

on spec

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“Rocket Packs” © Kazu Kibuishi

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

Also, please see our important notice about upcoming subscription changes on page 59 of this issue!

A Win-Win Situation

Diane Walton, General Editor

We are constantly re-inventing ourselves at *On Spec*. We have always encouraged feedback from our readers, and now we have made it even easier for you: visit the *On Spec* web site to see breaking news about our authors—prizes they have won, and new publications they announce. You will also see where *On Spec* staff and editors will be appearing at upcoming SF conventions—we love it when an *On Spec* reader or writer comes by our table in the Dealer Room, and this past year I was thrilled to meet Kevin Cockle, Robert Burke Richardson, Susan Forest, Paul Bartel and Mark Brennan (among many others) at conventions. And now on our front page you can find a link to the new *On Spec* blog! On this blog, the *On Spec* editors will be posting their humble opinions on life, the universe and everything else that comes to mind. We'll also announce *On Spec* merchandise you can buy, and (here it comes... drum roll please...) FREE STUFF!

That's right—from time to time, we will announce a contest of some sort. Effective immediately, here's a chance for you to win something—our first contest asks for reader feedback, with a copy of Charles de Lint's book *Spirits in the Wires* as a prize: There is a common thread running through several of the stories in this issue. We did not even notice it ourselves, until we re-read them to select the order of placement. *See if you can find out what it is.* Send a letter or e-mail with your answer, by February 15, 2006, and we'll put the correct responses in a draw for some cool free stuff in the new year. It's just that easy.

As time goes by we will have more goodies up for grabs. Perhaps even

a free subscription. Currently, we're thinking of a postcard fiction contest for those of you who are writers. All the more reason for you to visit the *On Spec* web site more often, and let us know what you like about the magazine, and what you'd like to see. We can't do this without you.

Speaking of this, we encourage you to write a letter to your Member of Parliament (subject to change <g>) and thank them for the recent commitment by the Canadian government under leadership of Paul Martin, to a significant increase in funding for the Canada Council for the Arts by 2008. Small presses and magazines in Canada, independent artists and larger performing companies—anyone involved in the cultural industries—often depend on this sustainable support for their very survival.

And where would you be without us? •

• **Special Notice to Our Readers** •

We have determined, at long last, that the purchase price of *On Spec* must increase, to keep pace with the ever-growing costs of production, printing and distribution of the journal.

Please see page 59 for more info...

Back then, in the Fall that followed the Plague, before the Entity and its empire, the world consisted of those who survived and those who died. Survivors learned fast what their skills were.

Memories of the Dead Man

Douglas Smith

You are done for—a living dead man—not when you stop loving but stop hating. Hatred preserves: in it, in its chemistry, resides the mystery of life.

- E.M.Cioran, The New Gods

You ask me of the Dead Man. What kind of man was he?

Good question. But not the right one.

Some call him a murderer, a cold-blooded killer—or worse. Some call him a hero. Jase and I made it through those days only by his hand in our lives, so you'd think I'd know where I stand on that one.

But even after thirty years, I'm still not sure.

I had dreams once, beyond living another day, but they'd died when I was twenty, died with my husband and daughter in the Plague. For ten years after that, I did what I had to, to feed Jase and me, to survive. That meant taking what we needed and staying in motion, one step ahead and not looking back. Not getting involved. Not trusting.

I made an exception with him, with the Dead Man. No—not that name. You call him that. They call him that. I won't. To us, to Jase and me, he was Bishop. He said his other name was John, but we just called him Bishop.

Yeah, I made an exception with Bishop. But then he was an exception to a lot of rules, even before the Merged Corporate Entity rebuilt Earth under its own rules.



It began in a shantytown, squalid and squatting on the edge of the Alberta Badlands. Began at 4 a.m. on a chill May night, under a moon as bright and cold and pockmarked as the chrome on the old Buick I'd just hot-wired.

Jase and I left some pissed-off locals in the dust, including Lizard, the skinny boss-man who'd proposed a business deal earlier that I hadn't wanted to consummate. They ran after us down the broken asphalt right to the crumbling ramp onto the old highway until we faded into the night. I'd trashed the alternators on the two other cars in town, so I wasn't worried about pursuit. I planned to drive all night and hide out in the hills come first light.

Jase slept in the back as the road climbed into foothills lying like rumpled sheets on the bed of night. The town fell two hours behind, and an eastern light began to wash away the holes that stars had poked in heaven's black canopy. I began to relax, humming an old lullaby I used to sing to Sally and Jase when Sally was still alive and Jase didn't think he was too old for lullabies. Some of the words even came back to me just before the Buick coughed once, twice. Then it stopped coughing and just stopped period.

