her room and opened the closet. The five remaining bunnies slept peacefully, half buried in piles of shredded and balled up paper. She slipped over to the bathroom for a hot shower, mentally rehearsing how she would take them to the woods in two runs. She must do it soon, for though much smaller than normal cottontails, they seemed almost mature.



The Three Graces knocked on her door the minute the dinner bell rang. "Be right there," she answered, and waited until she heard them thunder downstairs before leaving her room and securing the door.

Maggie dined with them and explained how Fit Week worked, as she had to Gail in the car. Gail's portions looked barely more generous than The Three Graces', but Brent had hidden a rich pâté under the steak and given her mashed potatoes rather than baked. She slipped her salad greens in a paper napkin and stashed it in her pocket. Cissie, Dorothy and Sarah-Jane declared that they would get even fatter on such big meals, while Maggie assured them that a sensible diet shouldn't leave them feeling starved.

After dinner, they agreed they should all walk along the lake. First, though, they needed to run upstairs to brush their teeth. Gail took care to fumble for her key until they had closed their doors. Inside, the room reeked of rabbit.

She opened the closet to discover the animals had nested down, so she could barely see them. She tried not to gag as she bent to gather up

the newsprint. At first she thought they had been fighting, for blood caked much of the paper. The rabbits bumped their noses against her hands as if to discourage her. Everything seemed to heave and move, all the blood-soaked papers, the furry creatures and whatever else was there. She uncovered one of the rabbits and realized it was giving birth: four, five, six kitten-like creatures wriggled out of the heaving mother. There must have been... she tried to count them. Fourteen, no fifteen. Sixteen! Sixteen rabbits. She remembered reading about female rabbits eating their young when disturbed and slammed the closet door shut. She had to get her hands clean of the blood and smell of the creatures. She ran water into the sink and picked up the doll-size piece of hotel soap. A reddish slimy goo frothed off her hands. Disgusted, she retched, tried not to throw up, but retched again.

Sarah-Jane knocked on the door: "Are you OK, Gail?"

Gail coughed, "Yes, yes. I'll be right down."

The door opened just as she threw up another bunny into the sink. Another white one with reversed baseball-cap markings on its head.

Sarah-Jane walked in and shut the door behind her. "Oh, my," she said, clapping a hand over her nose and mouth. "The stench ..."

The closet door swung open and out hopped three rabbits. Gail heaved up another two baseball-capped white ones, the sink was full now, with three rabbits and blood-spattered soapy water.

Sarah-Jane pulled paper tissues out of her sleeve and wiped Gail's face clean.

Gail felt like a grade sixer caught throwing up after drinking tequila at recess. She pulled away turning back to rescue the three rabbits trying to clamber out of the sink, and set to work cleaning it and the bunnies.

Sarah-Jane went over to the closet. "Pheeeiuw!" she said. "I've read of Cortàzar's Syndrome, but never seen it."

Dorothy and Cissie banged on the door. "Are you two ready? It'll be getting dark soon."

Gail put one hand on the door. Her other arm held the three bunnies wrapped in a towel. "Please don't let them in," she whispered.

Sarah-Jane called out: "Gail isn't feeling well. You just go ahead."

Dorothy and Cissie conferred on the other side of the door. "Can't we help?"

"She's OK. Resting up," Sarah-Jane said. "I'll keep an eye on her."

Dorothy and Cissie sent good wishes through the closed door and bounded off.

Gail put the rabbits down on the floor. They hopped off to join the

ones bouncing out of the closet.

"You produced all these since you arrived?" asked Sarah-Jane.

"No. Only five. I set some loose in the woods last night. Now these three. That's about eight left. But they're multiplying. Fast."

Sarah-Jane threaded her way through rabbits to check the closet. "I never saw so many at once. How many are there altogether... thirteen? Fourteen?"

"Sixteen—at last count," said Gail, knowing there were many, many more. She lay down on the bed, and started to shiver. Even though she wrapped the bedcover over herself she couldn't stop shaking.

Sarah-Jane put a hand to Gail's forehead, then drew the spare blanket, from the end of the other bed, over her. "Look, I'll get you some travel-sickness pills," said Sarah-Jane. She let herself out.

Gail wasn't sure whether she was losing consciousness or dozing off. She no longer cared about the rabbits rooting and gambolling around her. The muscles of her chest and stomach hurt so much she felt afraid to breathe although she needed more air. From the other side of the door she heard a snuffle and a sound like a horse softly snorting into cold air. The delicate noise of rabbits milling around the wood floor stopped as everything alive in the room froze.

She heard Sarah-Jane outside saying: "No, down boy. Go see Brent."

Brent's voice came from the direction of the stairs: "Come here, you dim dog. You know you're not allowed to go upstairs and give the guests nightmares."

The dog scratched at the door and woofed again. Brent called: "Come! Don't make me climb those stairs to get you, stupid beast."

The dog grumbled. Sarah-Jane said: "Dane go see Brent. Now!"

Gail heard the dog's claws click on the landing, then the awkward thump thump of his arthritic body bumping downstairs.

Sarah-Jane came in and closed the door quickly. "Here," she said. She filled a glass with water from the tap. "These should work like magic." She made her way through the moving carpet of rabbits to the window and opened it wider, leaning across the tub chair to prop it in place so she could force up the screen window and poke out her head to gulp fresh country air. Turning back to Gail, she wrinkled her nose.

Gail heard Cissie and Dorothy returning from their walk, slamming the door, greeting Dane and Brent, and climbing the stairs, followed by the click of Dane's claws.

The rabbits froze again.

Cissie knocked on the door and whispered: "Are you OK in there?"

The rabbits grew agitated, wheeling around. Then Gail saw a white one by the tub chair hop on the back of a brown one, which reared up so the white bunny could clamber on its shoulders to reach the seat. Another rabbit followed, and soon all were using one another as ladders to scramble up the back of the chair and hop out on to the sill. Gail sat up for a better look. The first white rabbit hesitated at the window, making Gail fear the ones coming after it would push it out and make it roll down the roof of the porch below and kill itself on the sharp rocks ranged against the lodge wall. All now crowded and pushed to get up the chair and out the window: brown ones, white ones with baseball-cap markings, a couple of black ones, even a fox-red one, all with white tails and underbellies, and moving with urgent determination. Some hopped over others, others nudged their siblings. The more aggressive nipped at the heels of those ahead. Even the new-borns, now furred and with eyes sleepy-looking yet open, were emerging from the closet, encouraged by their mothers butting them in the rear.

Gail, a hand to her mouth, stood up beside the bed for a better view. The first white bunny climbed out the window and hopped across the two long flower boxes under the gabled window, crushing the petunias, lobelia and alyssum. At the far edge of the second box, the animal looked down at the steep pitch of the roof, twitched its nose, looked back at the hoard following it, hesitated, then, leaning far over so Gail saw only its tail and rear end, it poked its head over the edge, went upside down and, holding on by its back legs, its forepaws reached down, stretching, stretching, until at last they found purchase on the black roof tiles. The next bunny climbed over it and hopped on to the roof. It immediately righted itself parallel to the edge before zigzagging its way, like a Sunday skier, down the roof's slope. From there, it took a mighty leap over to the grass beyond the rocks and zipped for cover in the wooded area alongside the hotel property. The leader hanging on to the edge of the flower box shook itself before the next rabbit used it as a step to the roof, and followed the one who had already skedaddled into the underbrush.

Gail had forgotten about Cissie and Dorothy on the other side of the door. "Can we come in?" Cissie whispered, and the door opened a crack.

"Holey moley, where did these come from?" exclaimed Dorothy, pushing the door open wider.

Gail heard the Great Dane coming up the stairs. "Close the door. Oh, Dorothy, quick."

Too late.

Dane crashed into the room, skidding on the wood floor, and snapping his teeth at this dog's-dream-of-heaven of a plethora of rabbits, which now started screaming. Gail dove from the bed for Dane's collar and tried to pull him off. Too late for the bunny screaming in Dane's jaws as the huge dog shook his head violently. Gail cocked a leg to stand astride him and clamped her hands on either side of his head.

"No. No," she shouted. "Drop it, Dane. Now." And drop it he did. Gail continued to hold on to him, almost sitting on him.

Sarah-Jane scooped up the bunny, still wet from the dog's saliva but not harmed, and popped it on the window box. The Great Dane, meanwhile, shrugged himself free of Gail's grip on his collar and struggled out from under her. Standing on his hind legs, front paws on the sill, he was as tall as she was. He barked at the last rabbit hesitating on the edge of the window box. It stopped dithering, hopped on to the roof, ran almost straight down, gathering enough momentum to dive safely out on to the grass below.

Through this pandemonium, they heard Brent's unmistakable step on the stairs and heard him shout: "Dane? What are you up to? Terrifying the guests again."

The Three Graces now joined the fearless Gail in pulling Dane away from the window and out the door. "Go see Brent," Gail commanded.

"He's coming, Brent," Cissie called out in her sweet and girlish voice. Dorothy put her hands on the beast's rump and shoved him out, slamming the door after him.

Cissie looked around the floor, covered in rabbit turds and balled up newspaper sheets stained with blood. She went over to the closet, held her nose and reeled back dramatically. "What's been going on here?" she asked.

Gail went over to her bed and sat down, wondering where to begin.

Sarah-Jane jumped in: "Ahem. We have a little clean-up to do."

The Three Graces raided the housekeeper's supply cupboard for cloths and brooms. They sprayed the room with their own aromatic yet hypo-allergenic potions with great abandon, tiptoeing out a half hour or so later.

With her room returned to sweet-smelling calm, and in the seconds before she drifted into dreamless, untroubled sleep, Gail sighed at the thought she might even miss her rabbits. But, she decided, not very much. •

It occurred to him that Juniper Skelton's diary had been mailed to his office and his home number was unlisted. This man should not have his number.

Ravinini Box

Jeffrey D. Johnson

"...Reid's black rages continue, and there has been another accident on the set, the worst yet. Ramirez is dead, the poor man. I'm terrified of getting a paper cut, or even a splinter, after what has happened to the others. The police were here this morning, but Taylor flattered them away. The studio is threatening to pull our funding, and Taylor is nearly broke. Chester, I can't say more, but I think there was something in the room again today while we were filming. It's the same feeling we talked about last night, but even stronger. I see things when I close my eyes. I fear I'm getting swept away in something. This camera, this device Taylor calls the Ravinini Box, will ruin us all."

-Juniper Skelton

David Weston slid the brittle, yellowed paper back into the plastic sleeve and set it on top of an ancient black film canister on the kitchen table. The fragment of letter was over eighty years old, presumably the same age as the strange film it had been found with. David smoothed back the peeling sticker on the outside of the film tin. *The Gin Thief*, written in a bold hand, was almost too faded to read. Next to it, so faint that first he had missed it, was the date, 1922.

David had purchased the items a week ago from a construction company that found them sealed in the bathroom wall of a Bel Aire

mansion they were remodeling. He got a good price after opening the old tin and showing them the film. It was unlike any celluloid he had ever seen: thick and lined on both sides with slots for the teeth of unusually minute wheels. It was immediately evident that it was non-transparent, and David quickly pointed this out as one of the sad hallmarks of a film hopelessly degraded by time.

David had shuffled his feet, made vague comments about the expensive chemical processes necessary to restore such film, if it was possible at all, and eventually walked off the construction site with the film and letter for one hundred dollars.

Afterwards in his car he examined the film again. It looked like a roll of paper-thin, extremely pliable copper. Glinting in the bright sun streaming through the windshield, he could just make out what looked like engravings in the frames on one side. He had no idea whether it was degraded or not without doing some research. Regardless, the note, if the people referred to were who he thought they were, had fixed the strange film with a high preliminary value.

William Taylor had been a great director in his day, but there was no record of him ever having worked with Wallace Reid, and there was no record of either having made a film called *The Gin Thief*.

William Taylor's death in 1922 was one of Hollywood's longest running mysteries. He had been murdered in his apartment on the night advanced. Some said he was killed by his brother, a man known as Edward Sands. Others maintained that he was murdered by a jealous lover. Either way, his house had been robbed twice, and his bank account had been drained in the months directly preceding his death, leading David Weston and most other people familiar with movie history to the vague conclusion that he had fallen in with the wrong crowd, and that the truth would never be known.

Wallace Reid, on the other hand, had died a highly publicized death in a sanitarium a year later, destroyed by substance abuse and madness. Any film, or train of articles connecting these men before their deaths, might be worth a fortune.

Juniper Skelton's name appeared in the credits of at least a dozen films. She had started as a production assistant and by the early twenties was listed as chief coordinator on several pictures. Her name never appeared again after 1922, but she wasn't attached to any kind of scandal that David was aware of.

Looking for some means of authentication, David had stumbled across Juniper Skelton's diary for sale on the internet through the

Rare Book Exchange. It was due to arrive at his office today. Unless it was extremely revealing, he would need more than this to hold a truly bank-breaking auction, but it was a promising start.

"Going into the office today?"

Sarah finished making coffee and poured two cups. She was short and trim, just younger than him at thirty-eight. She was wearing one of his white T-shirts. It hung just low enough to cover her red silk underwear.

"Yeah. I'm expecting an important package."

"Jim will be home today," she said, setting his cup down. She settled across from him, consciously framing herself in the bright morning sun in the window behind her. The fringes of her tousled auburn hair shone gold in the light. David could hear a lawn mower in the distance.

"Ah, your flaky husband returns," he said. He sipped his coffee. "Don't tell me. You have to go home."

Sarah sighed. "I'll have to mess up the house a little to make him think I've been there for the last few days." She set her cup down and curled one manicured hand under her chin. "Are you going to be okay?"

David shrugged. Their affair had been going on for a little over three months. Sarah pointedly avoided discussing their future and David never pressed her. He suspected that she still loved her husband and was just waiting for him to come back around. Sarah's husband was a carpenter who had recently fallen in with one of Los Angeles' many cults.

"I'll be fine," David said. His infrequent moments of honest introspection had brought him to realize that he felt nothing more than a companionable fondness based on attraction for Sarah, but this situation routinely irritated him anyway. "What the hell, we still have lunches, right?"

"At least until he takes off again," Sarah said mischievously. She smiled in earnest this time and he smiled back.

"I'd better get ready," she said, looking at the wall clock over his head. "I've got a nine o'clock meeting and I can't go to the office in the same clothes as yesterday. I'll call you tomorrow."

He slapped her rump as she passed. A few minutes later he heard her car start. Sarah never brought a spare set of clothes during the times her husband was out of town, as though she didn't really expect to stay the night. This made David uncomfortable for many reasons, chief among them that she had taken to using his toothbrush. He was ruminating on the implications of this and absently watching the palm in his small yard flutter in the breeze when the phone rang. He twisted around in his chair and picked up the receiver from the wall rest.

"Hello?"

"David Weston?"

"Yep." David had a brief flash of Sarah's carpenter husband on the other end of the line, fondling a hammer. The voice was low and gravely, definitely serious. "Who is this?"

"My name is Gabriel Skelton. I believe you recently purchased my grandmother's diary."

David's brow furrowed.

"I've recently purchased Juniper Skelton's diary, yes. I deal in Hollywood memorabilia."

The caller cleared his throat. "I put the diary up for sale, Mr. Weston. There are very few people who know about my grandmother. She's something of a footnote in cinematic history."

"True," David said, "but lesser diaries can be of great interest to biographers and specific collectors. The films Juniper Skelton worked on in the teens and twenties have been lost to a great degree. I'll probably add the diary to a resource base I lease out to historians."

"Fascinating," the caller said. "I never thought the diary would be of much value."

"Yes, well, the market is ever widening," David looked up at the clock over his head. "So what can I do for you, Mr. Skelton?"

"I was wondering if we might meet. I have several other items that might interest you, and I'd like a look at your collection as well."

"Sounds fine," David said, then he paused. It occurred to him that Juniper Skelton's diary had been mailed to his office and his home number was unlisted. "Call my office and book an appointment." Without waiting for a reply he hung up.

David's office and adjoining showroom were located in Rancho Palos Verdes, in a low imitation adobe building he shared with two other people, Roy Pinchevsky, a media analyst, and Virginia Strickland, some kind of chain-smoking party organizer. Virginia was tucked into her little office as usual, chattering away on the phone in a cloud of blue-gray smoke. Roy's office was dark. He was either screening news or taking the day off. David quickly crossed to the small table they kept under the mail chute and riffled through the stack of magazines, fliers and bills. At the bottom of the stack, in a padded envelope, was Juniper Skelton's diary.

He grabbed a quick cup of the tar-grade coffee Victoria had made earlier from the communal table and unlocked his office, the package

tucked under his arm with his bag.

David's office walls were lined with signed, framed photographs. A glass display case held various items from his personal collection, ranging from a pair of Rita Hayworth's petite red pumps to a bath cap worn by Angie Dickenson that still had a few hairs in it. In the middle of the room on a folding card table was the strange antique projector he had been working on. He sat down on the edge of his desk, tore open the package and tilted it. A small, worn book slid out, along with an old black and white photo.

The photograph was of a strange contraption, a dark iron box festooned with odd tubes and dials. On top of the device he recognized one of the strangely shaped reels he had in his bag. It was a photo of the Ravinini Box Juniper had referred to in the note.

A man was standing next to it, with one arm on a dial, smiling. David recognized the long, smiling horse-face of William Taylor. Next to him, wearing a black Tuxedo and staring expressionlessly at something out of the frame, was Wallace Reid. His heart skipped a beat. This went a long way toward authenticating *The Gin Thief*. An attractive, slender woman with a sheaf of papers hovered near Reid's side. David realized he was looking at the production coordinator, Juniper Skelton.

He turned on the desk lamp and studied the picture more closely. Juniper appeared to be in her late twenties when the photo was taken. Ringlets of dark hair framed a face even Reid would have admired. She wore a narrow-waisted lacy blouse, fashionable in the day. She was watching Reid, possibly holding the papers out to him.

David frowned and set the photo down. He wondered why her grandson had mailed the photo with the book. Old photos of Reid were worth money, especially ones taken on the set. He resolved immediately to take a look at the man's collection in the near future. The frenzied pace of Hollywood life tended to generate in the older families an order of recluses, withdrawn old-money types that accrued attic loads of the type of merchandise David dealt in. Skelton could be a memorabilia dealer's dream, the rare pack rat that came along once in a decade.

The phone rang. It was before his posted business hours so David ignored it. If it was the junior Skelton, it wouldn't do to appear to eager. He picked up the diary instead and began thumbing through it.

Juniper Skelton's entries were sporadic. The dates at the top of the pages, in the neat script he recognized from the letter fragment, indicated that weeks sometimes passed between entries.

She apparently drank a great deal, considering the entries were

made during prohibition years. There were several entries about parties and repeated entries concerning a man named Chester Brooks, with whom Juniper had intimate relations more than once. He flipped quickly to the last few pages and at once found what he was hoping for.

January 14, 1922

Taylor insists on using the strange camera he purchased in Italy last year. He promises it will be a color film, and I believe him. I've never seen a camera like it, and even the film is unusual. It looks like copper. He's very hush hush about everything and keeps the camera covered at all times when it's not in use. Only a few people on the set have even seen it.

Wallace Reid is furious about the secrecy, of course. The arrogant fool. He gets to be in the first color film of all time and he can't wait for the premiere to tell the world.

David whistled softly. The film still looked like copper. It might not have degraded at all. He flipped to the second-to-last entry, dated three weeks later.

Something is wrong with Reid. He storms around in some kind of haze on the set. His girlfriend told me in confidence today that she was leaving him. She's afraid to be in the house alone with him at night.

Taylor is obsessed with the Ravinini Box. I can't tell what he's thinking anymore. We've had to shoot everything in sequence because he's afraid to cut the film. No one has seen any of the footage yet.

David turned the page to the last entry, holding his breath. His phone was ringing again.

Taylor's house has been broken into for the second time in the last few months. It's terrible to see such a charming man degenerate into a paranoid mess. He looks so tired these days. I think he's having money problems.

I told Chester today about the Ravinini Box, and the presence we all feel in the room when it's operating. He was very upset, and insisted that I leave the project. He may be right, but to do so would surely ruin my career. I don't know what to do. Every time we start filming I feel it again. I think I'm going crazy. I'm now convinced that something is in there with us. Reid is like a dead man now. He walks without expression through his scenes. Taylor does not seem to notice. Half the crew is sick with something.

Every little scratch seems to fester. I'm scared.

That was it. David slowly closed the book. A small waft of ancient vanilla escaped from the old pages. It was only then that he heard Victoria yelling.

"David, you shit! David! You have a phone call. On my phone!"

David hurried out of his office to find Victoria standing in her doorway. Her lined face was drawn into a scowl, the phone dangling from her outstretched hand like a dead fish. The final third of a cigarette smoldered away at the corner of her painted mouth.

"It's your girlfriend," Victoria said. Ashes cascaded down the front of her designer jacket. "The married one. Sounds like trouble."

David reached for the phone. Victoria slapped it into his palm but held her grip on the cord.

"This better not happen again," she whispered before letting go. "Answer your damn phone next time, loverboy."

David yanked the phone away from her and pressed the receiver to his ear.

"Sarah?"

"David! I tried calling but you didn't pick up! Oh my God—"

"Calm down," David said firmly. Victoria rolled her eyes. "What the hell is so important that you would call Victoria?"

"I got her number from the yellow pages. Oh David, Jim was here when I got home. He knows all about you! I think he's on his way to your office. He's got a nail gun, David! A nail gun! You better get out."

David's heart rolled over. He ran a hand through his hair. "Jesus, did you call the police?"

There was a pause.

"Well, no. He might be bluffing, I can't tell, but he was mad, David. Just go home for the day and let him cool out."

"Shit," David said. He handed the phone back to Victoria, who hung it up.

"Trouble?" she asked sweetly.

"I'm going home," David said. "If a pissed-off cultist carpenter stops by with a nail gun, don't tell him where I live."

Victoria opened her mouth to speak, her eyebrows arched in mock-surprise.

"Or I'll tell one of your ex-husbands where you live," David said, pointing a finger at her. Victoria scowled mutely. She slammed her office door. Seconds later he could hear her back on the phone.

David grabbed his bag and the diary, locked his office door, and sprinted out to his car. The starter ground as he checked the rearview and looked around the parking lot.

Across the street was a massive blue Ford pickup, parked facing him at the edge of the Albertson's parking lot. Inside he could see the silhouette of a man. His head seemed to be angled in David's direction. Plumes of gray exhaust jetted from the tail pipe of the massive truck as the driver revved the idling engine.

David ramped his old Fiat out of the parking lot and crossed Raven Spur in one continuous high-speed burn. The Fiat's bald tires squealed and the wheel shuddered in his hands. His eyes flicked to the rearview.

The blue pickup was racing after him. David swore under his breath. The gas pedal was all the way to the floor.

He looked to his right just as a little white Miata swerved into his lane and slammed into the side of his car. For an instant as the two cars touched, the driver's face was mere feet away, a balding man with a big mustache and a ridiculous pony tail, his red face contorted with wild rage, his screamed words lost in the shriek of grinding metal and the roar of the engines. The Miata swerved away and slammed back into him again. David braked and pulled to the side of the road. The Miata skidded onto the shoulder in front of him.

"What the hell!" David bellowed, jumping out of his battered Fiat. The driver of the Miata was already rushing at him. The man was huge.

"Sarah is my wife, you piece of shit!" the man yelled. He stopped in front of David with his face less than three inches away, his big hands clenched into fists at his sides. He was almost a head taller than David and at least fifty pounds heavier. "What do you have to say for yourself before I beat your skull in, you Godless victim?"

"I thought you were religious," David said, taking a step back and wiping spit from his eye. Just then he heard a door slam behind him.

"I'm religious," came a loud, gravelly voice. David turned. The blue pickup had pulled up behind them. A grizzled man in worn cowboy boots, jeans and a sweatshirt walked up and stopped next to him. He narrowed his cold blue eyes at Sarah's fuming husband.

"Problem?"

"No problem except I'm gonna kick this puke's ass in!" Sarah's husband yelled. Some of the wind seemed to be taken out of him at the appearance of the gnarled old man.

"Not today, son," the man said in a low smoker's voice. "Get in

your car and go home. Now."

"Why the hell should I go before I—"

"Do it," the grizzled man said softly. "I may need to kick Mr. Weston's ass myself. But I'll just shoot you."

Sarah's husband swore, but retreated to his battered Miata. He peeled out, spraying them with dust and gravel.

David ran a shaking hand through his hair, watching Sarah's husband pass over the hill. Beside him the driver of the blue truck crossed his arms.

"How do you know my name?" David asked. His insides felt like water.

The man didn't answer. He knelt and examined David's car.

"You have a flat tire, Mr. Weston, and there's no way to change it with the fender crushed in like that. Come on, I'll give you a ride home." He turned back to the pickup. "My name is Gabriel Skelton," he said over his shoulder. "I talked to you this morning."

Gabriel pulled into David's driveway and cut the engine. The two had said very little along the way. David called a local tow service with Gabriel's cell phone and arranged to have his car taken in for repairs. Gabriel drove without speaking.

"Do you live with anyone, Mr. Weston?" Gabriel asked, studying the house. David looked up from the cell phone.

"No. Why?"

"Your front door is open."

David looked up and down the street. The Miata was nowhere in sight. He walked up to the door and nudged it open with one foot. Gabriel stood behind him.

The house had been ransacked. All the drawers in the bedroom and the kitchen had been pulled out and dumped. Great gouges of plaster had been ripped out of the walls. David had been gone less than two hours. It had taken more than one man to do this kind of damage. Or perhaps one big, pissed off carpenter.

David waded through the mess to the kitchen. The refrigerator door was hanging open and the contents had been dumped on to the floor. He fished around in the pile of to-go boxes and condiments until he came up with a six-pack of beer. Gabriel righted the kitchen table and pulled up two chairs. David sat down and opened a beer. Gabriel settled across from him and after a moment took a beer of his own. He turned it slowly in his heavily veined hands without opening it.

"Just out of curiosity, what was that about?" Gabriel asked. David drained half his beer.

"Jealous husband," he said shortly.

Gabriel's brow furrowed. "You mean you're having relations with his wife?"

"That's right," David said. He drained the rest of his beer and glared at the man across from him. "Don't fake any moral outrage with me, Mister. Like you've never done the same."

"I haven't," Gabriel said evenly. He popped his beer. "I'm a priest, you Hollywood jackass."

They glared at each other. David noticed for the first time the tip of a priestly collar peeking out of the neck of Gabriel's sweatshirt. David's eyes narrowed, and suddenly he barked out a ringing laugh. Gabriel snorted and smiled, then laughed himself.

"Well, Padre," David said, "before I call the police about this mess, perhaps you should tell me why you were following me today. He raised a fresh beer. "Not that I'm ungrateful for the help."

"Did you get a chance to read the last few entries in Juniper's diary?"

"Just barely," David said. Gabriel nodded. His eyes drifted to the window. Shadows of the fluttering palm leaves in the yard played over his stark face and the gutted wall behind him.

"Juniper was working on a movie called *The Gin Thief* at the time. It was the last journal she ever kept. Being a memorabilia expert, you probably know that it would have been one of Reid's last movies. He died shortly after it was completed. Taylor died immediately afterward, and the movie was never released. In those last days, both of them were apparently quite mad. Taylor confessed to Juniper the night before he was killed that he believed something other than color had been captured on the unusual film of the Ravinini Box. After his death the Box disappeared and the film was never recovered."

Gabriel paused. His eyes grew distant.

"My grandmother spent the rest of her life looking for that film. When she died in 1961 the job passed on to my mother. Later it fell to me. A few years ago I had the idea of putting Juniper's diary up for sale. I figured whoever had the film might have inherited some of her notes. The owner of the film would be very interested in Juniper's diary. And then, three days ago, you ordered it and my long wait was over." He leveled a hard stare at David. "Where is the film, Mr. Weston?"

"It's in my bag," David said slowly. "With a fragment of a note Juniper wrote to a man named Chester."

Gabriel nodded and looked back out the window.

"I entered the priesthood at Juniper's insistence," Gabriel said. "Juniper didn't believe in God, per se, and neither did my mother for that matter. But as a boy I was enrolled in private schools and groomed for the church. You might say I never had a choice. You see, Mr. Weston, these were women that didn't fear God, but they were afraid of something, something they couldn't see, because of Juniper's experience with the Ravinini Box."

Goose flesh rippled over David's arms at Gabriel's slow reflection, in spite of the sunlight and warmth of the day.

"Taylor was on vacation in Italy with some would-be young starlet when he was approached by a man offering the Ravinini Box. Somehow he convinced Taylor that the device made color film. Taylor purchased it, even though he suspected it was stolen, and brought it back. He began using it on what would be his last project, the secret film that drove Wallace Reid mad, *The Gin Thief*."

Gabriel paused and opened his beer.

"The accidents began happening almost immediately after filming began. First, a man's arm was broken by a falling sand bag. The arm never healed properly. Infection set in and the doctors were forced to amputate. Little cuts and scratches festered. Fingers were lost. Then the first man died, his neck broken in a fall. He was standing on a chair adjusting a light.

"People were scared, and Wallace Reid was clearly losing his mind. His girlfriend left him when he stopped sleeping. He just sat in a chair night after night in the basement of their house, drinking gin and staring at the wall. Taylor pressed on as the production fell apart. Soon after, people began to feel the presence."

"I read something about that in the diary," David said. Gabriel's pale blue eyes focused on him.

"Juniper said she was the first to feel it. She described it as something that seemed to enter the room when the Ravinini Box was rolling. She could feel it watching them. She was sure Reid felt it too, before he 'went blank,' as she described it. It wasn't long before everyone could feel it, and it grew stronger every day. Something had been attracted by the Ravinini Box, and day by day it was gathering itself around them."

David held up his hand.

"How come I've never heard of any of this?" he asked. "Hollywood's always been a superstitious gossip mill. I'd never even heard of *The Gin Thief* until the other day."

"The studio never really knew. Taylor was one of their best directors. In the beginning they gave him free rein to use his secret camera. He funded a great deal of the project out of his own pocket. After everything fell apart and the film disappeared, the studio decided to quietly write it off. Juniper thought that they were embarrassed for giving Taylor so much freedom, and they didn't want a repeat of the incident. Taylor did half the job of covering it up himself by being so secretive and maintaining such a small crew, several of whom didn't survive the filming or wouldn't talk about it if they did."

"Did the Ravinini Box actually capture color?" David asked.

Gabriel nodded.

"It captures more than that. Recorded on the film is a visual spectrum much wider than that of the human eye."

David picked up his bag and drew out the tin of film.

"So I have here the first color film, and coincidentally Taylor's last movie." His hands were trembling.

"You have more than that, if Juniper is to be believed. Juniper sought the film her entire life because she was convinced that the Ravinini Box had somehow captured some part of Reid."

"What?"

"Corrilian cameras reputedly record a person's aura. Photography is a record of events, no matter the means. Juniper knew this; she was after all a technical coordinator. But when she talked about the Ravinini Box, she always used the term 'capture'. In the seminary we were taught to refer to that which Juniper described as the soul."

Gabriel held up his hand before David could object.

"Imagine if she was right, Mr. Weston. The early Twenties were a dark time for Hollywood. Drugs, rape, murder. Insanity and lingering sickness. And it's only gotten worse, and you know it. Look at this place today. There is all that and more, on a grander scale, and now even the air is poison. Juniper thought there was something out there we could not see, something all around us, as large and nebulous as the very atmosphere itself. The lens of the Ravinini Box is analogous to a drain, or the spout of a funnel. The Box punched a hole in something huge, creating a point of vacuum. Like a fluid whirlpool it gathered itself in this place. That's why Juniper thought she could feel it, as more and more of it rushed in to fill the hollow. Day after day the Ravinini Box stole pieces of Reid's soul, but all the while it was gathering up something else, like a spread cloth knotted into a tight ball. Taylor gathered something evil into this valley. Look at you, David. You might not believe

in God, but your eyes are watering. You're scared of what you can't see. Just like Juniper."

David stared into Gabriel's hard, craggy face, and knew the man believed every word.

"I wonder what happened to the camera," David asked, half to himself. Gabriel looked back out the window.

"I've been keeping an eye on it. Juniper was the one who took it on the last day, though the film was already gone. Right now I've got it in the back of my truck."

Using the dolly David kept for heavy boxes, the two of them managed to get the huge crate out of the truck and into his office. David speculated that Gabriel might be a lunatic of some kind, but he needed him for the time being. He seemed to know a great deal about the film, and there was no harm in indulging the old priest in his strange fantasy, especially if it resulted in solving the puzzle of how the film was projected.

Gabriel squinted at the jury-rigged, antique Kleig projector David had assembled on his desk. He had matched the teeth on the spooling mechanism to those on the Ravinini film, but all progress had ended there.

"It doesn't work, does it?" Gabriel asked, tossing a thumb at it.

David shook his head. "Not even close. If I can study the camera I'll figure it out. Did Juniper tell you anything?"

"She saw Taylor's projector," Gabriel replied. He took three prisms from his pocket and set them on the desk. "Any projector will work, really. You have to set up a series of these, then bounce them off the surface of the rolling film."

"Let's do it," David said. He picked up one of the prisms and studied it. It was expensive, heavy crystal. He would have whistled with delight if it weren't for Gabriel's brooding presence. The thought of being the first person to see Taylor's last film, and in color no less, was enough to make his knees weak.

"I'll uncrate the camera first," Gabriel said. David opened his desk drawer, took out a hammer and handed it over. Gabriel pried off the sides of the crate and carefully sat the wooden slats in the corner. For a moment, David actually forgot about the film.

The Ravinini Box was utterly unlike any camera he had ever seen. A chill ran up his spine like the frozen hooves of a miniature beast prancing up his back. Cold sweat bloomed in his armpits and his

mouth went dry. Nothing could have prepared him for the sense of presence the object radiated.

It was an ancient, blackened metal box. Encrusted along the sides were various spoked nautilus dials and odd, ribbed pipes that vaguely brought to mind digestion, weaving in and out of the central cube. Strange, elaborate symbols were etched into the metal around the dials. A squat lens protruded from one side, deeply set in an ornately carved fish mouth. The reels mounted on the left side on small brackets. An ancient winder cast into the shape of a scaled fish tail protruded from the rear.

David studied the ornately etched slot where the film fed through into the interior of the mechanism. The metal around it dimpled out in the shape of a twisted mouth. It exited just down the surface from a puckered round slot, to be collected on the rear reel. He ran a finger along the rear slot and jerked his hand back. The Ravinini Box was warm.

"There're no hinges," David said. Gabriel shook his head.

"No. The metal was forged around the interior mechanism. The Box can't be opened. Juniper claimed that once she hired a man to cut it open with a torch. She said his equipment wouldn't function properly and that he eventually burned himself."

David stepped back. The Ravinini Box seemed to dominate the room, like a giant statue of a crouching black toad, almost vibrating with its readiness to launch itself. The overhead lights played along its surface in an unnatural way, failing to penetrate the minute pitting in the dark metal.

"What are the symbols around the dials?"

"Hebraic cuneiform."

"Jesus." David shook his head. "Who made this thing?"

"Juniper went to Italy herself to try and find out. There were rumors of its maker, but even I don't believe them. I think it must have been one of Edison's assistants, dabbling in the occult."

"What were the rumors?" David asked quietly. Gabriel shook his head. Outside the day had grown overcast. His face looked old and lined in the dimming light.

"There were stories of a man, a priest named Ravinini. Juniper said the old women and the gypsies knew of him, but that he had been burned as a heretic after it was discovered he had been attempting to build a device that would perform an exorcism without the presence of a priest. Ravinini died in the 1700s, over a century before Edison was born."

"I'm suddenly not so sure if we should mess with this thing," David said softly.

"We have to. Juniper believed that Reid's soul was captured in the film, along with a portion of something else. You may leave if you wish, but I must see the film."

David picked up the film canister and opened it. The strange reel of material glinted wetly. This was his office. He owned this film. This was his job.

"Let's do it."

It took Gabriel less than an hour to rig the prism assembly up to the projector. David watched over his shoulder, occasionally glancing back at the Ravinini Box with growing unease. Finally Gabriel sat back and wiped his brow with a gnarled hand.

"What now?" David asked quietly. He was afraid to raise his voice. As Gabriel worked he had begun to feel something gathering in the room, as though they were being watched.

Gabriel studied his surroundings, and then shot a smoldering glance at the Ravinini Box. He felt it too.

"Something else is here," he whispered. David nodded.

"All right, here's what we'll do. You run the projector. I'll man the Ravinini Box. We have to get Reid out, and whatever Taylor trapped with the film has to be... ungathered."

"What?" David cried, his eyes wide. "You mean this thing, you want to release it? What the hell kind of priest are you?"

Gabriel bared his teeth. "You haven't been listening," he whispered. His eyes rolled as he looked across the ceiling. His voice, already deep, dropped even lower. "It's the only way. The Ravinini Box is a failure. This abomination has been responsible for the death of thousands, maybe more. Whatever ill thing Taylor captured has to be allowed to diffuse. This cyst, this knot, must be untied."

"What if you're wrong?" David asked. Gabriel shook his head.

"It's not right or wrong, David. Taylor used this device to make the intangible tangible. We can both feel it. It was never supposed to be like this."

David was silent. Gabriel watched him expressionlessly.

"How do we go about this?" David asked finally.

"You man the projector like I asked you to," Gabriel replied. "I will use the Ravinini Box one last time, to pull the soul of Wallace Reid away from..." He trailed off.

David picked up the roll of film and placed it on the projector reel. The material felt faintly sticky in his hands and suddenly he didn't

want to touch it. He wanted to be anywhere other than there in the room, about to do this thing. He steeled himself as Gabriel moved behind the Ravinini Box and pointed the fish-mouth lens at the far wall. David turned on the projector.

Light spilled from the lens and refracted through the prisms, then reflected off the slowly unspooling reel. On David's unrolled office projector screen on the far wall, vague shapes began to take form. The sense of being watched grew with such sharp intensity that David's breath caught in his throat.

A single finger took form in the strange flickering light, writhing along the wall like a grub, followed by an arm. The fleshy hues were somehow over-ripe, like severed body parts coated in mortician's make-up. David's breath expelled in a great whoosh as Reid's silent, screaming head appeared. Behind him he could hear a low, vibrating groan as Gabriel began cranking the fish tail wheel of the Ravinini Box.

Something began to coalesce around Reid's contorted face. At first it was a vague, polluted orange cloud. The smell of putrefaction filed the room as it solidified.

"Reid!" Gabriel screamed. Reid's wild eyes flickered impossibly across the room. He could see them.

"Reid! Come forward!" Gabriel bellowed.

A howling filled the room. Scraps of paper fluttered into the dust-choked air. The edges of the swirling debris skittered along the outline of something huge crouched in the room, filling the space. David caught the shape of a beetle as trash and dust cascaded down the carapace above him. He screamed.

Reid grew larger, struggling against something, his face twisted with terror. His arms and chest dimpled from the wall. Superimposed over him were the opening credits of *The Gin Thief*. For a horrible instant his own name arced over his emerging chest.

"Now Reid!" Gabriel screamed again. David was utterly frozen.

Reid seemed to fly from the wall, disgorged from the screen. At the same instant Gabriel twisted the fish mouth. The lens of the Ravinini Box dilated open.

Lines of green light snapped into existence, emanating in a wide beam from the lens. The orange thing on the far wall struggled to follow Reid while the shape hulking around them seemed to be forced against the wall. The orange thing flashed into motion, and a blur of bright horns etched afterimages into David's skull.

"Get ready to turn it off!" Gabriel screamed over the howling wind.

In that instant David felt the terrible regard of the creature pressed against the wall. He heard Reid wail and Gabriel bellow something that was lost in the rising tornado around him. He was somehow aware that Gabriel had stopped cranking the fish tail of the Ravinini Box. The film reel was whirling furiously as it sped up of its own accord, the copper film hissing through the smoking projector.

On the far wall *The Gin Thief* played at triple speed, then faster. Dipping around the jerking marionette characters was some kind of dirty shadow. The ground shook as the essence of the thing erupted from the projector's cone of light.

Suddenly everything went dark. David fell to his knees, and then looked up to see Gabriel holding the plug of the projector in one hand. The wind died and the dust and paper settled to the floor.

Reid was hunched in the corner, sobbing. Gabriel crouched next to him. The man was fading.

"Juniper is waiting," Gabriel whispered. Reid opened his mouth to say something and in that instant vanished from existence.

Gabriel slumped against the wall. David crawled towards the Ravinini Box. He ripped the shirt from his back and threw it over the infernal machine. Gabriel staggered to his feet and together they resealed it inside the crate. Before they nailed down the lid David took the film and the prisms and tossed them in.

"Its over," Gabriel said in a cracked voice. "Ravinini's failed concept is undone." He looked at David, then put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. "Thank you."

David looked at the crate in front of them.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked.

"I haven't decided," Gabriel replied. "Juniper wanted it to be given to the church, in the hopes that they would store it forever without using it. I've considered dumping it into the ocean."

David smiled grimly. Outside a light rain was falling, the first in weeks. He shivered. "Sounds like a plan to me." •

MS lives here.

There's one thing you can predict in life.
MS makes life unpredictable.

MS Multiple Sclerosis
Society of Canada

1-800-268-7582 www.mssociety.ca

At first, MathMan thought the voices might have belonged to the Pragmatic Four, a band of business-oriented superheroes who occasionally left their Bay Street enclave to assist with crisis elsewhere in the Mega City...

Pornzilla

Hugh A. D. Spencer

BEFORE

... *Meanwhile* ...

Stewart Clarkman looked out his office window and saw the Forces of Evil descending on the parking lot.

"Gosh!" he thought, whipping off his horn-rimmed glasses and activating his optical sensors, "That's the fourth time this month!"

This time the Forces of Evil took the form of sixteen huge spiky robots with rocket launchers built into their chests and 16-millimeter cannons mounted on their heads. The big bad robots wobbled shakily on their hover disks.

"Miss Langley," Stewart pressed the intercom switch on his desk. "No calls for the next hour, I've got to write my speech for the Association of Mothers with Arithmetically Challenged House Pets."

Stewart knew this was a tremendously lame statement, but with so many attacks by the Forces of Evil he was simply running out of credible excuses.

"Yes, sir." Miss Langley's ever-efficient voice chirped back on the speaker.

Bless her heart, Stewart thought.

Stewart activated the image enhancers on his sensors and studied the big robots. Their eyes were single slits with a red orb continually

bouncing back and forth.

Hmmm, he thought. Whomever designed those robots was obviously influenced by the Battlestar Galactica marathon they'd ran on the SF Channel last Easter.

"But..." Stewart began his next cognition aloud... was this just sloppy thinking or was it some kind of kind of homage?

It might be some kind of clue...

The robots deactivated their hover disks and started stomping down the street towards Scarborough Mall, smashing the occasional car with hydraulically powered fists as they went.

Then again, Stewart decided, perhaps there was no significance to this pop culture reference.

With that, the youthful, socially-aware chartered accountant tore off his tie, pulled open his shirt to reveal the green spandex leotard beneath. The world-famous πr^2 symbol on the leotard seemed to barely contain the massive chest and abdominal muscles of a super-powered fighter of crime.

And with the quivering excitement that never seemed to dim with the passage of time, Stewart Clarkman spoke the magic formula for the factoring of quadratic equations... to become Math Man, the Algebraic Avenger!

Clutching his solar-powered slide rule (an artifact from an earlier era of mathematical achievement—and a unique source of mystic power), Math Man flew out the office window.

I just hope... Math Man thought as the sun gleamed like a heroic beacon off his magnificently bald head... *that I can dispatch these mechanisms before Miss Langley notices that I'm gone.*

Math Man needn't have worried.

Because Lisa Langley, Stewart Clarkman's humble but perky secretary, had a secret of her own!

"Thank goodness, he's gone!" Lisa whispered to herself as she ducked into a nearby powder room. Then, clicking on what seemed to be a normal ballpoint pen, Lisa Langley was instantly transformed into that paragon of super-effective super-empowerment: Logistics Lass!

Her optical sensors immediately revealed the most efficient route to the skies outside the office building—where she spotted Math Man circling the robots as they strode down toward the poorer part of town.

"Surrender immediately!" the superhero called down to the huffing and puffing mechanisms. "Or I'll reduce you to all to pile of improper fractions!"

"Up your vector space!" one of the robots growled back in a harsh metallic voice.

"Hey, big guy!" Logistics Lass laughed. "Save some of the bash-task for me!"

"The more the merrier!" Math Man said. As always he was delighted to see a fellow crime fighter on hand to help. Although, it was strange that Logistics Lass always seemed so close at hand recently, and come to think of it... why had he never seen her and Miss Langley in the same room together?

This chain of thought was interrupted by a blast from the head cannon of one of the bad robots.

As the battle of metal fists and calculation, rockets and logic continued, Math Man was able to explain the attack plan of the robots to Logistics Lass:

"It all seems to be a variation of the same pattern. Just about every other day, the Forces of Evil make another attempt to destroy the non-HR neighborhoods," he said grimly as he tore the leg of one of the mechanisms.

The sound of the crash was so loud, that Logistics Lass had to raise her voice to be heard:

"But why? Because they think no one will bother to defend non-virtual people?" As she spoke, Logistics Lass deflected the aim of one of the robot missiles so that it destroyed three of its evil metal comrades.

"I doubt it," replied Math Man as he calculated the exact amount of finger pressure to pull of the head of another robot. "The details of my Code of Crime-Fighting Conduct are well-known."

"Absolutely!" laughed Logistics Lass as the toppling body of the third robot crushed another one that happened to be looking in the wrong direction. "Everybody knows that you are sworn to protect even analog communities."

"So why—" began Man Math.

"*Oh, this is very naughty!*" screamed a youthful voice.

"*You bad robots have made a terrible mess of this neighborhood!*" echoed another.

"What the—?!" cried Logistics Lass.

Every Day is Play Day!

At first Math Man thought the voices might have belonged to the Pragmatic Four, a band of business-oriented superheroes who occasionally left their Bay Street enclave to assist with crisis elsewhere

in the MegaCity.

But no, this was not the equation he'd expected.

"Is that who I think it is?" said Logistics Lass.

There was no mistaking the silver-blond hair and the orange and pink plastic corvette convertible.

Blast, he realized. It was Stephanie and her Pals.

"What are they doing here?" For an instant, Logistics Lass looked as though she didn't have a plan.

"More importantly," Math Man replied through clenched teeth, "How did they get here?"

Stephie and Penny didn't act as though they were out of their co-action field. They didn't think even seem to be worried about being ground into silicon pellets by the most monstrous killer robots that SuperTown had ever generated.

The young models just jumped out of their car and strode over to the remaining robots.

"Didn't your mommies ever tell you not to break things when you play?" Stephanie waved her finger at the biggest of the bad robots.

"My mommie was a tank..." replied the robot.

"Well, that's no excuse!" Penny, the happy-go-lucky one, said. "Even mobile artillery have to mind their manners."

"Ah..." The sigh of the robot sounded like a blast furnace dying a slow death. "We're sorry."

"Well, if you're really sorry..." Stephanie began.

"We are, we are!" the robots all nodded their heads—which was difficult because the cannons weighed quite a lot.

"I don't believe this!" Logistics Lass whispered in disgust.

Math Man was simply at a loss for words. It just didn't add up.

But Stephanie certainly knew what to say:

"If you're sorry, you'll clean up this mess and go back home."

"Something's not quite right..." Math Man muttered.

Logistics Lass briefly wondered if this was some kind of hoax or imaginary tale.

But the robots, heads still down, walked back the way they came. Penny held the hand of the robot at the front of the line.

"Don't worry!" Stephanie waved to the two superheroes who were now semi-hiding behind an antennae tower of a nearby building. "We'll take these silly robots back to where they belong."

"Th-thanks!" Math Man found it difficult to call back, but he felt he had to make some kind of acknowledgement.

The two of them watched the robots and the doll-girls disappear down the street.

"This is too easy," Math Man said. "I just hope this isn't some kind of plot."

"Never mind about that!" Suddenly, Logistics Lass pushed Math Man flat onto the rooftop. "I want your super-jism!"

"What the—?!" Math Man gasped as his partner tore off his spandex shorts and grasped his penis. He noticed that Logistics Lass' breasts seemed to swell to twice their normal size and glow with a dangerous and unearthly erotic energy.

"Must resist—" he growled through clenched teeth.

Logistics Lass just growled.

His penis hardened in an incredible pulsing hulk of rigid flesh. He couldn't resist.

So, they fucked for the next twelve hours.

After the Planet Exploded...

Later, now in his everyday (if somewhat aching) identity, Stewart Clarkman dashed down the fire escape—hoping that the finally sleeping Logistics Lass wouldn't stir before he escaped.

He knew that this was his chance to find some clue to his partner's identity, but frankly, more knowledge about Logistics Lass was the last thing he wanted.

Something is very wrong here, Stewart thought as found his car in the office parking lot. I'll have to send a distress signal.

And in another part of the City...

Since they had houseguests, a new kitchen set was an absolute necessity. After a very competitive round of "eeny-meeny-mini-moe", Jodi and Penny were the lucky Pals who got to use it for the first time.

All your friends will want to join the fun!

So were the heck were they? Stephanie saw a distinct gray worm of ash nestled in the stainless steel sink.

Cigarette butt? Stephanie wasn't sure how it got there but she sure knew that it was absolutely gross!

She bounded up the stairs; it looked like she needed to talk to her Pals.

Smoking was so uncool! It just didn't happen in Stephanie's world. Besides if her Pals didn't want to play, why didn't they give someone else a chance to use the new toys? Her feet left a trail of waffle-iron

tracks on the artificial shag carpet that lined the hallway leading to Jodi and Penny's room.

"I'm going to give you girls a real talking to!" Stephie swung their bedroom door open.

Stephie saw something even grosser than a cigarette butt.

Jodi and Penny were doing something really weird with the robots they'd picked up at SuperTown.

One of the robots was in Jodi's bed. It was stretched out on top of Jodi and kind of moving around. Somehow she'd managed to wrap her feet over the robot's shoulders.

The other robot was laying on the floor beside the bed. Penny was sitting on him and sort of bouncing around. Stephie wasn't sure but it looked like there was some kind of greasy snake trapped between Penny and the robot.

Stephie meant to yell: "Cut that out!" and "If you can't play nice, you can't play at all!"

What she actually said was "Ack!" followed by a gurgling, choking kind of a sound. Then she collapsed onto the artificial orange fabric.

DURING

"...it's off to work we go!"

"Did you get a look at the distress footage?"

Morrow had his head back in the electronic toilet, communicating with Bradley. Service rep conference call.

"Yeah, I did," Morrow replied.

"Pretty hot, eh?"

"Yeah. I already got some good credit downloading it onto the Pornzilla site."

"You're a real entrepreneur, Morrow," Bradley e-pathed a leer at him.

"Yeah."

"Technically none of that was possible," Bradley continued. "It would have to be a core-redefinition of the StephiePal Paradigm,"

"Guess you're right," Morrow replied. "Except that it actually happened." Morrow wasn't going to get worked up about this, obviously this it was just some new kind of glitch here.

"Okay!" a louder thought-voice boomed out from a much more expensive digital head bowl and echoed through Morrow's and Bradley's minds.

"Let's get into action, here!"

Supervisor Price was had just joined the conference call: "We've

got some dissatisfied customers here."

Price was a very direct and aggressive administrator, his mental transmissions always gave Morrow a headache.

"We've got to find out what the problem is and fix it!"

Morrow wondered how much they paid Price to make obvious statements like this. Then he hoped he'd remembered to have the part of his brain that generated thoughts like that privacy protected.

"Any idea what the hell is going on here?!"

Bradley had more available wet ware capacity (i.e. he was smarter than Morrow), so he spoke first:

"We don't have much after the initial diagnostic. There's definitely some kind of inappropriate actor/analytic overlap here."

"Inappropriate?! Jeez! Tell me something I don't know!"

How come Price could identify obvious statements from other people but not from himself, Morrow wondered.

"We're also picking up a pattern where HR neighborhoods with Family-Values Information Architecture seem to deteriorate into protracted adult scenarios."

"Hell's bells, man! *Are we talking about sex?*"

Big e-path sigh from Bradley. "Yes. Definite sexual situations. Pretty extreme ones."

Now Morrow hoped that his mind really was privacy protracted here. Price really didn't need to know what he'd downloaded off the incident records.

"This could be a public relations disaster!" Price proclaimed.

"Yes, sir. And the customers aren't very happy about it either."

Suddenly Morrow became aware of an eighteen-digit number.

"Morrow, you still got an active driver's license?" Price asked.

"Yeah." He wasn't all that keen to use it these days.

"These are the coordinates of complaints from all HR neighbourhoods. Go pick up the nearest company car and get over there."

Shit. This meant that Morrow would have to leave his apartment and head toward the city centre. He never enjoyed that.

And even now in SuperTown...

Even integrated with his Stewart Clarkman avatar, Oliver Kynes didn't look terribly comfortable. Maybe managing a secret identity within a secret identity was a bit much sometimes. Anyway, that's the impression Morrow got when he e-pathed the guy to make the appointment at his place in SuperTown.

Morrow could relate. They'd shipped him some really ugly clothes with a truly stupid logo and told him that this was supposed to be the company uniform. Several things really bugged him about this: a) that some research group had actually found a way to make a fabric that was 150% polyester (and you can imagine how comfortable that might be) and; b) that it looked like something that had fallen off a Z-Burger truck (totally bogus) and; c) he had to change out of his terrycloth housecoat (for the first time in almost two years).

Morrow wasn't sure he knew how to think properly if he wasn't wearing his housecoat. Terrycloth was so much more conducive to creative problem solving.

Why the hell did he have to come all the way out here?

HyperReality communities like SuperTown started out as digitally enhanced gated communities but over the years they acquired more and more environmental animation. Maybe living in a "seamless integration of the physical and media worlds" got a little too self-referential. Maybe the residents needed some extra action and adventure to keep them motivated.

Or maybe, Morrow used to wonder in one of his more introspective moments, maybe people just wanted to get even further away from anything resembling reality.

Whenever you left the parking lot and walked into any HR streetscape you would find yourself surrounded by all kinds of streamers, banners and floating screens carrying just about any sort of sensory augmentation you could think of.

So you could create places like StephePals and SuperTown. The latter was based on a series of early 70s educational TV shorts using superheroes to teach basic concepts of math, reading and civics. The former was a world based on a set of collectible dolls and accessories.

Morrow thought developing massive collections of digital pornography was much healthier.

Maybe it was just economic envy. To pursue the HR lifestyle you had to be pretty comfortable. HR residents were definitely dependent on people like Morrow, but people like Morrow didn't make enough to live there.

Still, Morrow thought as he rolled towards his appointment, it pays the bills. And anybody who's hobby was electronically enhanced masturbation really couldn't criticize other people's preferences.

And here he was at his destination—the Metro Guardian Building. A massive Art Deco conceptualization—at least seven-eighths of it was

pure holographic projection. God knows what the thing really looked like. But at least there was lots of parking.

Wearing that polyester uniform was making Morrow cranky.

The physical meeting with Oliver Keynes, a.k.a. Stewart Clarkman, a.k.a. Math Man was something of a dose of reality:

"I think I'm the victim of some kind of sexual harassment."

"Sexual?!" Morrow tried really hard to sound shocked and surprised. "How could such a thing happen here? SuperTown is a Family-rated environment."

Keynes was sitting at his office desk and shaking a little. "That's what I always thought! But every time Logistics Lass and I would go on a mission... well..."

"Well?" Morrow flipped on his recorder. Maybe he'd get something good to trade here.

"Well..." Judging from Keynes's look of embarrassment, Morrow figured this was definitely going to be good. "...somehow our costumes would get torn off, or we'd be tied together for hours in an abandoned warehouse, or a villain would use a powerful love ray on us..."

Morrow was getting pretty interested but he knew he had to be pretty careful here:

"...and you would find yourself in some sort of..." What the fuck kind of appropriate wording could he use here? "...compromising situation?"

"Yes! Every time!" Keynes looked as though he might start to cry. "After three weeks of this, I was so ashamed and so exhausted. I just told her that we couldn't go on any more missions."

"But that didn't solve your problem?"

"No." Keynes was leaking around the eyes a little. "She just started sending me fake distress signals, pretending to be other characters, even telepathically implanting messages like this..."

Keynes covered his eyes as he activated an imaging surface on his desk.

Jackpot, thought Morrow. Pretty hot stuff.

"I'm afraid I'll need all copies of those," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "For purposes of analysis."

Sometimes you get to make new friends!

The apartment/imaging studio wasn't really working anymore. Now it was just a place for lots of stacks of shipping boxes.

The fierce chromakey blue on the walls was giving Morrow a headache.

"You really don't have to come around here!" Miriam Cruikshank

a.k.a. Stephie #981,437 wasn't all that different from her avatar. Maybe just a little smaller, a little more angular and a lot angrier.

Morrow had read the manual before his visit. Stephies were always supposed to glow with a sense of "optimism and sociability".

Obviously, not always.

Right now, this Stephie was folding up appliances and jamming them into the moving boxes.

"Besides, I don't know what went wrong with the programme," she said.

"That's not unusual," Morrow replied. "You're supposed to enjoy the environment, not understand it."

"Well, I didn't enjoy it!" she barked back. "And I don't like being told that I'm just usual."

"We'll do whatever it takes to make it right ma'am—"

"I don't want the fucking scenario fixed! I want a new one!"

A Stephie using the 'f' word? Now that was *not* usual. And that attitude wasn't going to make her the most popular girl at school.

"Even so," Morrow said as evenly as possible (there might be an good angle here as well) "We have to take a wider view of the situation. We have other clients and we need to know what went wrong."

"Fuck your other clients!"

Morrow was so happy. People would to kill to hear a Stephie avatar talk this way.

It got better: She stomped around the room and when she unrolled the packing tape over the top of one of boxes it sounded like someone cutting a pig's throat.

Man, she was pissed! Morrow kept the recorder going.

She kicked the box in the direction of the door.

"I thought Penny and Jodi were supposed to be my friends!"

Morrow decided to try and sound impartial here:

"Sometimes when a scenario takes an unexpected direction, the relationships between the players can get quite confused."

"Tell me about it." Stephie #981,437 zipped up her pink rubber greatcoat and looked at the doorway.

"I need your permission to capture the full record for analysis." Morrow was nervous here. He really wanted the actual incident footage—he could make a real killing.

"You must be shitting me!"

Morrow knew that a fast response was essential here:

"All identity codes will be masked, and of course, we pixelate

the faces of all players" (Not!)

"Jesus H. Christ..." Stephanie sighed.

"There's also some financial compensation involved." Morrow lied figuring he could easily afford this. "Although it usually takes the form of software credits."

Stephie sighed again. "Fuck. Take whatever you want. Just don't make me look at it again."

A few hours later, when he was processing the records, Morrow knew that he'd made the right decision. He had all of it: oral, anal, facials, group shots and even some stuff that he wasn't sure what the hell it was.

And he also knew why Stephanie/Cruikshank was so pissed. When the four-some became a six-some, then an eight-some and ten-some... nobody asked her to join. Kind of like being of being the last kid picked for the softball (hardcore?) team. Hurts your feelings.

Guess that's what happens when you're so bossy.

... and now a public service message ...

"Did you check out the Stephanie download?"

Bradley was disengaged. "Yeah. Nice resolution."

"Nice resolution?" Morrow couldn't believe this. "What about the content, man? Wasn't it incredibly hot?"

"Hot?" Bradley really did seem to be thinking about something else. "Yeah, I guess." He chuckled briefly. "Yeah, it looked like the Suzie avatar actually grew a new orifice near the end there."

"Doesn't get much nastier than that," Morrow said. "We'll do well."

"It gets much nastier than that," Bradley said in that "you-can-be-so-naïve" voice, "But I agree you should be able to get some good credit for it."

Then Morrow heard Bradley's telephonically/telepathically-enhanced sniffing echoing through his receptor bowl.

"What's up?"

"Tell me," Bradley answered. "What do you think we can get for all these new downloads?"

"Hell man!" Morrow laughed. "Our choice of any kind of real-time group action, access to some of the new Malaysian bondage sites. Just out of curiosity we might even look into the zoological services."

A short, sharp, sublingual message cracked out through Morrow's consciousness: "YUK!"

You of all people shouldn't judge!" Morrow barked back. "I know

what kind of shit you've got stashed away."

"Back to my original question," Bradley said. "What the hell do we ever get from downloading porn onto the network? Besides more porn for ourselves?"

"Yeah, isn't it great?" Morrow laughed.

"Why didn't you join this morning's maintenance meeting?"

Okay, thought Morrow. Change of subject. Probably significant in some nerd-head way.

"I was busy. Had a backlog of client requests..."

"Bullshit," Bradley said evenly. "I know your work schedule. You were masturbating."

Don't sound defensive, Morrow said to himself.

"Yeah, that's part of the fun of this job isn't it?"

"How many hours a day do you figure you spend abusing yourself?"

"Uh..."

"Two? Four? Six?"

"Eight! How I love to masturbate!" Morrow tried to sound jovial. "What's your point, Bradley? You're the biggest wanker in North America."

"Oh, I don't disagree," Bradley replied. "And if you're anything like me, you'll probably have started noticing that you're stroking time has started cutting into other things into your life, like reading, listening to music..."

Who cares about that crap these days, thought Morrow.

"... working ... eating?"

"This discussion is getting boring, Bradley."

"Oh, something you'd rather be doing, right now, Morrow? Perhaps involving some manual stimulation?"

"What the hell is your point?!"

Long pause.

"Morrow. Access the Fiction Section of the Toronto Public Library System. Check out some passages from the books."

This was just weird. "Which ones?"

"Anything at random. Patch in your optics so I can watch what you read."

"Okay."

The Trial.

The simple but formal text describes a protracted mutual oral sex scene between Joseph K and his housekeeper—presumably K. is in

search of comfort after his mysterious arrest. At the moment of climax K feels as though the escape of his life fluids might somehow transform him into some kind of monstrous insect...

"Hey, Kafka is a little hotter than I remembered!" Morrow said
"I'm enjoying it, too," Bradley replied. "But, pick another book."
Sure.

Treasure Island.

In just a quick skim, Morrow read of young Jim Hawkins hiding in the closet of a tavern, watching a buxom barmaid use Long John Silver's wooden leg for an intimate purpose.

"Now, that's just not right!" Morrow protested. "I know that's not in the book.

What is this, a novelization of a video?"

"Good guess, but no," Bradley said.

"What's going on here?"

"It's kind of complicated. Try another book."

Okay, Morrow thought, let's stick with the nautical theme.

Moby Dick.

Powerfully inspired by the butchering of an enormous sperm-whale penis, Captain Ahab instructs his first-mate to lead the ship's crew of in a carefully timed circle jerk...

Morrow screamed: "WHAT?!"

"Well, if you'd made the meeting, you might have a better idea of what's going on."

"Okay, okay..." Morrow was embarrassed by his reaction. "There's nothing new about slash fiction, and obviously there's some kind of programme slippage from a porn system into the library's knowledge architecture."

"That's what you think?"

"Sure, it's like what's been happening with the HR communities like Stephe's world and SuperTown."

"Slippage?"

"Or spill."

"Try invasion."

Bradley called up a diagnostic programme. Everywhere the data palaces and information structures of the city had been changed. All the systems looked like they'd fused together into something even more complex, organic...

Morrow hesitated...

...into something pulsating and very wet.

"The boss says the entire City network is evolving into a sexual paradigm."

"Which means?"

How could it be sexual, Morrow wondered. It wasn't hot, it was just freaking scary.

"It means that everything is becoming pornography."

PART THREE: AFTER

Miriam...

"It's your decision, hun, she said to the new girl. "You can have a live-in room or just use it for days or evenings."

Miriam Cruikshank (now a.k.a. Madame Serena #823,691) eyed the young woman sitting in front of her, nice tits, good ass and legs, a little heavy in the waist but nothing that good corset couldn't take care of.

Should be a money-maker.

"Okay," the girl said not really looking at anything.

Stoned, Miriam thought with disgust. Even in a fake world, some people still needed to get stoned.

"Of course the rent for a live-in is higher and the cost for the cleaners comes out of your tips." Miriam opened a drawer and pulled out a very large box of condoms. The box had to be large because many of the condoms were such odd shapes.

"You'll need to use these," Miriam explained, because the resolution is so good in this world, you won't know when you're dealing with a real person or an avatar."

Even in her tranquilized state, the girl looked a little alarmed as she inspected the range of styles.

"Okay?"

"Don't worry," Miriam laughed. "One of the girls on your floor will show you how to use them. Some of them are kind of fun."

"Okay..."

Miriam started making notes on a pad of paper. This one didn't seem too bright, so it didn't hurt to review the basics: "Now remember the values, \$5,000 for a manual release, \$8,000 for blow and \$12,000 for all-inclusive."

"Okay."

Miriam sighed. "You know, I'm sure you're really going to enjoy your time here, but I have to tell you, if you're really going to succeed here,

you're going to have to show a little more enthusiasm."

"Okay, oh!" At this point the girl seemed to wake up a little. "Yeah, sure! No problem."

That's good, thought Miriam. She has nice eyes. Some of her more sensitive guests seemed to care about that shit.

"Now run along," Miriam lit something that simulated the taste and effects of an opium-tipped Russian cigar. "I'll check on you after you've had a chance to settle in."

Miriam closed her eyes and inhaled. When she opened her eyes again, the girl was gone and Miriam could feel the buzz coming on. This was definitely a better game, she decided. She got to meet some interesting people and handle some pretty wild situations. And just like the days when *StephiePals* was fun, she got to call the shots.

Morrow...

The de-installation crew had left about four hours ago. Morrow's apartment was no longer a creative hub in the digital experience sphere of HyperReality.

Nope. Now it was just the bed sitting room of a loser in a bad part of town. It was also an apartment that Morrow wasn't sure where he would get the rent for.

Out of work again. And no way was he going to get any Employment Insurance on this one.

But he had to get out. Not that he felt personally responsible. By the estimates of his own company at least 2.5 billion people a month were feeding data-growth media into what more and more experts were recognizing as a gigantic erotic AI network.

Of course, thought Morrow as he removed his last two beers from the refrigerator, his leaving the company wouldn't make any difference either. Maybe it was just that he didn't like knowing all the facts and being unable to do anything about it.

He dropped onto the sofa and sucked back on the cold can.

Morrow knew he was screwed (and not in the good sense) when he discovered that the Porn-AI had even infected the on-line company operating manuals:

"...updating the archives protocol will be curiously thrilling experience... as the patch software engages, you will feel an odd but urgent pressure rising deep within you and your site computer... this pressure will build... it is best to yield..."

Morrow knew that he'd reached his limits and he knew there was

no way he could function in an environment like that. Yeah, he was a total porn-hound but after a week with working in the new AI, he'd probably be insane. Hell, he might not even be sentient.

Morrow noticed that he'd already consumed seven-eighths of his first can of beer. He picked up a copy of the local paper and flipped over to the classifieds. Cold turkey on the smut. Now he had to go out and get a real job.

Oliver...

"I just hope this works..."

In past few weeks, Math Man had been forced to become a realist. He knew that even with his increased computational powers and the strength of his authorized Oath of Celibacy, he might not be equal to this challenge.


He flew slowly over the vast mass of glistening flesh and pulsing tendrils that had absorbed almost all of SuperTown. Just about everyone was somewhere inside there... including his beloved Logistics Lass.

Now she was probably just some connecting twinge in some unending orgasmic response.

Math Man knew that no form of reason, no statement of fact, no matter how arithmetically pure, might be able to control the gigantic tidal wave of living lust beneath him.

Some of the few who were immune chose to leave SuperTown, and try to set up new and decent virtual lives somewhere else. But Math Man knew he couldn't do that. He would stay and fight, no matter what.

What else could he do? •



NEO-OPSIS
Science Fiction Magazine
*Art, Opinion, Fact
and Fiction*

Single issues
\$6.95 Canadian

Subscriptions
\$24.00 Canadian
(four Issues)

www.neo-opsis.ca
4129 Carey Rd
Victoria BC
V8Z 4G5

I can never pass a door
marked "Do not open"—
I deleted eight icons. A week
later I restored seven...

Judgement

Catherine MacLeod

I bought a used computer from a nervous guy disposing of all his worldly goods. It had a surprising amount of crap on the desktop.

Impulsive by nature—I can never pass a door marked "Do not open"—I deleted eight icons. A week later I restored seven.

But the eighth won't stay in the recycler. Drag 'n' drop doesn't work.

It was on-screen when I first booted 'er up, between the inbox and the word processor:

Judgement Day. If it's a game no one's ever heard of it. The previous owner blessed me hysterically and hung up when I asked.

The icon looks like a sunburst. I admit, I'm curious.

Well... what could it hurt? •

Most were sceptical of Bridget's father's claim, but they knew he was no fool, and she was marched soon enough to the wharf to prove that they were once again blessed.

Bridget's Blessing

Peter Hynes

Teacup nurtured in arthritic hands grateful for the heat, she sat in her window chair, head pressed to the tangerine quilt caped over its back, and awaited their arrival. She wondered what it was like to trek across that plateau, precipice on one side, sea-froth well below, frozen deck of emptiness beyond. Half-blind for blowing snow, glaring albino expanse filling in the other half. She opened a circle in the window's frost with a corner of the quilt, sipped at her tea, and watched the figures move closer. No longer shadows cut from the drifts, they were close enough now to offer textures, contrasts, skin and dark wool finally separated. The one at the lead had his head down in focused direction, long legs unconcerned with the deep snow. Even at this distance, the hat, the gait, the determination were all familiar.

Philip. She wondered if he knew.

So be it if he did. He could stay long enough to shake off the cold-limb lethargy, if such a thing be possible, and make his recriminations. And then Mr. Philip Morley could take his breathless self back to the seabed with his boat and leave her be.

Bridget moved to the woodstove, stoked it, let some heat work into her joints. She flexed her hands, knuckles cracked in reply, and grit her teeth against their stubbornness. Traced the lines from fingers

back to wrists, trying to find the onset of this agedness. She usually avoided sitting by the window, porous as it was to the chill, but watching the men approach helped her deal with the anticipation.

She could have gone into the bedroom and gazed out the window there. Out towards the village, perhaps still just visible through the blowing snow. Perched like a gull searching the waters for food. The clump of little houses, shacks more likely, were plain and sturdy, ornamented with reminders of the town's simple attitude towards life—clotheslines abounded, one slice-marked stump used for chopping block per yard, the occasional rooster weather vane (most so rusted no wind could impart any information regarding direction). A net to be mended might be curled up on the slip of planks running before the porch door. Plenty of peeling sheds in backyards to sequester split wood. A single road that wound and crept until everyone had a piece running past their house, no sense or care as to where it began or ended. One merchant's, good enough store it was too, so long as you needed nails or flour.

The wharf was out of eyes' reach, but she could see it. Both her former prestige and present exile in shame had been born there.

Eight years old, tall for her age but most of it neck. Father was finishing his new boat, no leviathan, just twenty feet of capable reliability. What else would Father value? Bridget loved the shape, how it closed forward to a point, always certain and obvious in its direction. She ran a hand over the smooth gunwale and whispered, "Safe."

Her father had stopped whatever task, leaned over the opposite gunwale. "What, Bridgie? What'd ya say, love?"

"Safe," she had repeated. Tapping the keel and laughing. "Daddy safe."

"Yes," he said, picking her up and taking her into the wheelhouse. "Daddy safe."

Three months after the boat first got its bottom smacked by the waves, a drop-to-your knees gale staggered the coast, blew in from nowhere near and stayed. Six boats of that village had been on the water. One returned.

"Safe," her father had whispered when, cloaked in salt-smell and with rope-burned hands, he lifted her from her bed that night. "Daddy safe."

The village had become unlucky. The worst sort of unluck—lost boats, lost men, and what other village would take any craven enough to desert? No thanks, no room, stay warm.

Father had waited, hesitated, she was eight years old, barely aware of her own footprints behind her, let alone the love the sea could have

for some. But he made it known, above Mother's protests and with his child's confused, unblinking trust.

"She can Christen," he told the town.

And their luck changed.

It had been so long, so many generations since last the village had one who could Christen, that it had given up looking. Took its ills with grief and good grace and counted the safe return of each boat, each evening, as a sign that they were doing right. Never so pitiable as to think that the sea held any malevolence toward them. Simply that it gave no heed to their fragility when it, what? Threw tantrums, swelled with pride, rolled in its sleep? They bobbed and fished and hoped it did not notice them at all.

Most were skeptical of Bridget's father's claim, but they knew he was no fool, and she was marched soon enough to the wharf to prove that they were once again blessed. Or that the old superstitions ought to be reburied.

Bridget had rifled an aged aunt's equally aged shelf of encyclopedia volumes before she was to conduct her first Christening, precocious even at eight, and while repeated readings and lip-biting were necessary to extract all the meaning from the entry, it nonetheless instilled in her a sense of importance. A lineage, perhaps.

The christening of ships, the mouldering greenbacked volume said, went back four thousand years, when the Vikings would inaugurate their vessels with human sacrifice, the spilling of blood most fit to placate gods beside which the senile petulance of her parents' old testament deity seemed wasteful. Later, wine would be substituted, and kings and priests would make it ceremony. There were no gold cups or princes in these parts, but appeasance to old gods remained, if dressed in tradition and community.

Coaxed and coached by her father, the nervous child had blessed the boats, which would seem increasingly fragile as she grew. And over time, as each vessel not only returned safely, but near swamped with teeming cargo, she was treated less with cursory courtesy and more with awe.

It was the last that fulfilled her. Far better than being a mere fisherman's housekeeper, coarse of hand and sunken of eye, as most of the village's women became. Standing on the dark, salt-licked wood of the wharf, the loosely lashed boats bobbing all about her, she would dip her hands into the ocean and lay them on each prow, saying simply,

"Safe." Not merely for new boats, but before every trip, at every dawn. She never minded rising early, being the wife of a fisherman, it was no great adjustment for her. Even if Philip had to adjust to making his own tea each morning. She could hardly be cooking porridge when there were men to keep from harm.

Bridget skittered to the chair, sat, rose again. Since a child, accepting the strange power she had over the oldest, grandest force in this world, but this, now so close, now *here*, it was too hard, too strange to see a water-robbed husband strolling to the door as though he had just tied up *Bridget's Blessing*.

And how he had fought her over that name, as though it was her idea and not that of the town. How could he not acknowledge her, when her hands brought the dear thing home again each night? She had caught herself those three decades ago mourning the loss of that boat, while the neighbours assumed she spoke of her husband. But it was too late for shame, by then.

Now they were coming back. Coming to remind her of past decisions and desires. Coming to end her comfort.

She counted a half-dozen figures shuffling closer, dodging between sheets of snow like actors making repeated curtain calls. There was Glenn Stokes, staggering as he did in life, though she could not imagine where he found drink now besides seawater. Quiet Steven Critch, one hand always in a pocket, hiding the lack of three fingers taken decades ago by an axe that lost its grip on an icy log. He could still haul a net better than any other in the town, and Bridget had always thought his embarrassment unjustified. And Daniel. Daniel, Daniel...? Married Loretta Keating, but she never took his name, that must be why it could not be recalled. She had asked Philip about him once, and he had replied, "Steers straight." Following came Bobby Hanlin, Bobby Hang-On: he always had a hand on a secure piece of the boat, even on calm water. She doesn't doubt he stayed with *Bridget's Blessing* to the bottom—he would never have gone overboard, not even as she was swallowed.

And Philip.

He stood quietly, studying the house, perhaps wondering how she could have come to be living in this drafty shack that hadn't seen paint or tar in over a decade, when he had built her, them, a perfectly sound home not a half mile from here. Took no hand in making it livable *inside*, of course. Keeps heat in and water out, 'tis livable, sayeth Philip Morley.

The rime on the window made him look so pale, ice in his hair, she could not tell if it was still as high-night black as when he was alive.

Bridget stepped away from the window, pulled the kettle off the woodstove and poured shaky streams into two fresh cups. The teabags bobbed for a moment, rolled over, then slowly settled back to the bottom, bubbles of released air frothing the surface.

Perhaps Philip would not be wanting tea after all.

She heard the crunch of snow at the outside door, still unbroken to now, none to clear it from her entrance, none to punch boot-shaped holes in it; it had snowed since the last delivery of dried goods and milk powder, that three days ago, and another not due for half a week. Bridget believed that the townsman sent on those deliveries only knocked to see if she was still casting breath, to see if his marches to her place of exile were truly, blessedly, done. She saw the disappointment in his eyes each time she opened it. Just as he dropped the sagging box of essentials to the porch floor, perfunctorily tipped his cap, and headed back to the village. To her last day, there would be reminders.

This knock was more patient than that of the delivery man, firmer than the old priest when he summoned her the night Philip's boat sank. That one, *that* one was the reason she was here. She might forgive him one day. After all, how could he not hate that his blessings, while more poetic, were never as effective as hers? How he gloated that long-dead day of the loss of *Bridget's Blessing*. Turned from God to superstition, he had told the town, and their fortune was up, unless they turned back to Him. No thought to the hundreds of safe returns she had wrought, only of the one she did not.

Philip was knocking at the door. Bridget smoothed her smock, orange flowers faded to mulch. Had he forgotten how to use a door handle? What if she did not open it for him? Would he stand there pounding the wood until it splintered? How likely that the sea had leached the stubbornness from him?

She walked into the little porch and pulled the door towards her. None of the other men looked at her or broke their rhythmic pacing. She peered over Philip's shoulder, he still filled most of the doorway, told her heart to stop its foolishness, and turned back to the living room.

"Well, dear, you've come this far," she said over a shoulder. "You might's well come the rest of the way."

Philip, closing the door, removing his cap, ducking beneath the doorway, halting at the woodstove. She had remembered his height, but he towered so here—this house was smaller than the one they had shared, but still. She forewent the chair, already feeling the shrinkage of age before him, not wanting to exacerbate it. She waved toward the

steaming teacups, her breath frozen as the air just swept in the door. He shook his head. Ice fell from his hair to the carpet. They both watched it soften and puddle.

"Hello, Bridgie."

She swallowed tears that seemed to slide down the backs of her eyes, unable to leave by the usual route, likely lost, she had shed few enough in this life. "Hello, yourself," she managed. Rubbed her aching hands. "You've come a fair hike."

He nodded, still watching the salt water on the floor. He glanced sidewise about the house, nodding as though a suspicion had been confirmed. Philip waved his hat at a far wall.

"The boat collection didn't make the trip."

"Oh, no," she said. She had left behind all those pictures of the village boats, the ones given to her by their owners, that she might watch over them even away from the wharf. "Hardly a need."

Philip held a hand over the stove, flexed his fingers. She bit down a complaint about her own aged joints. She sought out a window. A blown glass swan on the side table. Her useless 8-track player, the equally useless gospel tapes beside it. A pattern on the carpet, her sagging boots behind the stove...

"For blessed's sake, Mother, sit down before you make yourself dizzy."

She moved to her chair, unwilling to show the relief as she sat. Mother. Childless and aged to barrenness, and he *still* called her Mother. How was that healthy, a grown man and all? "No need to get sharp, Philip."

He sighed, mauled his cap awhile. "What're you doin' up here, girl? Somethin' happen to our house?"

"The house? Oh dear, no. I believe it's still there. Long empty, mind you. You can just see it from the bedroom," she waved towards it, "and it stands. More'n that, I couldn't say."

"So, they ran you out."

"Well, they didn't pelt me with rocks, or anything. Clear enough I wasn't welcome. They did put this place up pretty fast, I'll say that."

"Look's it," Philip said.

"Yes, well. Not much good of a Christener what can't bring her own husband home safe."

He did not respond to this, content to watch her shift and settle. Him and his damned silence. Was a time he never faltered in speaking his mind, especially when it was about her place in the hearts of the village. Shamed. Shamed by being reduced from a reliable worker, a skilled

fisher, a dependable, honest man, to being her husband. *What a terrible thing*, she would mock. *To be known as my husband! Only*, he would mutter. *Only your husband*. As though every woman of that community had not suffered the same half-humanity, known by the man they served rather than as flesh and blood. He had no right to resent her, certainly not to call her the things he had—haughty, vain, you're not a goddess, or whatever goddamned thing you think you are you're a woman like any other but that the sea fancies you and by God it will want you for itself some day...

"Damn you, Philip."

He tilted his head as the words sauntered out her lips like parolees at the prison gate. She stroked the quilt as a tear finally found a course to her face.

"No," Philip said. "I wouldn't call it damnation." He rubbed at the skin of his face, his neck. "These old clothes don't fit like they used to." She looked at his bruised yellow oil pants, the high-collared sweater, the briary cap. She felt he was not even aware of their presence, and could make little sense of his statement. He lifted the cap from the kettle to check its level. "You know why I've come, Bridgie."

"Don't know any such thing. Torment me, most likely. Tell me again how miserable I made your life, how full of myself I am."

"Just get dressed, love. It's a long walk, and the wind has teeth."

She laughed, amazing herself. "Walk? Walk where, are you mad? I'll catch my death."

A pained look ghosted Philip's face. "You wanted it more than anything, Bridget. More than anything, the most important thing you'd ever do with your life, above all the nattering work of the rest of the town, you were special. Your function was special." He was out of breath, drew deeply. Out of practice, or water left in there. "Like all those other women being wives and mothers didn't count. Well, love, it's time to come say thanks in person for that gift."

"What're you saying to me, Philip? You wander in here after thirty years, still looking young, and still begrudging me, and you tell an old woman you left behind that after all these years of being alone and unwanted she has to join you?"

"'Tisn't me you'll be joining, Mother."

She turned at a sound from the window. A face, long and white, and Robbie Morris it was, nearly bald head, stringy strands waving in the wind. A hand on his shoulder turned him away, and he faded beyond the rime on the glass. She was shaking her head, the rest of her

shook of its own accord. "No, no, no. This, you can't. You loved me, Philip, I was, I am your wife. This isn't right. I never was asked. It just was. I never liked the water, you know that, I hate being cold, my Lord, you know I hate being cold, Philip."

"You get used to it, Bridget."

She rattled a finger at him. "You. This is you just wantin' revenge, is all. Well, I'm sorry, Philip, I am, I slipped, I was angry, and it was wrong, alright? I regret you had to wait so long to hear it, but I was wrong. But this isn't right, I'm not done yet, you can't tell me every Christener had to go like this, so why me?"

He moved closer, crouched beside her chair, one hand on the rocker's arm. She turned away, buffing her eyes. "Revenge?" he asked. "Revenge for what, love?"

She started reading labels on the eight-tracks, kept her eyes busy while her mind lined up questions like dominoes and tumbled them—did he really not know, was he toying with her, had he learned cruelty, this man who only ever tried to be a good provider and wanted acknowledgement for it, yes it was a terrible thing she had done, but was thirty-odd years alone on this hill not punishment enough?

"It had occurred you might blame me," she said.

Philip rose, back straight, never victim of the gnurled slouch so many fishers took on after years at the nets. Never lived long enough.

"The bargain has always been that the Christener take the place of all those the sea gave up for her," he said. "It makes no allowance for the ones she *asked* it to take."

And so he knew. Knew that she had stalked to the wharf that morning with bees in her head. Knew she hated him for the things he had said, for his envy, for the looks the other women cast, for the whisperings that she did not deserve him, for his regrets, for having met her, wooed her, married her, for saying that she was unworthy...

And she cursed his boat. Softly, into the wind, no "Safe" for Philip Morley and his poor unwitting crew that morning, just a hard, "Damn you," and a flick of seawater across the wooden letters that bore her namesake's title.

Bridget's Blessing had gone down, only her distress call and her wake left behind, not even a stormy evening, just plucked from the surface, it had seemed. Bridget's prestige was gone. Her blessing deemed worthless, despite that she told them the truth. Her status had been worth too much to her, so she told them, her blessing was as powerful as ever, she had simply not given it this time. But they hated her more

for it, and the families of those lost wanted to drive her out to fend for herself, but she was due a certain respect. So she was exiled to a small house away from the village, and supplied with essentials when possible, but she was not to set foot in the town again. And she still mourns that loss, and thinks them fools.

"Fools," she cried, and tucked her quilt beneath her legs and pounded a pained fist against an arm of the chair.

Philip kept his patience, plowed a rough hand through his hair, scattering seawater.

"Are you ready then, Mother?" he asked. Frost-lipped and breathless, chest full of ocean, dashing hair wrecked and sodden. His touch would be cold as a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation. Warm he was once. Now, he sighed impatiently, extending bleached fingers to take her hand. And her heat.

"No." She sniffed, dried her eyes, vinegar coming back. "No, I'm bloody not. And I'm not your blessed Mother, Philip, as I've been tellin' you since our weddin' day."

This stymied him. His eyes, once blue now dimmed to grey, scanned the house. "Damned rot in those walls—not fit..."

"Now you stay on your duty at hand, Philip Morley. You weren't sent here after thirty-two years of drownedness to peel wallpaper. If you let your attention go so fast out on the water, then no wonder you ended up where you are."

He stepped forward, hands out, and for the youngest moment she thought she'd finally done it—that it had taken eighteen years of marriage and decades beneath the waves and a winter trek to do it—but that Philip had finally tired enough of her stubborn mouth to squeeze all the air from it and leave no room for more to enter. She pulled her twisted hands to her breast, the pulse in the wrist all she could feel in them.

But he was still Philip after all. Poor, careless Philip. He only sighed after his token silent appeal, and that was all it could have been, she should have known that, and she studied swirling snow out the window. She wondered, if his hands had indeed meant ill for her, if she would have been relieved.

"You should drink that tea, Philip. Bit'a warmth'd do you wonders, I don't doubt. I'm sorry to send you off alone, but I'm not yet tired of being warm. Go back, Philip, dear, and Daniel and Bobby and Critch and Stokey and the lot. God speed you back to where you rest, go afore you can't see to find your way, and leave me to my view and my longin's."

They watched—she, Philip—watched the snowy fist beat the windows,

the gears in the mantle clock turn, dust twirl in the pale frame of snow-light, the woodstove turn orange. She let a corner of her eye take in the man at her side. When the waters folded over his head, when the cold drained the last good from him, had he wished for a choice? For someone to ask him, *Are you ready?* But she was not one of them, the expanse of crests beyond shore had no pull on her. And she had no inclination to heed their call.

"You're not so warm as you'd like to think, Bridgie," he whispered, and moved to the door.

She did not watch them recede back down the coast, to whatever spot they would reenter the water. Down beyond the cliff fronting the house, to low land where the ocean ran right up to the boots. She supposed that even dead men had no love of climbing.

She stopped in the middle of the living room, suddenly certain of the reason Philip kept scanning the walls, suddenly too aware of their bareness, the absence of a single image of him. Not a picture of his living self to indicate that he did once imprint upon the world. If she had seen it sooner, she could have told him their presence was too painful, that she missed him too much. She would have done that for him, she wished he knew, that she would have done that for him.

As she dressed for bed, itching at the gaping of her nightgown's seams, she supposed that he would be back. Perhaps sent continually back for her, stirred from his own sleep, until he succeeded. She sighed for Philip, and shivered into her blankets.

The dream began—at least, her perception of its events registered in her sleeping mind—with her in the living room. The house rolled, the floor heftily see-sawing beneath her feet. Ocean spray flecked the windows. Glasses clattered in a cupboard. One lamp was already overturned, another tottering to join it.

Fear. Nightmare skin-prickles. Cold sweat sure to be carried to the real world and found on waking. Bridget watched the horizon totter, one arthritic hand clutching the back of her rocker, as the coast, the pinprick houses of her village, receded.

"Nothing to fear," she whispered. "Philip built this house tight as a drum." Then she remembered that this was not the house she had watched her husband raise from the ground up, not the place of their wedding night, or their dreams, that was not the door that received the knock the night *Bridget's Blessing* had foundered.

She felt the water work through her slippers, her toes curl against the iciness of it, oh Philip, I hate to be cold, you know that, I can't be cold and all that weight above me, pressing down on me, tell It they never told me, tell It I didn't want to be special, not this badly ...

Bridget lay in sweat cold as the seawater of the dream, heart making the sound of breakers hitting the wharf, remembered to start breathing again, and began the search for her slippers.

Warm. Dry. *I am officially an old woman*, she thought. *Set to starts by a silly dream.*

In the living room, she wandered to the stove, put her hands near—still some warmth there, enough to unlock her finger joints a little—and tested the kettle for water. Just enough. Only her for tea. She fumbled a bag into her cup. It wasn't so bad, this exile, alone with memories, plenty of them fine, if she were to credit them properly. She had been, if not a goddess, then a high priestess, a charm against the multitude of ills her people's lives could hold. Bridget poured her tea, wondered if the sea cared at all for the abuses she had made on its privileges, watched the clouds hustle sky out of their path, and tried to ignore the sound of water lapping at the door. •

Calling all poets and lovers of poetry

CV²
contemporary verse 2

**CV2 is now
accepting
submissions of
original verse, and
critical writing in
the form of
interviews,
articles, reviews
and essays.**

For an idea of what we publish, email us at cv2@mb.sympatico.ca or visit our website, www.contemporaryverse2.ca and check out our upcoming issues. Better yet, why not subscribe! A one year subscription is only \$23.98. Send your cheque or money order to: CV2, 207-100 Arthur Street, Winnipeg, MB R3B 1H3.

Want to know more? Send us an email, visit our website, or drop us a line at, (204) 949-1365.

The hate was still burning in those brown eyes. I walked up to the fence and we stood there staring at one another.

Violation

Lance Bond

As I flew JBuster-1 at .7 mach over the Amazon jungle the faint, familiar smell of expended ammunition crept into my oxygen mask, triggering that tingling feeling of total alertness I always got just before combat. A GlobeTech JBuster is basically a small cockpit stuck on top of a double-thrust hyperjet, one of the most powerful engines on earth, and its weapon pods have more firepower than some air forces had in previous wars. It's a bitch to fly, but handled right it's one of the most maneuverable and lethal weapon systems ever invented. God help me, I loved these missions. With the deep growl of the engines vibrating my whole body, I was the Lord of the air and the dealer of death to those below.

The four other members of 3-Flight were tucked in tight formation behind me. We were so close to the jungle canopy that I felt I could have reached out and picked the leaves that sparkled gemstone green in the tropical sun. Behind us the blast of our super-heated exhaust carved spreading v's in the dense vegetation like wake from a boat.

The target field was covered by netting camouflaged with green vines. Looking through my cockpit window it was indistinguishable from the rest of the jungle canopy, but on my infrared display, it stuck out like a patch of day-glow orange on a pair of GlobeTech GreenJeans. The DNA sensors under my JBuster's nose had no difficulty getting a preliminary sequence of the field crop below the netting. With a loud

beep, my heads-up display blinked a bright purple "PROBABLE CAUSE." The mission was a go, and I whooped out loud as I hit the confirm button to alert the flight. We now had full WTO authority.

I fired a net-buster. It's white flash of heat blew a hole fifty meters across in the camouflage netting, revealing a field of wheat below. I signaled my wingers, Hugo and Selena, and on my mark we kicked in our after-burners. There was a teeth-rattling bang and my JBuster bounded forward. The three of us swooped through the hole in the netting in a perfect triangle formation. We streaked across the field, our over-stressed engines screaming banshee howls. To those on the vibrating ground it must have felt like hell and all of its furies were upon them.

High above, I saw what looked like hundreds of JBusters streaking down in all directions as JBuster-4 and JBuster-5 released decoy drones to confuse the defense systems. I was in the hot seat out in front of our attacking triangle formation. My mouth was dry as I tensed up for the squeal of my detector, telling me targeting radar had locked on. All the time I kept an eye out for the white arcs of converging ground to air rockets.

Nothing.

My JBuster shuddered in protest and it was all I could do to keep it from slamming into the ground as our triangle formation spun in an impossibly sharp turn and vectored towards some old wooden buildings. Our exhausts burned three parallel black streaks in the stalks of golden wheat. The buildings looked derelict. My gut clenched. For all I knew, we were heading directly into the kill-zone of a jump-rocket pod operated by one of those Free Crop Consortium biofanatics.

I triggered the voice link, trying to sound cool and detached, despite my heart-thumping excitement. "Two and Three with me on foot." I hit the front jets. My JBuster slammed to a stop. The liquid shock absorption saved me from anything more than the bruises I was certain to feel the next day. The Ground Ejector popped me out of the cockpit. I started my sprint before my feet touched the ground, and a second later I burst open the door of the middle building with the heel of my titanium boot. Hugo and Selena took doors in the buildings on either side of mine.

I was in a house: crude furniture made from scrubby wood, dirt floor, and the stale smell of corn tortillas. A shot rang out. It felt like someone had slapped my Spidersilk armor. I dove to the floor and squeezed the trigger of my pulse rifle.

A barefoot man dressed in ragged white pants and a filthy blue shirt caught the full burst. His head exploded into a plume of brains

and bones that sprayed against the wall behind him.

A movement to my right.

I rolled twice. My pulse rifle's auto-aimer locked on.

At the last instant I jerked the gun up. The burst exploded the thatched roof, blowing open a glowing hole a meter across.

It was a kid.

He was about ten years old, dark hair, skin like pale chocolate, and skinny as a jungle snake. Behind him was a woman. She was rocking back and forth and moaning, tightly clutching a little girl. The kid stood with his arms out protecting them.

The woman moaned louder and the girl stared at me with wide, frightened eyes as I clambered to my feet. I knew I looked like something out of a nightmare. A giant covered in black iridescent body armor with a huge fluorescent green GlobeTech logo on its chest. My head, covered by my black carbon-fiber helmet, appeared bulbous and misshapen, and my face was hidden by the reflective surface of a one-way visor. The imaging systems on both sides of my head looked like multi-faceted insect eyes.

I walked over to the kid and lifted him up by his arm, checking for weapons. He hung in my grip, staring at me, his eyes full of hate. I couldn't blame him for that. I had just blown his dad's head off.

He was clean. I knew the mother and girl wouldn't be armed, but I did it by the book and patted them down. The little girl whimpered, and the mother gulped for breath like she was drowning. I went over to the headless corpse of the father. His body was still clutching a GlobeTech .232, hacked with a dangling circuit board so it could use cheap generic bullets instead of the GlobeTech authorized ones. I studied the exposed circuitry of the gun and the crude way the circuit board had been patched in. It was a wonder it hadn't blown up in his hands. I swore under my breath. Stupid bastard, why hadn't he just sat still and let me come in? I stomped the circuit board hard with my boot and ground it into fragments on the dirt floor.

I turned back to the bedraggled threesome huddled on the other side of the room and motioned them to walk out. If I was going strictly by the book I should have made them put their hands on their heads, but the moaning woman had her hands full with the toddler, and the kid was just a kid.

I activated the voice link. "All clear. I'm sending out three—woman holding small child, young boy."

Hugo and Selena were waiting for me outside, crouched and ready

for any counterattack. Hugo signaled that the immediate area was secure. Four and Five circled above with screaming engines, like hawks waiting to pounce. At least the noise drowned out the woman's air-gulping wails.

Hugo was a big, burly guy. I was tall enough to play a decent game of basketball, but he was a good half a head higher. He was operating a hand scanner. I turned to him and asked, "Anything in the area?"

He did another turn, scanning the whole 360. "No Major, nothing within a kilometer."

Selena was alert, keeping her gun at the ready as per regulations. I activated the voice link again. "Everyone stand down, situation clear. Four and Five return to base." Selena relaxed and rested the stock of her weapon on the ground.

I pulled my helmet off and slumped down on a log. By the look of it, the log had been sat upon lots of times. There were wood shavings scattered on the ground in front of it, some of them fresh. It wasn't hard to imagine the father sitting there, carving bits of wood, talking with the boy, watching the sunset. I turned and faced away from the boy. I couldn't meet his eyes. I felt awful.

Hugo and Selena had taken their helmets off and were poking around the area.

I hit my chest pad to activate communication with the Command and Control Bird ten thousand meters above us.

"CC, this is Leader 3. Do you copy?" I said.

Captain Velor's voice was loud and clear. "Copy, Leader 3."

"Just a peasant op. Call off the backup. One organ-donor. Send the grave robbers."

"Roger, Leader 3. Do you need the nannies too?"

I forced myself to turn back and look at the family. The mother continued to moan and rock the girl. The young boy stood in front of them, staring at me with unblinking hate. I sighed. "Yeah. Three no-threats: woman, small female child, young boy."

"Roger, Leader 3. All on their way."

Hugo kicked at a bag of grain and a gush of golden wheat spilled out on the ground. He unclipped a black, rectangular sequence scanner from his belt. It was at least two revs out of date, but Hugo didn't like change. He dropped a few grains into the compartment at the bottom and slid the lid over it. A second later his scanner beeped.

He studied the screen and then said, "Illegal, all right. It's GlobeTech WV-19, tropical variant, developed in the Philippines. Someone's hacked the suicide gene."

I nodded glumly. No surprise there. The grain was patented with built-in DNA protection against unauthorized use. Either you used GlobeTech fertilizer or it would dissolve into a smelly, brown slime. Someone had modified the DNA to allow it to grow with old-fashioned organic fertilizer. Black market outlets sold the stuff all over the Amazon basin.

Hugo opened the door on his scanner and tossed the grain on the ground. "Patent violation," he said. "There'll be no second guessing on the kill, Sir."

The family had clearly been engaged in a criminal enterprise, violating WTO 6.1, Unlicensed Use. UU was a capital offense. The kid didn't know it, but I had spared his dad the stress of a trial and execution. It should have made me feel better.

In this, the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, the global economy was totally dependent on the licensing of intellectual property. Everything: crops, music, software, clothing was covered by patents or copyright. There was a thriving black market in unlicensed products, denying the license holder of legitimate revenues. We were the operations arm of the GlobeTech license enforcement program, under World Trade Organization authority. As our bosses kept telling us, our efforts were keeping the global economy from collapsing, and saving billions from starvation. Most days I believed it.

The grave robbers got there first, wearing their familiar brown uniforms and green GlobeTech badges. They loaded the headless body, along with what bits of brain and bone they could scrape up, into a green GlobeTech OrganKeep refrigeration container. The boy watched them wheel it to the chopper. He didn't shield his eyes as the rest of us did when the whirling blades threw dust in our faces. Then, the helicopter was gone, and it was quiet except for the woman's sobbing. The boy wiped some tears from his cheeks with an abrupt, angry gesture that was meant to tell me he wasn't afraid; it was only the dust and nothing else.

The nanny chopper swirled up more dust into a small tornado, and the woman continued moaning and clung tighter to the small girl. The boy didn't stop staring hate at me for a second.

There were two nannies. Gray-haired women, as usual, who clucked and fussed over the woman and children. In seconds, they had the small girl chewing on a chocolate bar laced with pediatric sedatives, and hugging a plush, plump teddy bear with a shiny green GlobeTech logo on its chest. They used a sedative spray on the woman, and she walked toward the chopper with a vacant smile on her face.

The kid wasn't having any of this. Without warning, he ditched his untouched candy bar and the GlobeTech UUBuster handheld video game. He took off for the trees like a jump-jet. He almost made it, too. He was only a meter from the safety of the forest when the oldest of the two nannies, a short, buxom woman with a pleasant smile, nailed him with a tranquilizer dart.

His mother smiled in a dreamy kind of way, and his little sister watched wide-eyed, chewing on her candy bar, as they lifted the boy's limp body onto the chopper.

A minute later the nanny chopper was a black dot throbbing in the sky and we were alone.

I stood up and felt the stiffness in my muscles from the tension of the attack. I tried not to think of the kid's father. There had been others. What the hell. The pay was good and if I didn't do it, someone else would.

As I started to walk back to my JBuster, my foot kicked something by the log. I picked it up. It was a small, hand-carved stick figure. It was crude, but bore a surprising resemblance to the young boy. How many hours had the man and the kid sat together, while the father carved away and the mother made supper in the house? I shoved the wooden figure into my pouch and tried not to think about it.

"Okay," I said. "Let's torch this crop and get back to base."

By the time we were airborne, the sun had set. Behind us, the burning field had died down to a red glow that was like a stain of blood on the black jungle canopy.

Back at base I showered and changed into a green GlobeTech EasyWear jumpsuit. I reported to my commander, General Williams, a paunchy, middle-aged man with thin, silver hair. He was the LED, (Licensing Enforcement Director), for the Amazon Region.

I stood at attention in front of his desk.

"Sir, this was a total foul up. We were told it was a threat-5 and went in hard," I said. "It was just a peasant op. We could have done it with a pickup truck and a sidearm."

The general watched my face with shrewd eyes. "Intelligence screwed up." He gave a wry smile. "Seeing they classified it at level five, it counts on the stats. Don't worry. You'll get your commendation."

I wanted to tell him what he could do with his commendation, but I took a deep breath and said, "I took out a guy right in front of his wife and kids."

The general turned back to his paperwork. "It happens. The guy was doing a UU, what did he expect?"

I could see the general wasn't going to waste any more of his time talking about some dirt-scrabbling, illegal farmer. The meeting was over.

That night, Hugo, Selena, and I left the antiseptic boredom of the base, and headed for the pitiful collection of bug-infested huts the locals call a town. I drank too much GlobeTech DarkBrew in one of the rough, open-air bars. Hugo was matching me beer for beer, but that was no big deal for him. Selena drank GlobeTech PureWater and didn't say much of anything—she rarely did. Selena was always there, always competent, one of the best wingers in the business. What she had done to end up in this armpit of a base buried in the Amazon jungle, I couldn't imagine.

I talked a lot. Then I got belligerent. I always do when I'm drunk. Everyone in the bar knew why I was assigned to this disease-ridden furnace. Most of them had heard it too many times before and were ignoring me. Somehow, when I get plastered, it seems important that everybody really understands what I'm talking about. I harangued Hugo and Selena about the incompetent executives, and how I had told them what I thought of them. "Bastards!" I said in a deliberately loud voice. "They sent me here to work with all these losers."

I glared around the bar to see if anyone would pick up on the insult and take a swing at me. God, how I wanted to fight someone. Someone not as drunk as me, a powerful guy who would give me that burst of pain in my face when his fist flattened my nose. I wanted someone to smoke me good and hard with a kick to the gut, preferably with their steel-toed boots.

There were no takers. After my legs gave out, Selena and Hugo carried me to my sleeping quarters. As they laid me on the bed, and took my boots off, I tried to explain how I really loved them. I blubbered that they were the best team a man could work with. They exchanged knowing smiles, thinking I wouldn't notice. Hugo tossed a blanket on me. They turned off the lights and left. The room spun around me and I vomited on the blanket.

We had no ops the next day and I went out to walk off my hangover. I went by the detention compound, and there, pressed against the plastic mesh of the fence, was the kid. His hair had been cut short and he was shiny, institutionally clean, dressed in a white T-shirt with a green GlobeTech logo, green pants, and a pair of black, GlobeTech RocketJet sneakers.

The hate was still burning in those brown eyes. I walked up to the fence and we stood there staring at one another. I reached into my pouch and pulled out the carved figure I had found near his home the day

before. I held it out to him. He ignored it, but kept watching me with loathing. Finally, I put the small figure down on the ground where he could reach it through the mesh. He didn't move; he just continued to stare.

I turned and walked away. After I was out of his sight, I snuck back to see what he was doing. The kid was holding the carving, tracing the features with his finger. Large tears rolled down his face. I felt sick to my stomach, and it wasn't the hangover.

Later that afternoon, I got reprimanded for insubordination. I flipped a visiting executive the finger. He was an arrogant head-office jerk, strutting around in his GlobeTech FashionSuit, and spouting off about how we should get tougher on these intellectual-property free-loaders. I was docked a week's pay, which meant that Hugo and Selena would have to buy the rounds for a while.

Over the next few days, I found myself dropping by the detention center. The kid was always standing by himself, leaning against the fence. He seemed to prefer being alone, rather than scrambling over the GlobeTech ChildFun playground equipment with the other kids. He didn't speak, nor did I. We just looked at each other. One time I took him a MouthMelter candy bar and left it by the fence. But as I watched him from my hiding place he just stood there and let another kid take it.

The day after that he wasn't at his usual place by the fence. I went into the reception area and asked about him. Normally, the administrators weren't supposed to give out information on detainees, but the woman behind the desk, taking note of the rank on my nametag, did it as a favor.

Using the date of his apprehension and the fact he had been brought in with a mother and sister, we identified him as Carlos Alvarez, aged eleven. I found myself wishing I'd thought to do this sooner.

The woman used her finger to probe the holo-display that floated in front of her. She frowned and hesitated, then read the slowly scrolling text. "The mother and sister are dead," she said.

I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. "How can that be? They only arrived a few days ago." I realized I was shouting. Heads looked up from other desks.

"Most of these illegal farmers aren't up on their vaccinations," she said, shaking her head wearily. "We have a thousand people here at any one time. Many of them carry diseases. Someone screwed up and put your illegals into general population before they were vaccinated."

I felt a lump in my throat. There were a lot of deadly, quick-acting plagues around. Most of them were released by bio-terrorists. Some conspiracy theorists claimed GlobeTech had developed them so they

could sell vaccines. That was all crap, of course, but the deaths were ugly and painful.

I didn't really want to ask, but I had to. "And the boy?"

She probed her finger deeper into the holo-display, zooming down to the information. "He's okay. It seems like he was a bit of loner. He had reduced contact with the other guests. He got his vaccination in time."

I ignored the irony of the term 'guests'. "So why isn't he in the yard?"

"He had to be sedated after he was told about his mother and sister. He bit a guard and tried to climb the fence. He's in isolation."

An old guard, his green GlobeTech uniform losing the battle to keep his gut from spilling over his belt, led me down a long hallway of steel doors I looked into the isolation cell through the one-way viewport, and saw it was nothing but a stainless steel box without any windows. The only furniture was a steel platform that served as a bed, and a small metal toilet attached to the wall. The kid sat on the bed, tears running down his cheeks.

The guard shrugged when I asked how they could put a kid in a place like that.

"These kids are like wild animals," he said. "You wouldn't believe how many times I've been bitten."

I stormed out and hit the bar. I started a fight with a new guy, a Pakistani who used to be some kind of elite commando. I got a couple of punches in, but then he pulled some fancy judo trick and put me down on the floor. He used his boots, his fists, and his head, until they finally pulled him off. I ended up in Emergency with a broken tooth, severe bruising, and sixteen stitches just under my hairline.

Three days later, the kid was back in the yard. He looked at my black-rimmed eyes and the swirls of purple and yellow on my puffy face. Was that the faint trace of a smile on his face?

"Hi, Carlos," I said through my swollen lips.

He didn't respond; he simply continued to stare at me. He still wanted to kill me. I respected him for that. His father deserved no less.

The next day, we left for a threat-6 on a factory in Sao Paulo. We had to fly down and refuel in Brazil. We were supposed to be there for backup, but the primary got the wrong location and we found ourselves jetting in against heavy fire.

I had my JBuster on afterburners and flew in alone against a fortified anti-aircraft battery of ion-cannons, while Hugo and Selena handled the covering fire from above. I was yelling at the top of my lungs as I weaved in and out of the hot sparks that flashed towards me at Mach

2. The sparks changed color from hot blue to blinding red as they flared by with ear-splitting bangs. With a loud beep I got a target lock, and squeezed off three GT4 battery-busters. The battery vaporized with a brilliant green flash, and I pulled up in a vertical climb. I was almost kicked out of the sky by the shock wave, but I managed to hang on and get free. To go in alone like that was totally against company policy, and stupidly dangerous—but it worked. The factory defenses collapsed as the other flights, free from any anti-aircraft threat, pounded the place flat.

It was a good haul. We confiscated over a million units of illegal software and music, and that didn't count the tons of stuff that were destroyed in the attack. Some fat executive would nod approvingly at the numbers and authorize a commendation. Hell, it might hit the business channels, and put the stock up a few points.

On the way back to home base, we were under orders to fly a sniff patrol. Each JBuster in 3-Flight would be responsible for a strip, fifty kilometers on either side. Four hundred kilometers along, my sniff box registered a weak signal. It was barely above the ambient noise level, and normally I wouldn't have bothered responding. This time, in order to help get my mind off the kid and his family, I zoomed down to take a look. I was surprised to see that it was definitely a UU op. They had some kind of electronic camouflage that simulated the normal heat spectrum of the jungle, which explained the weak signal. I didn't see anything in the way of defenses, but judging by the number of buildings, there seemed to be a thriving community under the canopy. I regained altitude and without knowing why, I reported the area as a clean sniff and logged the location as a false positive. Future sniffs would automatically find my entry and ignore any signal. With any luck, they would never be discovered.

Carlos wasn't at the fence when I got back two days later. I usually went to see him after breakfast, but I had slept in and was late. I looked around the playground but couldn't see him in the tangle of squealing children.

I was about to leave when I saw a small figure on the roof. It looked like Carlos had shinnied up a pipe that was attached to the wall. It must have been a tough climb. The kid was standing on the roof, looking over the side down to the cement walkway below. He was a good four meters up, and I suddenly realized he was preparing to jump.

I raced over and opened my mouth to yell at him not to jump, but before I could get a word out he launched himself off the roof. An

escape attempt? Suicide? I leaped forward, and Carlos crashed down onto me, driving us both into the cement.

He was okay. I sustained bruises on top of the still painful ones I had from the fight, and my wrist hurt like hell. We lay there panting, and I wrapped my arms protectively around him.

I'm not sure what I was thinking, but I scooped him up and took him around the building. He struggled, but I had a firm grip on him.

My JBuster was on the runway, refueled in case of a scramble. I jammed Carlos into the small space behind my seat. As I got into my flight suit, he watched me with that intense hate I'd come to know so well. I took out a spare oxygen mask and pantomimed how he should put it on.

As I took off the communication panel lit up.

"Leader 3, Leader 3, come in. There is no authorized mission. Repeat. There is no authorized mission—." I cut off the officious voice and headed deep into the Amazon basin.

I checked on Carlos. He was watching me over the too-large mask. I mimed pressing it closer to my face and he copied me. I moved my hand to give him a reassuring pat, but he flinched as if I was going to hit him. So I turned my attention to flying the JBuster. I swooped down to the canopy to get below radar. I changed course and increased the power until we were heading at .7 mach, three meters above the green carpet of trees.

The flight was exhausting, demanding absolute concentration. Two hours later, we came upon the UU op I had spotted the previous day. I hovered low and crept under the canopy. I could see log buildings and an ox-powered grinding mill. It was one of those right-to-farm groups, probably run by some of the Crop Liberation people. They were radicals who believed anyone should be able to plant crops and not pay royalties. Their politics might be wacky, but they were decent people.

The JBuster brushed over some small trees and I saw about twenty people working in a field. They were so surprised by the sudden appearance of an aircraft that none of them moved before I landed in a cloud of their precious topsoil.

I pulled Carlos out from behind the seat and held him in front of me. The farmers were gathered about twenty meters away, clutching their hoes and scythes, ready to run at any second. I took off my helmet and held up my palm in a gesture of peace.

A young man with dark hair, sweat streaked grime on his neck, and

wearing tattered overalls slowly walked towards me. His earth-caked hands were shaking and I could tell that he would bolt at the slightest sign of an aggressive move on my part.

There was no love lost between people like this and a guy like me who sported a GlobeTech logo on his chest, so I got right to the point. "This is Carlos," I said gruffly. "He needs a home. His family is dead."

The young man eyed my black armor and the squat deadliness of the JBuster with its weapon pods. He licked his lips and nodded.

I pushed Carlos over to him. The kid stumbled, but the young man caught him and put his arm around him. They both stood there staring at me.

As I turned to get into the JBuster, a clump of soil hit me in the back. I looked back and saw Carlos, his arm still raised from the throw. The hate blazed from his eyes and his mouth was a tight line of defiance.

When he was old enough, he would come after me.

As I jetted skyward, I realized I was looking forward to it. •

Join the Small Press Co-op!



It's free!



SPECULATIVE
LITERATURE
FOUNDATION

The Speculative Literature Foundation Small Press Co-operative is an organization designed to help small presses within the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres co-operate on projects and exchange useful information.

Membership in the Co-operative will initially give members access to our private discussion boards, where members may exchange information on finances, logistics, advertising, editing, and more. Members will also have the opportunity to join such group ventures as Co-op convention parties, sharing costs and space. We hope that further discussion will also open possibilities for other cost-sharing ventures (as with printers, advertising, convention dealers room tables, etc).

Membership in the SLF Co-op is currently open to any self-identifying small press and its representatives (publishers, editors, copyeditors, etc.) -- both online and print presses are welcome to join.

To apply for membership in the SLF Small Press Co-operative, please visit: www.speculativeliterature.org/Co-op for details.

At first I had been baffled by the sudden change in Sam's spending. For eight months I had logged his every transaction. Studied his viewing habits to tailor his cable subscription to his liking.

Smart Card

Kristopher Horton

Dinner with *her* again. Always ordering the calamari appetizer and drinks. Forcing the cost of basic sustenance beyond any reasonable budget. She was after Sam's money, I could tell. Little gold digger. Expensive restaurants where the gratuity alone exceeded the cost of Sam's typical meals. The little tease didn't care for his financial security. She wanted it now, and she wanted it with cheesecake and ice-wine. Sam didn't even seem to notice.

Typical that all the worry falls on me, the Smart Card.

Using my wireless antenna, I had been in contact with the restaurant's mainframe all night, monitoring orders as they're posted to Sam's bill. When calamari had appeared on the statement I had instantly estimated the final bill to within four dollars. So predictable. With an empty bank account and Sam's credit already stretched to his lending limit, it was going to take some fiscal redeployment to settle with the restaurant. There was the option not to pay, but I had been programmed as a law abiding intelligent agent. Quickly seeking alternatives, I burned a few million cycles sorting through the monthly bills, cross referencing each against advertised offers on the global market. Eventually, I found a deal on Mongolian beef that would slash his monthly meat budget by eighty percent. Even beef that wasn't USDA certified for import was better than failure to pay.

Sam, old fashioned as he is, swiped me through the restaurant's card reader. The restaurant network read my magnetic strip, verifying that the encoding matched the encryption keys we had been communicating with all night. The handshake of our times was concluded; business has transpired, the sale is final, enjoy your day.

At first, I had been baffled by the sudden change in Sam's spending. For eight months I had logged his every transaction, studied his viewing habits to tailor his cable subscription to his liking. Managed his life. Then everything changed with a sudden surge of expensive dinners, movie tickets for two, and an interest in The Woman's Network. Was it some kind of horrible human crisis?

Six weeks of carefree spending and Sam had burned through his entire investment portfolio. Eight months of careful planning and investing wasted! Researching stocks, building short and long term opportunities, all for what? A fling with a cash consuming hussy? For eight months I've rested comfortably in the credit card slot of Sam's wallet, paying the bills and managing his income. What could possibly outweigh his future security?

The oven explained it to me: "Romance is in the air. Such a fragrant and delicate mixture of feelings congealing together to make a perfect emotional blend. Best complemented with an aged wine."

What does an oven know of romance? It thinks the Internet is just a big cook book.

"Romantic meals account for fifteen percent of my total culinary knowledge. They should be light, so as not to overwhelm or leave lethargy in the diners. The presentation must be simple, the flavours as complicated as love itself."

Sometimes I think the oven talks too much.

Research into love, romance, and other lesser matters of the heart led to the conclusion that courtship was a barbaric and destructive practice. So much waste in the name of love. Money thrown away on flowers that were already dead. Chocolates whose value was based more on the shape and color of the packaging than on the nutrition they provided.

Trips to the mall increased. Shoes, blouses, perfume and other assorted gifts. Sam's good credit evaporating with every purchase. Fiscal statements were sent in daily emails to his cell phone with bills outlined in bold red. The spending had to stop.

Then, while chatting with a point of sale device, my holder entered a contest promising a payoff of a trip to Hawaii for two lucky winners.

Verifying the information left me with a chilling realization. The name on the contest entry was Emma Watkins. Her email, address, phone number, all listed, all different than Sam's. He had given her access to me.

My programming obligated me to find a way to purchase her leather boots with Sam's money. By moving his liquor subscription from a local distributor to one based in Mexico, enough funds were freed to pay for the boots over a four month period. A consumer report on the Mexican distributor showed a fluctuation in listed proof levels and mild color irregularities. Several red flags triggered in my low level safety systems. But I was desperate. Every day brought me closer to declaring bankruptcy, and I wasn't ready to give up just yet.



Then came the vacation to Las Vegas. Did Sam fail to realize he couldn't afford this trip? What was happening to all my messages? Paranoia led me to query his cell phone—he could have created an inbox rule to delete my mail on receipt—only to discover he had read and manually deleted every statement. What if he didn't understand the statement, or worse, didn't care?

Covering the cost of the Las Vegas trip wasn't easy. Dinners, shows, hotels, car rental and air fare. It added up quickly. My last solution was to shuffle his basic necessities. Reducing the power he purchased to the minimum required to cover his daily habits. Switching his gas over to a low cost natural gas solution which claimed to burn at ninety-five percent of standard. Impurities may vary.

Bankruptcy was near. For a Smart Card agent, bankruptcy was suicide. It was never the owner's fault that bankruptcy was declared. Only an intelligent agent was responsible, for obviously it had failed to learn to manage the owner's spending habits and any requisite money management techniques. Any owner who started over would do so with a new Smart Card, one who could theoretically learn to work with the owner. On the reverse, any agents who were able to make fortunes for their owners would have their learning network added to the Archives, becoming a part of the base programming for all new agents. Bankruptcy was not an option. I had grown too accustomed to existence with Sam.

To survive, I would have to get rid of her.

Stage One of Operation Restore Sam's Credit implemented a policy of covert money hoarding. Purchasing stocks in Sam's named was easy,

I had done it many times before. However, disclosure laws required me to inform Sam of all capital purchases and holdings. Attempts to break the law for Smart Cards generally ended with the agent entering fully into an ethical subroutine that resulted in eventual deletion. Not ready to surrender or divulge the details of my master plan, I began encoding any details pertaining to purchases in the exact off-white colour used as the background for all messages to Sam. The information required for disclosure existed in machine native character codes, enough of a compromise that I technically hadn't broken any laws. Still, ethical routines began consuming an increased number of idle cycles.

Following on the subtle but promising gains made during Stage One, Stage Two launched my passive campaign. While my duty was to pay Sam's bill, I was under no such obligation to pay in the case of theft. Sam had never expressly instructed me to purchase things for her. In a way, she was stealing his funds. Whenever calamari was listed on the bill, I refused payment. Insufficient funds. Purchasing a cardigan, men's size? Approved. This blouse? A woman's shirt, her size. Insufficient funds. Let her pay for it. Sam's money would stay Sam's money.

Ethical routines continued to consume cycles.

Stage Three opened the campaign into all out war. When the oven was baking a romantic heart shaped crepe for two, I told it to burn it, just a little. "My pleasure is to cook, and to ruin romance with a poor performance is an unthinkable act," the oven said. Of course, the oven was easily swayed. Once bankruptcy was declared, repossession and formatting of the housewares would soon follow. An army of digital appliances occupying the apartment began to conspire with me. The television refused to show The Woman's Network. The toilet kept the seat up. And mood lighting was forbidden.

Several weeks of electronic war ended when all expenditures on her suddenly ended. Sam's salvation had arrived. An acknowledgment would have been nice. Just a simple message thanking me for getting him out of debt and restoring fiscal security to his future. But no, my dedication went unnoticed.

Later that week, while mapping out the five-year plan for Sam's finances, St Joseph's Hospital billed me for services rendered: Detoxifying IV drip. Stomach pumping. Artificial respirator. Emergency resuscitation.

Pausing my analysis of the bill, I began querying the digital housewares as to Sam's recent activities. The refrigerator reported that several ounces of imported Mexican tequila had been removed along with a half pound of Mongolian beef, one onion, one bell pepper, a stalk of

broccoli and a potato. Next the oven confirmed it had cooked for Sam, and no, it hadn't been re-calibrated in the event of using non-standard gas, and was I aware the wide range of impurities in non-standard gas? So I asked the oven if it had personally supervised the cooking.

"The onion offers such a delicate balance of flavor to beef, a perfect complement to a pan-seared meal," the oven said. But did it supervise the cooking? "As a master, I always supervise, however, power was low, and I was required to sleep while several dishes were left to cook by timer."

Power was low? The house regulator confirmed it. Sam had been home all day running appliances. And it was Wednesday. Sam never stays home on Wednesday, so only enough power to cover the evening was required. I hadn't anticipated needing additional power!

"Matters of the broken heart are often enough to leave a craving deep down for some rich, soothing, comforting chocolate, or equally fat and carbohydrate-rich food." The oven definitely talks too much.

Returning to the bill, I scanned to the last item: Complete Autopsy. Extreme intoxication from unregulated Mexican tequila, imported and unapproved Mongolian beef, non-standard gas, irregular power supply—all could have attributed to Sam's hospitalization. Theorizing as to Sam's medical status, however, wasn't one of my stronger applications.

Like a good Smart Card I had saved his credit. Even though Sam never returned to work, my covert investments blossomed, and I was able to cover household expenses on my own. Year after year I managed investments, increasing his portfolio to a seven-figure milestone. So perfectly had I managed the finances during his absence, that I knew he would be pleased with my work, and a place would be waiting for me in the Archives. •



Edmonton Small Press Association (ESPA)

The ESPA is a non-profit independent media and arts activist network with a socially-conscious mandate. With 650+ members from 29 countries, small press is bigger than you think! For more info or to SUBMIT to our 2005 North of Nowhere Expo, see www.edmontonsmallpress.org !

2005 NoN Expo Ass-Kickin' Chick'n Mascot by Dan Piraro

Pianogeist

Peter Norman

At first the trills and glissandi
trickled out, tickled night air,
a stippling chorus of struck glass,
subaudible.

We thought neighbours had hung wind chimes.

Then the sustain pedal
flattened each tremulous note,
suspended chords from cords of luminescence,
held triplets glowing in an unseen palm,
eggs set to hatch flame.

Somnolent, we stirred, suspecting
a trick of the wind in wine bottles.

But then, as we curled tighter into sleep,
the full forte of your anguish
galloped up from the front room
tattered with dissonance,
the wailed stretto curses
of a ghost ignored.

We snapped upright,
cast into thrashing crescendo, and gawked
as the door crunched off its hinges.

Aghast we witnessed your grand finale:
ornaments tossed into giddy rondo,
candles, hairpins and rings of keys,
books, a flashlight, three screws and a hammer
swerving and reeling mid-air;

mirror splintering under your sharps;
rug furled by your flats;
curtains tangled
in a tarantella gust.

You drove us out.
Dispossessed,
we filled a truck with what we owned,
save the piano
and all that your tantrum had shattered.

We jostled down the dirt road
and you struck up a dirge,
fading always behind us,
never achieving silence:

whispered memento to haunt our days,
the aural decay of your anguish,
perpetual diminuendo. •

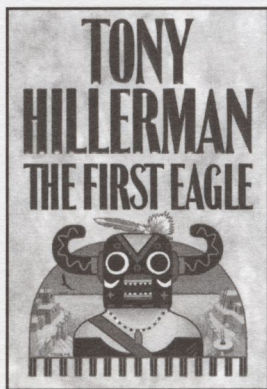
A selection of work by this issue's cover artist...



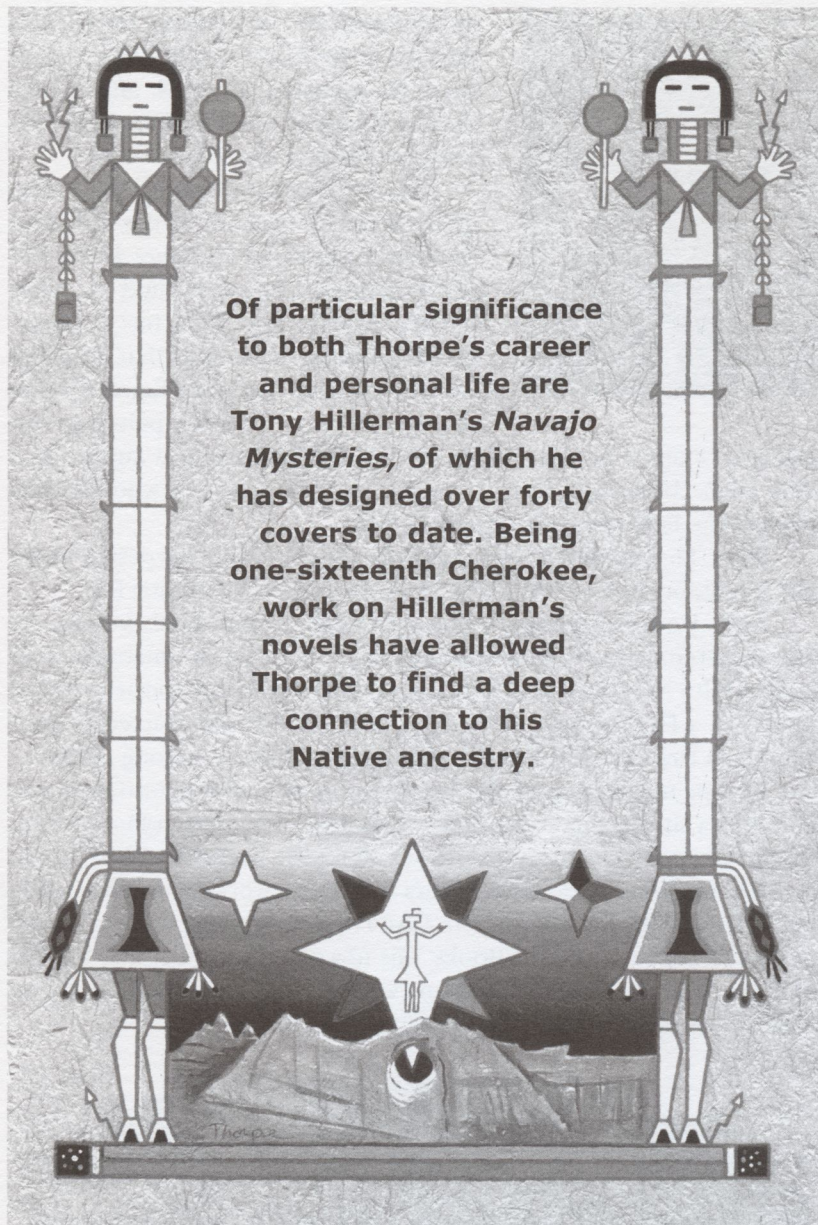
Gallery feature

Peter Thorpe

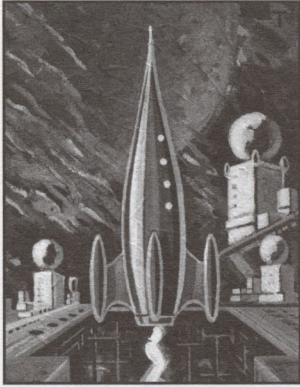
Peter Thorpe has designed and illustrated book covers for over twenty-five years. His work has been published by HarperCollins, Warner Books, Random House, Penguin USA, St. Martin's Press, Viking Penguin, and other publishers worldwide. Specializing in mysteries, espionage, science fiction and Americana, Thorpe has done covers for the first editions of *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor, *The Fourth Protocol* by Frederick Forsyth, *Red Phoenix* by Larry Bond, *Fire on the Mountain* by Terry Bisson and over forty book covers for Tony Hillerman's *Navajo Mysteries*. He has also done covers for editions of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller Jr. and *The High Frontier* by Gerard K. O'Neill.



As a boy growing up in New Orleans in the 1960s, Thorpe became interested in space and SF at a young age. Influenced by the hard SF of Robert Heinlein, Issac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, he became active in space advocacy in the mid- 1980s while living



Opposite page, top-down: Cover illustration from *Dance for the Dead* (1996, Random House) and *The First Eagle* (1998, HarperCollins). This page: *Leaphorn* Novels. Next page: Rocket #35, and cover illustration from *Ditch Rider* (1998, HarperCollins).



in New York City. He has been the creative director of the Space Frontier Foundation since its inception in 1988, and is now their webmaster. See the SFF's website at www.spacefrontierfoundation.org.

Thorpe's rocket paintings were originally done for friends of the SFF, and they have appeared in *Space Front*, the SFF's quarterly magazine, and on their website. Author Ben Bova has a 'Hugo' rocket painting by Thorpe that he keeps on a shelf with his real Hugos. Others who own Thorpe's rocket paintings are

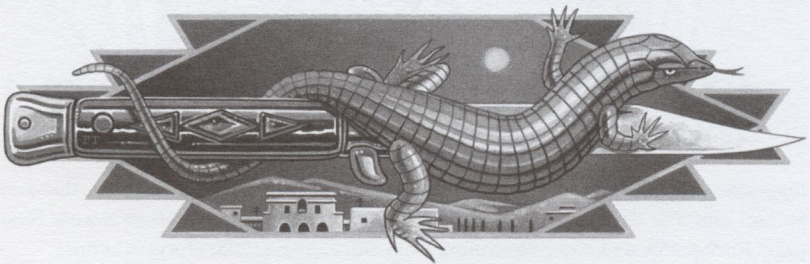
Andrew Chaikin (former editor of *Sky and Telescope* and author of *A Man on the Moon*), and Walt Anderson, the entrepreneur who privately funded the last cosmonaut flight to Mir.

Peter Thorpe now lives in Asheville, NC, and runs his design studio out of a historic turn-of-the-century hotel called The Manor Inn.

Aside from designing the Space Frontier Foundation's website, he also is webmaster of www.davidmanners.com, a site he manages with author John Norris which is devoted to their late friend, the actor David Manners, a Hollywood leading man of the 1930s who starred in such classics as *Dracula*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Mummy*, among others.

Thorpe maintains a site for his design work at www.peterthorpe.net, and also a site for his own science fiction stories, bigheadmoon.com, which features his near-future stories about life in Bighead City, Luna.

He continues to do book covers and is now working on illustrating his second children's book, *The Lost Treasure of Talus Scree* by Adam Osterweil for Front Street Books. His newest mystery cover is for *The Skeleton Man* by Tony Hillerman, which will be released in North America by HarperCollins in November of 2004. •



Cooper had the sudden feeling of being under water—of the engine noise blurring and time slowing down—stretching out.

Conservation

Valerie V. Deacon

It was February 19th, 1959—black Friday. The smooth, gray glass that was Lake Ontario in winter slipped away far beneath the airframe and the cold, dark patchwork quilt of the industrial section of Niagara Falls, New York, slid into view. The hulking shoulders of the air intake pods cut deeply into the pilot's visual field and he cursed softly. Mott Cooper banked tightly to the right. At his feet a heavy canvas satchel slid across the narrow space and bumped reassuringly into the side of the cockpit.

Cooper peered over the wings, looking for the landmarks that would lead him to the rest of his money. The place where no one was looking to chop *Gordon's Girl* into bicycle parts. And enough money, he was sure, to set him up in comfort for the rest of his life.

Until last year Cooper had been happily flight-testing DeHavilland prototypes. Now they knew how to build a plane!

Cooper had loved flying those potent interceptors—nothing subtle or understated in those beauties. Dark dragons, all sharp points, swept back wings, narrow bodies and erect tails. One engine, providing that undisciplined burst of raw power that heaved the plane at the sky. One

hot blast that threw you back in the seat and forced you to fight for control just to get the bugger off the ground. Cooper craved that rush of adrenaline surging through his veins, making his stomach crawl and his hands shake. That was why he'd decided to become a test pilot, for chrissake.

Cooper never would have left DeHavilland if those Liberal nuts in Ottawa hadn't awarded the new RCAF interceptor contract to their crony Gordon at Roe.

Cooper shook his head. RL-207 just didn't have it. No matter what her engineers were claiming. She was too smooth, too—girlie.

He considered RL-207 to be female, with her round delicate lines, big, generous curves, and a pert tilted-up nose. Her wings were graceful isosceles triangles, pinned sweetly to her fuselage. She was even painted an angelic titanium white.

He righted the plane again gently, nudging her wings even with the far horizon. That was the way it was with 207. There was no wrestling with the stick, no split-second life or death manoeuvres. No struggle whatsoever. Just a touch or a nudge and the plane obeyed instantly. A blind monkey could fly it.

Frankly, Cooper could care less about the damn thing.

A burst of static jarred the pilot's concentration, bringing his head around with a snap.

"RL-201 through 206 have ... destroyed as ordered, sir ... dismantled ... ditched in the lake. All recovered parts stowed and accounted for."

"What about them two Iroquois engines, mister? ... the hell they get to, huh?"

"... still looking sir. Could still be at Pratt ... testing them, there. Floyd wasn't the best record keeper."

"I want those engines found and bagged, corporal. This project is as cold as a Russkie's welcome in Omaha, and I want it to stay that way!"

"Yessir!"

"Dammit, Crawford," Cooper said aloud, "This had better work."

Cooper could tell the army boys where to find those missing engines. He was sitting on the damn things. Cooper had to admit that these engines were *juicy*. Beside and behind him the booming roar of the twin Iroquois buffeted his ears, even through the canopy of the cockpit. To his ears, their thunder was as comforting as a lullaby. He left the radio on *Receive* and settled more comfortably into the pilot's seat, stretching his legs a little.

Early that morning, CEO Crawford Gordon had appeared on the

manufacturing floor at A.V. Roe, a Canadian Club in one hand and a Montecristo panatela in the other.

Unshaven, his elegant clothes disheveled, Gordon strolled the length of the shop, nodding frequently to the employees he knew personally, speaking quietly to some here and there. When he reached the end of the factory floor, he climbed onto a set of scaffolding, took a long pull at the whiskey and raised his hands for quiet. All activity stopped and a hundred pairs of worried eyes speared the Director. His voice, slightly slurred, boomed over the heads of his people.

"Welcome to Black Friday, folks. The bastards have won. It's over. Go home."

Gordon scrambled down to the floor, angrily shrugging off the hands that reached out to assist him. He downed the rest of the whiskey in one long swallow and hurled the gleaming cut glass tumbler to shatter against the concrete wall. Holding himself stiffly erect, Crawford Gordon stalked grandly out of the building.

Cooper was standing in stunned silence with the rest of the test pilots when VP Jim Floyd sidled up to their group. Under the pretext of a handshake expressing shared grief with him, Floyd pressed a scrap of paper into Cooper's hand. Turning slightly away from his colleagues, he read, *Jim's office, twenty minutes*. The note was unsigned, but Gordon's eccentric lop-sided script was unmistakable.

Potocki and Zurakowski had commenced jabbering at each other in loud, angry outbursts. Their passionate exchange surprised Cooper. It was true that they were all out of work, but jobs would be easy to come by once the contract was reassigned. With luck, he'd soon be back flying for DeHavilland. He'd enjoy that. Cooper eased away from the other pilots.

Cooper slipped out a side door and made his way across the compound to the squat building that housed A.V. Roe's executive offices. He climbed the steps to the third floor and found the door to Jim Floyd's office ajar. Cooper could see Floyd leaning against the metal cabinet that held his drawings, long fingers massaging his temples. Gordon sat behind Floyd's desk, an open bottle of whiskey near at hand. He motioned Cooper in.

Before he could speak, Gordon raised a finger to his lips, signaling silence. He passed Cooper a sealed envelope across the desk. Across its face were typed the words *Final Flight Plan*.

Had that been only three hours ago?

"Come on, girlie, we'll make it," Cooper said, tapping the fuel gauge.

The indicator remained spitefully low, in spite of his encouragement. Cooper cut his air speed back a little, conserving fuel he might need later if Gordon's little contingency plan didn't pan out.

Her speed reduced, RL-207 hesitated for a millisecond in the air as she adjusted to the lighter demand on her engines, then settled happily into cruising mode. Cooper felt the subtle shift in 207's trim and grudgingly acknowledged that her quick, easy response might be an advantage in combat. If Gordon knew what the hell he was doing, 207 might still have a shot at proving her worth.

Cooper thought about Gordon's last letter. It had been bitter and to the point:

"Six months ago I was "advised" that if Dief and his Conservatives won the election, the Arrow was finished. Not just shelved, obliterated. That's when I started planning for this moment.

Well, it seems now that the bright lights in Ottawa have been convinced that a goddamn missile can defend our borders better than a manned interceptor capable of more than Mach 2—bloody morons.

I have one last assignment for you, Coop. Inside old Hanger 31, stowed behind a couple of CF-105's you'll find something very special.

Use runway 17, it'll take you up directly into the sun—make you harder to spot. Time your departure with one of those new passenger jets, it'll cover your engines on take-off. The boys in the Tower will play along and look the other way. Maintain radio silence. Fly directly to Westney airforce base in Louisiana.

Westney's Commander, General Abbott is an old friend of mine. He's agreed to give our snowbird a comfy nest until the wind changes. As for your compensation, \$5,000 now, another \$25,000 is waiting for you at Westney.

Good luck, Coop. Don't let us down.

*C. Gordon
February, 1959*

Thirty grand! Sweet! Talk about set for life! Cooper had had to

stop himself from sprinting to the hanger.

Secreted behind two old out-of-service 105s sat a gleaming white Arrow, designation RL-207, complete with a set of custom designed and installed Iroquois engines. With the Iroquois on board, 207's theoretical top speed was Mach 3, fully loaded, at 60,000 feet.

Not that Cooper was big on theory, but for thirty thousand dollars he'd fly rich American anglers between fishing holes in a Beaver Cub.

The 207's belly was full of drawings, reports and specification test results. Enough information, Cooper speculated, to resurrect the Arrow like a phoenix, sometime in the future.

In 207's cockpit was a canvas satchel full of tens and twenties. Cooper ran his hands over the paper, not quite believing the money was real. The bills made the crackling noises of abundantly used currency under his fingertips.

A change in the light brought Cooper's attention back to the flight.

Ahead, he saw an immense cluster of angry clouds. If his calculations were right, he'd have to fly right through the thunderhead to reach Westney. He couldn't go around the storm. That trip might take hours that he didn't have. He couldn't risk communicating with Westney until he was right on top of the base or Dief's friends might overhear and come gunning for him. Still, he couldn't fly through the storm using visual references alone.

As he drew nearer to the thunderhead, the clouds stretched further and further up into the sky, dragging their skirts on the dusty ground below. Cooper felt he was flying straight towards the walls of an immense canyon, so dense was the formation. Worse, those walls were moving; writhing and contorting into tortured shapes that reminded Cooper of the twisted metal airframes he'd left behind at Roe.

"Well, girl," he said, caressing the stick with his fingers. "Can't go under or around. Can't go through. Only way left is over. Let's see if Floyd knew what the crap he was talking about."

Cooper pulled back on the stick, forcing 207's nose up and pushing the white lady into a steep climb. She ran with the challenge, shooting straight upward, into the topmost few thousand feet of the overhanging thunderhead. Cooper was plunged into inky blackness, darker even than the night sky. He lost the horizon. He lost all visual cues as to 207's movement.

Cooper had the sudden feeling of being under water—of the engine noise blurring and time slowing down—stretching out. Ice crystals began to form on the rim of the canopy, growing up the sides

like hideous crystalline claws. He glanced down at his instruments, flying by gut, watching the altimeter spin reassuringly as he kept the plane in a steep climb.

The interior of the thunderhead flared with the brilliance of thousands of flashbulbs popping. A huge explosion of sound, almost too loud for human hearing, cracked the stillness. RL-207 lurched violently to the left, her body shuddering under the impact of the lightning strike. Cooper's instrument panel flickered, illuminating the darkness. Red trouble gauges blinking like frenzied Christmas lights as the electrical systems tried to cope with the overload of current. Even the unstoppable Iroquois seemed to stagger under the assault. Cooper shook his head, trying to clear the photo-blindness from his eyes and the G-force dizziness from his brain.

"C'mon, baby, c'mon ... show em you can take it," Cooper breathed, fighting to keep the wings level in the buffeting wind as 207 struggled to recover from the unexpected assault.

Cooper sensed a second concussive wave building in the thunderhead. Another lightning bolt began to sizzle between the boiling clouds. If 207 took another strike now, Cooper could forget about his money, and his life.

The bolt streaked across the thunderhead, leaping from cloud to cloud. Wraith-like, jagged fingers of blue-white death reached out for Cooper and RL-207. Cooper's hand tightened around the stick, anticipating the lightning's lethal caress.

The top of the thunderhead split open and 207 shot through into the clear sky above the troposphere. A beautiful halo of golden sunlight drifted down the plane's sparkling flanks, illuminating her bold red and blue trim and the white-toothed grin of her pilot.

"YEE-HAH! Atta girl!" Cooper yelled, slapping the inside of the canopy and willing his heart to start beating again. He brought 207 out of her climb and leveled her out, coasting over the churning storm below. Glancing back, Cooper saw an ugly black scorch mark on 207's aft wing. Below him, the dark clouds boiled and flashed, irritated by 207's luck. Cooper leaned back in his seat and concentrated on just breathing for awhile.

RL-207 slid gently over the top of the angry storm, safe in the lower stratosphere above the reach of worldly weather. Looking up, Cooper could see a curtain of midnight blue, hung about with brilliant sparkles of light.

Cooper's breathing slowed. He heard his heart beat. His gaze was

caught and held by the vastness of perpetual heaven. Cooper realized he was looking upon the boundary where earth ended and something else began. Even though he felt infinitesimally small, Cooper suddenly sensed his connection to every other everything out there. Thoughts were difficult, words, impossible.

He, Mott Cooper, irreverent blasphemer, had been given a gift granted to few mortals. This was a knowing that even death could not extinguish. The feeling was compelling, commanding and addictive.

Reluctantly, Cooper eased the stick forward, letting 207 drift gently back into the upper troposphere, losing sight of that glorious curtain of wonder as it merged and was then consumed by the startling aqua blue of the sky at midday. He buried his sense of loss in the practicalities of continuing the flight. His bereft spirit implored him to go back again.

A while later, the air below cleared, the thunderhead thinning to a veil of dirty brown lace blown about by a gentle spring breeze. Cooper risked a tight banking turn, trying to orient himself but he was too high to make out any of the landmarks on the ground. He brought 207 down to cruising altitude, stretching his neck to see over the plane's generous flanks. There, yes, that was one of the radar beacons on his topo map and, yes there was another. He was right on the money. Westney was ten minutes flying time dead ahead. He flipped over the radio, switching from the Canadian military channel to the U.S. channel and froze.

"Roger that. We have the bogey in sight Tower and will intercept. Confirm level one ordinance use authorized. Over."

"Damn," Cooper breathed, checking over his shoulders for the flight of American interceptors. "Bloody nuclear threat—shoot first and ask questions later! Damn!"

He *might* be able to outrun the American fighters, but he could never escape their missiles. In any event, that wasn't Gordon's plan. He had to convince these Cold War-wary pilots that 207 was no threat to Westney. He brought his airspeed down, making it easy for the interceptors to catch up and surround him.

Two voodoo fighters rose up to fly uncomfortably close to RL-207, crowding the Canadian plane. Cooper looked behind him to see two more fighters following at the far end of his slipstream, undoubtedly primed to send their missiles up his butt.

"Unidentified aircraft, you have entered a restricted zone. Turn your plane around 180 degrees and we will escort you back to neutral airspace. Please respond."

Cooper wet his dry lips and flipped his comm unit to send.

"This is Avro Arrow RL-207 requesting permission to land at Westney air base." Silence. The seconds ticked away, the voodoos did not stand down.

"Request denied."

Cooper's hands began to sweat. "Repeat, this is Avro Arrow RL-207 out of Toronto, Canada, requesting permission to land at Westney. General Abbott is expecting me."

Silence.

"Request denied. Bring your craft around and we will escort you to neutral airspace. Otherwise we will be forced to terminate your flight. Communicate your compliance immediately 207."

"Stupid, idiotic ...", Cooper banged his head against the side of the canopy in frustration. How could he have come this far only to find 207's supposed sanctuary yet another home where she wasn't welcome?

"Your time is running out RL-207. Acknowledge."

The voodoo fighters at his sides slid a safe distance away from the target. The fighters behind began to creep forward, taking up their most effective offensive positions.

What the hell had gone wrong?! Cooper re-ran Gordon's instructions over in his mind. *General Abbott's an old friend of mine. He'll give our ...*

"Wait, wait!" Cooper screamed over the comm unit. "Snowbird! Tell General Abbott I've got the Snowbird!"

Silence. The voodoo fighters to the rear held their positions, missiles poised and ready. Ten seconds, twenty ...

"Roger that, Snowbird. Why didn't you say so in the first place? Welcome to your southern nesting grounds." Three of the voodoos peeled off, leaving the fourth to escort 207 down onto the tarmac at Westney.

Cooper leaned back and blew out the breath he'd been holding during the last exchange. He'd made it. RL-207 would be safe now, secreted within the bowels of an American military base where Dief's hired guns would never find her. Smiling, Cooper began planning how to spend his ransom.

"That's some bird you got there, good buddy," drawled his escort pilot. "Looks like a big old kite. What's all the hubbub about, exactly?"

Something about the pilot's question niggled at the back of Cooper's neck. Under the well-meaning joviality, something else simmered.

"Don't ask me, friend. I'm just the chauffeur."

The American pilot chuckled appreciatively, nodding across to Cooper in understanding.

"Okay, partner, I hear that! Our slide-rule boys don't share much with

us neither. We're just the monkeys whose parts gets blown to bits when somebody screws up. Why don't you park that big-ass limo of yours down on runway 11, the one running north south on your left. We'll take good care of her."

"Runway 11, north south, roger that."

As Cooper swung 207 around for his approach, the comm unit struggled to life with a burst of static.

"... don't get it, Wrangler. What's the big deal about this boat?"

"Well, from what I hear, our lab-boys are gonna ... into pieces. Mach 3 my ..."

"What the hell for?"

"Seems like in a couple a years our sorry butts'll be settin' in a pretty little crate just like that one."

A new, sharp voice cut through the static.

"Wrangler! Youngerman! Stow that chatter and clear this channel, pronto, y'hear?"

"Yessir!"

"Pieces?" Cooper thought to himself. "Into pieces?" He pulled up sharply, taking 207 out of her approach and into a wide banking turn.

"You got a problem up there, 207?" The voice of his escort interceptor came across the comm unit.

"Ah, yeah," Cooper said, struggling. "Your ah, runways are ah, shorter than the ones at Malton. I'm gonna, ah, have to line her up again, adjust my trim, and bring her in hot." Cooper swallowed against his dry throat. "I'll need to make another pass."

There was no reply. Cooper saw his escort interceptor settle onto the runway next to his.

"Ah, OK, 207, roger that. Come on around again and line her up proper. We're all anxious to get a close-up look at that bird and we don't want her damaged. Take your time, 207."

Cooper leaned back in his seat, taking 207 on a long slow banking turn around the Westney field. A shadow fell across his instruments. Looking up, Cooper saw two voodoo fighters flying above and slightly behind 207. To Cooper, the message was clear. Take all the time you want, kid, but get this plane on the ground.

As 207 rolled into her turn, Cooper's mind swam. It sounded like the engineers at Westney intended to take 207 apart; reverse-engineer themselves an interceptor capable of Mach 3, stealing all the unique technology the Avro people had sweated and bled into the Arrow. Ripping 207 down. Doing exactly what Crawford Gordon had planned so carefully to avoid. Destroying the last one, the only one.

RL-207 banked again as Cooper brought her back around the field. What the hell did he care as long as he got his money? He'd been paid to deliver the plane and he'd done that. All he had to do was land 207 and he'd be a very happy—and rich—man.

So what if Gordon had trusted the wrong guy? That wasn't Cooper's problem. Where the Arrow was concerned, Gordon was a lunatic. Everybody said so. He'd just never learned to play ball with the big boys. He'd loved himself, his drink and his Arrow, in that order.

But maybe, Cooper thought, this had been a part of Gordon's plan all along. Maybe a fleet of American Arrows was the objective.

For a second Cooper flashed on Jim Floyd pressing the note into his hand, desperation haunting the back of his calm dark eyes. He thought of Zurakowski and Potocki, stunned and lost; like grieving parents who can't believe their child's death isn't all just a bad dream. He remembered 207 running before the storm, effortlessly ferrying him upward through the darkness; delivering him into God's basement.

He lined 207 up with the runway, the voodoo fighters still flying in tandem with him. Even if he wanted to bug out, how could he? Think, dammit, think. With two armed interceptors on his tail, he simply had nowhere to go. Unless ...

Cooper punched send on the comm unit.

"I'm having a little problem with the landing gear". Cooper tried to make his voice sound embarrassed. "My display shows that the gear's not locked down. Always seems to be a bunch of damn bugs in these new systems. Can one of you have a little look-see?" Cooper held his breath.

After a moment the interceptor to Cooper's right slid down, far behind him.

"I don't see any gear, 207."

"Sorry," Cooper said, again sounding embarrassed. "You'll have to get a little closer and lower. The gear on this bird is like a bug's legs, really fine and short. Would you mind?"

Compliantly, the interceptor slid closer, flying just under Cooper's tail. The second interceptor dropped down, taking up rear point.

"Just a little more," Cooper whispered to himself, tightening his grip on the stick. The rear interceptor crept closer, just touching Cooper's slipstream.

Cooper punched the afterburners and pulled back hard on the stick. The 207 shot forward and upward, her twin Iroquois engines kicking up a wash of hot, heavy turbulence in her wake. The burst threw Cooper back against the seat, hard. He felt a sharp pain in his

thigh, but kept pulling back on the stick, fighting dizziness and the burning agony in his leg.

Glancing back, he smiled when he saw that one of the interceptors was spiraling down towards the tarmac, its' helpful pilot unable to overcome the swirling turbulence of 207's backwash. The distance between Cooper and the falling Voodoo was growing rapidly as 207 shot upwards.

He looked around—there'd been another fighter. Where was it? Cooper's eyes scanned the skies. His head swiveled on his shoulders. The Voodoo had been somewhere farther behind him. The 207 kept climbing.

The pain in Cooper's leg dulled down to a throbbing ache, but each shift of the plane's airframe jarred his concentration with a jolt of discomfort. Then suddenly, the other voodoo was there, chasing 207 as she climbed. The smaller fighter was fast, rapidly closing the distance between the two planes.

Cooper pushed 207 hard, watching as his airspeed climbed smoothly toward Mach 1 and the altimeter continued to spin. He didn't *think* they'd risk shooting him down, but the Voodoos had already been given clearance to use "level one" ordinance.

Thunder! Twin resounding booms, so close together they were almost inseparable. The Arrow and the Voodoo melted the sound barrier at almost the same moment and still the chase continued.

They were rapidly running out of room in the troposphere. At 49,000 feet, the Voodoo staggered a little, her engine clawing at the thinning air. Cooper knew then that theoretically the race was won. His altimeter hit 50,500 feet and the Voodoo was definitely failing. Cooper watched as her pilot leveled her out, pulling the Voodoo's nose over hard and letting her drift back down through the thin atmosphere.

Cooper eased up on his airspeed. The rapid flight had used a lot of Cooper's remaining fuel. He'd have to conserve the Arrow's resources carefully to get her to ... where?

From far below, Cooper saw a bright, orange-yellow flash reflected on the bottom of the clouds.

"Shit!" Cooper pushed the Arrow back up to top speed, wrestling her into an almost vertical climb. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

The Voodoo's missile was closing in on the Canadian plane. A silver glint in the sunlight, riding on a burning ember, trailed by dark gray vapour—the missile was heading unerringly toward 207.

"For Chrissake! I'm not a goddamn combat pilot," Cooper shouted to the ether. Cooper rubbed his hand over his face, fighting off

panic. He tried to concentrate, to remember what he knew about the Voodoo's armament.

"Ok, think. Think! Falcon missiles, infrared guidance system, ah heat-seeking ... Shit."

Cooper's plane was probably the hottest goddamn thing in this hemisphere. With two burning Iroquois engines for the falcon to home in on, there was no way 207 could elude the missile. Cooper felt the sting of tears at the back of his throat, as futility threatened to overwhelm him.

RL-207 slipped into the lower stratosphere and Cooper watched the blue sky melt away again into the blackness of space. Cooper's breathing slowed. He heard his heart beat. That infinite peace returned. The knowing that was everything; the certainty that superceded any worldly limitations settled over him. Then he had it. The answer came to him as a gift.

There *might* be a way—one terrifying way. Predicated on the kernel of truth in a mythic legend that had circulated at Avro. Floyd and his bloody paper airplane.

Struggling to explain the advanced aerodynamics of the Arrow's design to its military handlers, Jim Floyd sent a paper airplane configured to emulate the Arrow's airframe gliding the entire length of the boardroom at Roe. Floating past the noses of the skeptical generals and the rest of the Arrow's engineering team, the craft landed softly in the corridor outside. "Like that," Floyd had said.

RL-207 rode near the top of her ceiling, 58,000 feet above the earth. He had the room. He could do it, if there was some particle of truth in the legend and *if* Floyd really was the bloody genius everyone said he was.

The missile was close now, flying behind 207 with unerring accuracy, homing in on the blazing heat of her engines. Cooper pulled a deep breath into his lungs and leaned over the controls, wincing at a fresh jolt of pain in his leg.

Reaching out, he flipped the red toggle switches that controlled the engines, killing them. The comforting rumble died, replaced by an eerie quiet that wrapped 207 in a blanket of silence. Cocooned in the absence of sound, Cooper had never felt so absolutely alone.

He didn't look behind him. Only counted down the seconds in his mind, shutting his eyes when he reached zero. Eyes still tightly shut Cooper took one breath, then another. With one more breath he was sure. Looking behind him, he saw the missile dropping down below

the cloud cover, seeking some other, warmer target. Cooper smirked.

The momentum that had been supporting 207's flight slowly gave way and he could feel her dipping gently downwards. The 207's beautiful isosceles wings caught at every updraft, helping to support her weight; still there was no mistaking that, however gracefully, 207 was going down.

When her nose buried itself in the clouds, Cooper felt it was likely that the falcon had either taken out the other Voodoo or, having spent its fuel, was tumbling helplessly back toward the Westney base. Either way, it was safe for him to resume his flight under power.

Leaning forward, he pressed the restart button for the Iroquois engines. A burst of thrust pushed him back in the seat. Everything went dark for a moment as a fresh jolt of pain coursed through his leg. He suspected it might be broken but maybe that was the price fate demanded he pay for her life—it seemed a small cost for that, as costs went.

Just as suddenly as the power started, it sputtered out, the engine lights blinking red, indicating a failure. He remembered the stagger in the Iroquois' output after the lightening strike. A shiver chased itself up and down Cooper's spine. He pushed the restart again. This time there was no responding push on his backside, no reassuring thunder through the canopy. RL-207 slipped through the cloud cover, a few miles above the cold, hard ground.

He tried again, again nothing. He tried again and again.

Cooper sat back as the Arrow glided elegantly toward the earth. A chuff of laughter escaped from his chest. So this was how it was going to be? Dief's marauders win by default? The Arrow, along with Mott Cooper, would vanish after all, winding up as an ignominious, smoldering wreck in some farmer's cow field. The death of the seventh, the last Arrow, reported as a mere sidebar in some backwater tabloid.

He caressed the stick, telling the Arrow that he believed in her and no matter what happened, he knew she was the best. Cooper patted the inside of the canopy affectionately. He watched the altimeter roll down the last moments of his life in hundreds of feet.

He told her he would keep trying. It was the best he could do for her now.



"Die, Vadar, die!" Cameron whispered, depressing the firing control to release the bombs from his X-wing fighter. "Crap," he groaned as

the bombs missed their target and the video screen blanked out, leaving the words, "The Empire Is Victorious" etched in reverse dropout letters. "I'll never finish this damn game!"

"Cameron, don't swear," his mother said, frowning slightly. "It's only a game, for God's sake! And you should be paying attention, anyway. This is very important. It's about our history. It's educational."

Cameron rolled his eyes at his mother's use of the death word. *Educational* meant boring. *Educational* meant, "It happened at least a thousand years before you were born." Geez! Why did she have to drag him to some stupid art gallery or war relic every time they went on vacation together? It wasn't his fault that his dad liked sports, instead of museums and ballet.

At least he had *some* interest in this stuff. He liked planes—well, not those old WWI things with the wooden bodies and ribbed canvas wings. He liked fighters. The F-18s in *Top Gun*, or space stuff, like the Shuttle. Besides, their guide through the Aerospace Museum was kind of cute. Her blond hair was tied back in a neat bun and he imagined it was really long and wavy and hung all the way down her back. He grinned at her and she smiled back. He tuned in briefly to what she was saying.

"... the nose and cockpit section of the 1959 Avro Arrow, the most technologically advanced airplane of its time. The Arrow was built by the A.V. Roe Company at what was then its Malton airport location. A.V. Roe was managed by Crawford Gordon Jr. from 195...."

Cameron went back to destroying the *Death Star*.

The next time he looked up, his tour group had moved on to the next exhibit, leaving Cameron alone with the Arrow display. Well, almost alone. An old man stood on the opposite side of the exhibit, leaning on a cane. He limped awkwardly around the display, lost in thought. He was wearing a battered old brown hat from a 40's movie and what looked like Indiana Jones' leather jacket, the elbows all scuffed and scratched.

The old man became aware of Cameron's scrutiny and turned sharp eyes on the young man. Cameron backed up a little.

"You like planes?" asked the old man, his voice weak and papery.

"Yeah, sure. Who doesn't?" Cameron replied, holding tight to his Game Boy and keeping one eye on his mother's location. "You?"

The old man ignored the question. "You like this plane?"

"Nah. I like fighters. Y'know, F-18s ..."

A chuff of laughter escaped from the old man. "She's a fighter,

boy. Best damn fighter ever was. Did Mach 3 at 58,000 feet. Handled like a dream. Best damn fighter ..." the old man trailed off, his eyes misty.

Cameron looked up at the Arrow. For the first time he noticed her smooth lines and generous curves.

"Yeah," he said, looking at the old man. "She looks pretty cool. Too bad she's so old and not all in one piece, y'know?"

The old man transferred his cane from one hand to the other and slowly reached into the pocket of his leather jacket. Cameron tensed a little, but when he saw the piece of paper in the old man's hand, he relaxed again.

"Here, take this," said the old man, holding out the folded sheet to Cameron.

"What is it?" Cameron asked, stepping forward and reaching out hesitantly.

The old man looked down at the paper in his hand, gently smoothing out a crease against his chest. He looked up at Cameron, fixing him with an intense look.

"Truth, boy. It's the goddamn truth". He dropped the paper on the riser of the Arrow display and shuffled slowly and painfully towards the entrance to the gallery.

Cameron gingerly picked up the yellowed sheet of paper. It was stained and cracked with age. Carefully, he unfolded the letter and began reading the blurry, typewritten lines.

"Six months ago I was "advised" that if Dief and his Conservatives won the election, the Arrow was finished. Not just shelved, obliterated. That's when I started planning for this moment"

"Who's Dief?" Cameron asked as he looked up again, but the gallery was empty. The old man was gone. •



Alberta
Foundation
for the Arts

You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

The dead don't rest easy, boy.
Not when they're left to drift
amid the logs and refuse...

Maelstrom

Angelo Niles

At first glance Hope seemed like any other coastal town. With its salty odors and lazy Pacific breezes, Hope lay on the edge of the world. Oregon gave Cole Defoe what New Orleans hadn't: a sense of rural ease, that live-by-your-boot-straps kind of pith. He could smell the history and quiet traditions.

Cole's transfer had been after a particularly haunting ordeal. Keisha Bowley's had been a hard case to crack. So the Bureau gave him a cozy desk and plenty of papers to file, all to help rid Cole of the pangs he suffered from back in New Orleans.

But the Big Easy was far behind Cole now. Some ghosts, he decided, were best left to rest—unlike the Bureau's latest case, Bert Holland of Lake Oswego, Oregon, last seen April 7, 2003. As he came to Carver's Deck at the far end of the marina, Cole pulled out Holland's photo, eyeing the scenery for clues.

Fog rose up from the wet black rocks along the dock, leaving a frothy gruel of waves and scavenging sea gulls. He inhaled the salty cool air that hung over Hope's otherwise languid calm. It felt good to get out from behind a desk and into the fray of the hunt.

People strolled along the storefronts, eyeing the trinkets of a fishery town. The morning bustled with the crackle of fluttering sails and the creaking of old hulls that fought to keep their mooring. Carver's Deck

hid a starkly sinister mist below its restless wake and battered planks.

Receipts found at the Lake Oswego home had led Cole to Pearl's Herbs, a small boutique nestled in a cluster of shops not far from the pier. Cole eyed the boardwalk for Ezekiel Adams. The albino Haitian woman had said he might know about Holland. He found the old man perched on a log stub at the far end of the dock. Oblivious to Cole's approach, his fingers worked deftly with a knife as he carved.

"Mr. Adams?" Cole asked cautiously.

The dense gray eyes peered up to inspect the stranger. Cole wore dark slacks, a parka, and a holster. His short-cropped black hair framed a chiselled face and keen brown eyes lined with crow's feet. Ezekiel Adams nodded.

"I'd prefer Zeke," he spat, returning to his whittling. "And don't block my light."

Cole stepped aside. Other than the tattered boats and a dreary coastline, there wasn't much to the scenery. Carver's Deck was the faltering relic of a once thriving fishery port. Beyond Payoda Street and the placid hills lay the outskirts of Oregon—old Northwest-style settlements, logging town ships, the Federal Bureau of Investigations in Portland, and the patchy grave of ashen pines and pristine lakes.

"Sloppy work." Zeke said. "Bones ain't what they used to be. Can't fish with these hands, either. But you stick a worm on a twig and they sure fight fiercely."

"The fish here?"

"Crabs, boy."

Cole saw the bucket. Red-shelled crabs clawed fruitlessly, vying to escape their plastic prison.

"Got quite a few, I see. Any good for eating?"

"If you're into crap!"

Zeke's fingers were scarred and wrinkled. His clothes came from another age: a torn thermal top and overalls, boots of black rubber, muddy. Pale layers of skin shrouded a mere skeleton. He glowered at Cole briefly.

"No, son. Best not to eat the scavengers. Foul and disgusting, if you ask Old Zeke."

Two shadows came into Cole's periphery. A pair of chatty old ladies out for a stroll on the dock slowed, then moved to the other side of the Deck, as if to avoid the bucket of crabs. Cole felt their wary gazes as they quickened their gait.

"Ever see this man?" Cole asked, taking out Holland's photograph.

The Kodak had been among the trophies and yachting plaques in the missing art dealer's home. In it, he stood on the deck of his plush 40-foot yacht.

"Bought herbs from Edna Pearl a few weeks ago. She said he often came down to the docks."

The old man seized the photo.

"Looks like him, I suppose. Hard to tell in this light."

Bert Holland wore glasses. He had the look of a banker, mid-forties, of Scottish descent. Apparently, two ivory fetishes with black diamond eyes had vanished with him. The relics, Cole had learned, were diplomatic loans from Mali. The Portland Art Museum kept a log of every piece in the exquisite collection: mostly carved from ebony, the tribal idols were said to have thrived in the pre-colonial kingdoms of Africa, but now, by illicit means, the Dogon carvings were gone.

"Strikes me oddly," said Cole, leaning on the railing. "Out of the clear blue, Bert just takes off without a trace. Can't make sense of it."

"God awful thing," Zeke agreed.

A lone clipper sat in the harbour, adrift like some stray barge, as though it had been cast long ago from the infinite gray buoyancy. Cole asked about its owner, and if Holland had ever had anything to do with the clipper.

"She's a lighthouse," the old fisherman said. "Nobody owns her anymore. An Alaskan whaler left to drift ages ago. Don't know the story in full, but they say its crew vanished in 1907. The Tailgate is a tale we'd all rather forget."

"We?"

"Anyone who's lived in Hope long enough."

A gust stole over Carver's deck just then, bringing an odor which Cole found redolent of crude oil. He wondered if there might be a spill down the coast, or a burning wreckage, perhaps. It was probably an odor caused by the imagery in his mind. Of a crew lost in the throes of an angry sea.

"Sit here a while and you'll see," Zeke growled. "God never liked a man who didn't pay attention to her. All this dust and mud in every organism comes from the sea. And it's all a pile of crabmeat, like them in my bucket. Scavengers and men."

Cole grew impatient.

"Any reason why Bert Holland would fear for his life?"

"Same as any. An eye for an eye."

"Someone owed him a bad favor, you mean?"

“God did.”

“Oh, I see,” Cole chided. “Bert’s sins finally caught up with him.” Zeke glared up at him.

“Listen, boy. I’m no preacher. I said it was an eye for an eye, which means he got what he had coming, if you ask me.” The wooden carving had become a rude effigy of a man. Its mouth was agape, frozen in a scream. “The cost of some secrets is knowing a truth you don’t want to. And knowing got Bert in bad trouble.”

The air grew stale with an eerie tinge. Zeke’s eyes were mere sockets in a skeletal face. The irises were milky with age and wise of things dark and forgotten.

“Knowing got them all eventually,” said Zeke with a scornful glance to the Tailgate. “Evil’s winds took them souls back. Long ago when the Negroes did the fishing in Hope, people got mad. Nobody wanted their nets soiling the fish. So they scared them off.”

Cole vaguely knew of the black settlers. Back in the gold rush days, Blacks came to the Northwest to make a new life and fish on the coast. But, like elsewhere, they were lynched or burned out of the shantytowns of Oregon. Since the late 1800s Hope had kept a tight seal on its dark history. An old graveyard lay hidden somewhere near the fishery...

“Black folk,” said Zeke, “wasn’t left in their graves. Good local folk wouldn’t have it. They’d steal the bodies out and dump them in the harbor. Let the crabs get their fill, like these scavengers, full of Negro souls.”

Crude oil scents rose above Hope’s lazy breeze. The gnawed hunk of wood in Zeke’s hands grew more ghastly.

“The dead don’t rest easy, boy. Not when they’re left to drift amid the logs and refuse. Right here in these tides, yes, they was all taken down. Only what they could salvage—that’s what them Black folk took back to bury. In a secret place.”

“Secret Place?”

“Where they can rest safely.”

Any chance Bert might be there too?”

“If he was fool enough to let them take him. But ain’t likely you want to find out what he did.”

“Bet I do,” Cole demurred.

“Don’t go meddling, son. Angry souls live in that boat’s wake.” But Cole had already made up his mind to get out to the Tailgate and find out what lay in its wake. A wheezy, scornful bit of words caught his nape as he strode off away from Carver’s Deck.

"Rest assured, boy. They'll kill you too!"

• • •

Cole walked the boardwalk, eyeing the marina for any sign of Holland's yacht. As he neared an alcove of sailboats he saw a kid squatting by a nearby schooner, doing a few minor repairs. He glanced up when Cole approached.

"May I help you?" the young man asked hastily.

"You own this?" Cole asked.

"Are you kidding? I work for Nickels."

"Cheap, huh?"

"Mr. Nickels. Owns a rental shop."

Cole smiled wryly. "And I suppose he's on vacation. Is that it?"

The boy of sixteen or so paled. Small, rugged scars marked his left cheek, trophies from a recent scuffle it seemed. Otherwise, he looked clean-cut and agile. He gave Cole a hard look.

"I'm not stealing it," he protested. He stood, extending a hand speckled by latex paint.

"Jimmy Doyle's the name. You're the cop looking for that creep, right?"

"Bert Holland, yeah."

"Fat luck," Jimmy grinned. "He took off weeks ago. I know 'cause he owes me for a job. The lousy reneger."

Cole's brow furrowed.

"Think he's hiding, maybe?"

"Can't say. Birdy wasn't all there. Keep things on that boat he didn't like talking about, you know?"

A gush of interest swept over Cole. He asked Jimmy what he thought those things might be, or if he'd seen any unusual behavior out on Holland's yacht.

"Just the weird odor," Jimmy replied. "A reek like rotted wood, maybe. Can't really say." He wiped sweat from his brow. The wetly soiled rings at his armpits grew wider. "Except for that awful odor, you'd think it was the cleanest rig in the marina. The cleanest."

Jimmy looked over his shoulder. Then he squared eyes with Coles and said, "He kill somebody?"

Truth was, the Bureau didn't know for certain.

• • •

Before leaving the docks, Cole decided to get a look at the 150-foot clipper. After a cup of coffee and a Danish, Mr Nickels of The Bucket gave Cole a key to a rented dinghy which awaited him in a nearby cover. He undid the ropes and slid into the harbor soon after.

The motor whined noisily as Cole stole over the murky waters which anchored the old cargo ship to the town of Hope.

The Tailgate clung to a fading lure of old places and ghosts. In Holland's case, those ghosts existed as in tiny bits of forensic theory. Some dark secret had swallowed the art dealer into a swirling gale of peril.

Above a rotting embankment of masts and creaky mooring, the Tailgate's sails flapped like wings of a tiring raven. Cole felt a wire of dread tighten at his throat as he flanked its hull. Its masts creaked under a perpetual breeze.

After fastening the dinghy portside, he climbed a rope ladder up onto the deck.

Decades of refuse lay over the ancient planks. Cole saw scurrying crabs and thought of Ezekiel Adams. Scavengers, Zeke had said of them. Eating tiny bits of grime and algae living in the timber? His skin felt flaky.

He gathered his coat snugly to his chest as he eyed the derelict for signs of a galley—some place in which to store whatever evil it was that Ezekiel had warned of.

The cabin door creaked with a nudge.

Cole undid his holster and aimed the laser-fitted Glock down into the dark belly of the Tailgate. Crabs had eaten a gaping hole into the stairwell leading to its cargo hold. A foul kiss of decay stung his nostrils.

With ginger steps, he edged down into a grim scene lit by his flashlight. Crates were piled in rows. Many of them empty now; they were filled with odd African relics. A few lay open to reveal some sort of skeletal remains; the small, ashen bones now covered with dust and cobwebs.

He stood in the belly of a floating grave.

Cole recognized the stolen Dogon artifacts. The crates had been hidden here in the Tailgate's bowels, far from the prying eyes of the FBI.

A nasty pitch shook Cole's footing. He narrowly missed a glass jar that clanked against a crate. Looking to the floor, he aimed his flashlight at the jar.

Kneeling, he picked it up to inspect its contents. Even through the dusty webs Cole saw the moldy leaves of an herb he had seen elsewhere.

"Edna Pearl," he muttered to the darkness. "She's come here looking for her patient."

Those pale eyes had looked straight into Holland's fears. And she mistakenly believed her herbs held a cure, an elixir to calm the demons and keep him from drowning.

Stale, salty air flowed down the cargo hold. It did nothing to mask the stench that rose from the crates. Can of kerosene and flammable sealants lay nearby. He now knew that was the same gas oil that soaked the wood and entire hull of the Tailgate. The crude odor he had smelled on the docks.

Cole envisioned the ship being rigger with a fiery booby trap against trespass.

Still inspecting the jar, Cole took an evidence bag from his coat. A lab test might find a strand of hair, or a single wood louse, of which he could link to Holland's mystery. After placing a sample into a baggy, he knelt to retrieve one other bit of evidence: nestled amid the debris lay a broken pair of eyeglasses.

He recognized them from Holland's photograph.

A shriek shot through his veins. His cell phone pulsed in his breast pocket. Clumsily he groped for it.

"Defoe speaking."

"Agent Napoli."

He felt relaxed by her tone. The Special Tasks agent had last talked to Cole in Chattanooga earlier that week.

"Any luck finding Bert?" she asked.

"Only his specs."

"Well then," Napoli offered, "that's a lead I'd kill for. Nobody thinks the body we found at the lake is Tobey's. The kid went thin air on me. I'm ready to puke."

"Sorry to hear."

Silence filtered her breathing. Cole asked if she was in Portland.

"Got in at two this morning," Napoli said. "On my way to the Bureau now if you want to talk shop."

The Tailgate swayed in the tides, deepening in the pit of his stomach.

"Cole?" Napoli asked, as if the line had gone bad.

"I've got a Haitian to visit," he replied.

"Edna Pearl, right?"

"Bert Holland was on this ship. And if he got his crates from this hold, then he probably needed a gun."

• • •

The Haitian herbalist, Dr. Edna Pearl, had not returned to her shop since his last visit and hadn't giving anyone her whereabouts. So Cole had sought out Old Zeke at his stump, but he wasn't anywhere in sight of Carver's Deck.

Cole edged warily along the pier's railing, sensing peril. The Tailgate swayed in the harbour, guarding a secret that dug at his bones. He sure felt Holland had been snared by his own dark secrets. An art deal gone to far...

Lapp waves frothed against the Deck. Tides driven not by wind, but a faraway current.

He leaned over the gnarled wooden railing.

In the murky swell he saw a floating bit of timber. Cut from wood that grew far from Hope's fishery, no doubt. Cole eyed it for a long while, then looked to the Tailgate, thinking, *that's wood too*. Down in the hull of the clipper was a stow of Dogon sculptures that Bert Holland hid shortly before his disappearance.

The timber was dark like mahogany. Waves cradled it, twirling the debris back below the pier.

Cole wanted a look down there.

Holland's skulduggery may very well have ended in foul play. A bad deal neatly tucked away by a ruthless buyer. Cole saw a body in his mind's eye. The secret may lie underneath Carver's Deck, if they had indeed killed him, as Zeke promised.

Fog hugged the surf like fingers. A low creaking noise seized the Deck, sending cold tremors through him. The only way down was to climb over the railing. Huge beams held the pier high above the water, giving Cole an icy plank to manoeuvre should he climb onto the false ledge.

He knelt at its edge. Salty sweet air caught in his throat as he swallowed. When he groped halfway over the embankment, a crab scurried up his hand and soared into the harbor.

His blood froze.

A basket floated into view just then. It was a fishing basket that had been anchored to a pole beneath the Deck. Cole gripped the railing tightly, easing himself down just enough to snare the line and pull the basket up.

Gasping from the effort, he hefted the cargo up onto the Deck. A gray seagull perched on a nearby stump squawked, eyeing Cole suspiciously. The metal basket was fashioned with chicken wire and a sturdy fishing line. With cold fingers he undid the loops and fetters, feeling

his chest throb.

Immediately, Cole saw what had been stashed. The mesh wire unfolded to reveal a small tin box, an antique fisherman's gearbox, rusted and battered by age.

The gull squawked ominously. Cole sniffed.

"A flying rodent," he breathed, picking up the gearbox.

He eyed a motley stash of souvenirs: gold-plated pocket watch, fishing lures, a carving knife, cork pipe. An odor of decay sealed in its tin, airtight vault.

Wrapped in plastic, beneath the other items, lay black-and-white photographs, so old they were dingy brown and curled. The scenes were of the fishery back when life was simple—men who worked the docks, wore old sailor hats and boots covered with fish guts. A face in one photo, sharp as a carver's blade, caught Cole's eye. On the deck of the Tailgate stood Ezekiel Adams, looking the same as today, clenching his fishing knife. They had caught a big shark. The old croon had a king crab in his grimy hand...

A date glared from the photo: 1907.

"That's impossible!" Cole harked. But as he gazed at the scenery—a town of horse-drawn buggies, an old bucket Ford, and far fewer shops and homes along its hillsides—Cole saw one thing that was as old as Ezekiel.

Afloat like a mirage stood Carver's Deck, newly built and unscathed by time.

Cole's veins went cold. A low snarl seized his nape.

I told you, boy. The dead don't rest easy.

Startled, he snapped to his feet. With a hand on his holster, he searched the pier for Ezekiel Adams. When he glanced up he saw the source of the words. There on the deck of the Tailgate stood a wavering figure. Fumes from the clipper's rotting hull made a mirage of the old face; even this far away Cole could distinguish each pock mark, the scowling pale eyes. Zeke's lips curled tightly into a grimace.

See, didn't I tell you, boy?

Crude oil scents stole over the harbor as if to strangle Hope. The Tailgate's sails rose high like tattered clouds chasing away the last remnants of a storm. In a surreal flash the ghastly ship burst into a fury of rolling flames and dark gray clouds. So intense was the heat that Cole had to shield his eyes. Tiny spark angels formed a riotous pyre, the fiery column ascending into the dusty sky.

Then it was all gone.

The next day Cole consulted Ernest Pablo at the Bureau's forensics lab in Portland. A plethora of specimens, microscopes, and charts cluttered Room 501. The technician was an olive-skinned man with wiry limbs. He held the photo to a special phosphor lamp. At his computer, a row of tiny lines came into focus at his command.

Cole stood at Pablo's side, eyeing the screen. "Touched up with zinc and nickel, I'd say," the FBI technician explained. "But this photo isn't just a clever fake."

Cole had retrieved a key bit of evidence from Carver's Deck. Among the souvenirs was a snapshot of a crime scene that had yet to be investigated. In a pool of water, effused into the dark silence down in a cellar at the Lake Oswego house, lay the lifeless gaze of Bert Holland. It had been there in the tin gearbox, obviously left for Agent Cole Defoe.

After an inquiry by Jan Napoli with the National Mariners Guild, the Bureau also learned the whereabouts of Holland's yacht. Apparently it was abandoned off the shores off Puget Sound, with no trace of its owner. They only had the snapshot of Holland, obviously a victim of foul play, face up in a dark pool in a flooded cellar.

"Stressful case?" Pablo asked. He must have sensed the tense muscles in Cole's nape. "Maybe it's worth a visit to Dr. Eves," he quipped.

"Don't need a shrink, Ernie."

Using the mouse, Pablo dragged an image down from a second file. Its grayish brown shadows were of two sailors, one with a carving knife, scanned from a photo that Cole had retrieved from the gearbox.

Pablo said, "I used sepia toning to filter out the film. Take a look at this, Cole." The computer washed away the upper layer of the photo image. A hazy figure came into view, one overlapping the NetScan original. Where two men had stood in 1907 there was now a dim, youthful face Cole recognized.

"Jimmy Doyle," said Cole, incredulously.

Pablo opened a window on the screen and zoomed in a corner of the image to one-thousandth magnification. It was Old Zeke with enlarged, scowling eyes. The film looked grainy and sketchy now. Dots fizzled to the screen, like a patchwork of tiny hieroglyphs.

"Amazing," Cole breathed.

"Yep," Pablo agreed. "This photo isn't what it appears to be, either. Definitely not amateur work. The NetScan did most of it, but any hack

would've known what he was looking at. Like I did."

"Coded imagery, you mean?"

"Right."

The words scrolled up in a single column: *Rest assured, boy, they'll kill you first...*

The air grew icy cold. Cole plummeted into a labyrinth of swirling souls, deep down into the Tailgate, where old Zeke still stood, eyeing him with crow eyes.

Suddenly he thought of those old ladies on the dock. Hadn't they walked warily past him, as though Cole were talking to thin air?

Cole's investigation had wandered into a place where few had ever gone. And the fiery explosion had wiped away any trace of the Tailgate. Ezekiel Adams. Bert Holland. The crew of 1907. It had taken them all back, yes. Ghosts lay there in the burning hull, alongside the stow of Dogon sculptures and cobwebs. Lingered down there where the Bureau would never find any of them. •

**From all of us here at On Spec,
THANK YOU for reading
and supporting Canadian SF!**

Don't miss a single issue—subscribe now and save!

	Canada	USA	Overseas
1 year	\$22.00	\$22.00 US	\$27.00 US
2 years	\$36.00	\$36.00 US	\$48.00 US
3 years	\$48.00	\$48.00 US	\$62.00 US
Institutional (per year)	\$30.00	\$30.00 US	\$35.00 US

All prices include GST (Canada), shipping and handling
(See page 2 of this issue for ordering details)

On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6 CANADA
phone: (780) 413-0215 • fax: (780) 413-1538
email: onspec@onspec.ca

about our contributors

LANCE BOND has a Ph.D. in mathematics, has taught at University and has worked for decades in the software industry. He is now working from his home and writing short SF stories and novels. He watches the world unfold with a sometimes uncomfortable mixture of optimism and dread, but he is always fascinated by the strange and unexpected impacts of technology on human society.

PAULINE CLIFT studied fiction in Concordia University's creative writing program, where she was short-listed for the Irving Layton short-story award. She has received support and encouragement from many sources, including the Canada Council for the Arts, Humber College, Vermont Studio Center and PWAC, Canada's national association of professional freelance writers. Her latest stories have been published in Matrix Magazine and Lichen. She is currently writing a novel about a one-parent family struggling to survive in London during the depression.

VALERIE V. DEACON lives and writes in Toronto, Ontario. She prefers to write in the fantasy genre, be it modern or classical, with underlying themes of myth, magic and divinity. Having always had the drive to write, Valerie credits her publishing success to a part-time fantasy/sci-fi writing course she took at a local college, which taught her the fundamentals of good short story writing. *Conservation* is Valerie's first science fiction piece published by On Spec. Valerie has yet to quit her day job as a law clerk, practicing in the area of family law.

KRISTOPHER HORTON lives and writes in Southern Oregon where he is hard at work on a collection of short stories and a couple novels.

PETER HYNES is a native Newfoundlander who, after over a decade in the tourism industry, has set to pursuing full-time his twin passions of writing and filmmaking. His stories have appeared in such publications as *Flesh & Blood*, *The Malahat Review*, *Transversions*, *Rain Crow* and *Wicked Hollow*. Two of these stories were nominated by the editors for the Journey and Pushcart Prizes. His family maintains that he is taking this writing thing far too seriously.

JEFFREY D. JOHNSON is a professional artist, currently illustrating a pop-up book in collaboration with Robert Sheckley. He has spent the last fifteen years tattooing in Canada and the United States.

CATHERINE MacLEOD is looking for a good bowl of rattlesnake chili, thoroughly enjoying her second childhood, and properly humbled after reading *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

ANGELO NILES lives in Florence, Arizona, where he is working on *Gallery Noir: Twelve Dark Tales by Angelo Niles*, his collection of short stories which will feature *Maelstrom* and other Cole Defoe tales. He longs to return to Vancouver, B.C., where he once lived as an abstract artist and starving poet.

PETER NORMAN's stories and poems have appeared in various magazines, including *Toro* and *subTerrain*, and the anthology *Victory Meat: New Fiction from Atlantic Canada*. His sonnet collection, *The Shape Inside*, is online at www.newformalist.com/ebooks. He lives in Ottawa with his wife, author Melanie Little.

HUGH SPENCER was born in Saskatoon and currently lives in Toronto. His recent works include *The Hospital for Sick Robots* in *Descant Magazine* and *Amazing Struggles, Astonishing Failures and Disappointing Success*, a radio drama mini-series for the Satellite Network of National Public Radio.

in upcoming issues...

Get ready for our WINTER 2004 issue that explores the theme of ADDICTION. Featuring new works by Leah Bobet, Ian Creasy, Jonathan Cresswell-Jones, Catherine MacLeod, Brian Moore, Trevor Nickel, Kate Reidel, Wes Smiderle, John Unruh, and more! And in SPRING 2005, read new works by Kevin Cockle, Fiona Heath, Susan Urbanek Linville, David Redd, Jess Stuart, and many more! POETRY fans who've been craving more can also expect some fine work in the pages of On Spec in the coming year—in the meantime, thanks for reading!

on spec

acknowledgements

The donors listed below have all given generously of their time and their money in the past year. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

sponsors

Alberta Community Development, Arts Development Branch;
The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts;
The Department of Canadian Heritage; Advanced Education and Career
Development; Alberta Community Employment Program

patron

E.L. Chen

supporters

Rick LeBlanc, Danica LeBlanc, Lynette Bondarchuk, Janice Jessop,
our subscribers & our dedicated editorial board

behind the scenes support

The continued success of On Spec is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as:

Jane Bisbee and Paul Pearson of Alberta Community Development and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Don Bassie and the Made in Canada website, Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library, and Donna McMahon.

Financial support provided by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries), the Canada Council for the Arts, and further support from the Government of Canada through Canadian Heritage and the Publications Assistance Program (PAP), towards our mailing costs.



Alberta
Foundation
for the Arts



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des
du Canada



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien

WASPS

at the Speed of Sound
AND OTHER SHATTERED FUTURES



Cover collage by Elaine Chen

DERRYL MURPHY

The long-awaited first
collection from
On Spec art director
Derryl Murphy

with an introduction
by Peter Watts

“...tremendous beauty
and poignancy...”

— Karl Schroeder, author of
Ventus and *Permanence*

“...takes dead aim at the
complacency of those who
regard this planet as
a resource to exploit...”

— James Patrick Kelly,
author of *Strange But*
Not a Stranger and
Think Like a Dinosaur

Coming from Wildside Press this January

www.wildsidepress.com

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40063520
REGISTRATION 08148

RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:
ON SPEC
BOX 4727
EDMONTON AB T6E 5G6

DISPLAY UNTIL JAN 15/04



7 25274 15005 2