It sounded like we were out of gas, but the gauge showed three-quarters of a tank. I popped the hood, as a suspicion grew along with a cold lump in my gut.

They'd rigged the gauge to move no lower than three-quarters. At least I had the two hours head start, and they had no wheels. That hope died as I looked back to the flatlands below. Two pairs of headlights bobbed along the broken highway.

It looked like they kept spare alternators.

My earlier bravado blew away with the cold night wind. I could take whatever they did to me—I'd been ready to die a long time ago—all except for Jase. He was what kept me going on. And these people wouldn't limit their retribution to me. Even if they spared Jase, what would happen to him if I were dead?

I looked around for a place to hide, but we were a good mile from any cover the still-distant hills might provide. Trying to convince myself that maybe we could make it, I checked the headlights below again. The highway started weaving about where they were as the terrain got rougher. I was just figuring we had maybe ten minutes when a black shape following the two cars turned off the highway and cut across the rocky desert, straight for us. A third car, running dark. And the lack of a road didn't seem to be slowing it down much.

Straight for us. Shit. Too late I remembered that I still had the Buick's lights on. *Why don't you just send up a fucking flare, bitch?* I swore at myself.

I ran back to the Buick. Jase was awake and sitting up in the back. He always knew somehow. "Mom?"

"Out of gas, and we got company." Yanking open the driver's door, I killed the lights as Jase jumped out. He threw my bag to me then ripped his open and began pawing through it. I pulled my gun from my belt and thumbed off the safety.

"How close?" he asked, standing again, his own gun in hand.

"Two minutes, *tops*," I said, looking at him. Small for his eleven years, calm and sure, thin sandy hair blowing in the night wind as he scanned the terrain for a place to hide. Ready to fight. *Are you ready to die, Jase? Do you know that's what this is about? Do you blame me for this life?*

I pointed at some rocks about a hundred yards east. Jase nodded, and we ran. We were about halfway when the growl of an engine leapt over the rise behind us. I turned to see a black shadow launch itself over the ridge of the hill we'd climbed in the Buick. Airborne for a full breath, it landed far more smoothly than any car should, then immediately spun towards us.

I stopped, putting myself between the car and Jase. Jase ran for another twenty yards before he noticed. "Mom!" he cried.

"Keep going!" I yelled, but he stayed put, gun out, one eye on the car. I raised my own gun as the car swerved around me and slid sideways to stop between us. It had an oversized Caddy body but this was no Caddy. Tinted windows hid the inside.

The night held its breath. All I could hear was the dying rattle of rocks the car had kicked up and my own hard breathing, louder than the engine in this thing. Both back doors *shooshed* opened. I tensed and sighted along my gun, but no one emerged.

"Get in!" An amplified voice, metallic and cold, boomed from the car. Jase looked at me. I shook my head. The driver's door opened with another *shoosh*. A man stepped out. Dark hair, slim, six feet. Long coat covered in black chain mail, probably crysteel loops, light and strong. Gray T-shirt and faded jeans. Black, finger-less gloves, and a short heavy chain around his neck with metal balls hanging from it. Smaller metal balls decorated the chain mail and the back of the gloves.

Arms raised, he stepped away from the car. I could see a knife sheath strapped to each of his forearms. His movements seemed casual, but he kept his weight low, knees slightly bent. The gravel barely crunched when he moved. He looked from Jase to me, both our guns on him, and he grinned. "Two minutes, and your friends from your car rental will be here for payment." His voice was calm, bantering.

"Why would we trust you?" I said, aiming my gun at his chest.

He shrugged. "Me or them."

I bit my lip. I could hear other engines climbing the rise. "We could shoot you. Take your car."

He nodded. "You could try."

I sighted along my gun at him. His grin faded, and he opened his hands, still held above his head. Two shiny balls like the ones decorating his coat and gloves seemed to hover above each palm. I heard a metallic clicking. *What the fuck?*

"Mom!" Jase called. I could see him out of the corner of an eye, but I didn't want to take my eyes off the stranger.

"What?" I snapped.

"Mom, he's okay." The approaching cars, now much closer, almost drowned out Jase's voice. "Mom, look at me!"

I hesitated, then shot a look at my son. Jase was smiling at me, running towards the man. "It's okay, Mom. He's okay."

Back then, in the Fall that followed the Plague, before the Entity and its empire, the world consisted of those who survived and those who died. Survivors learned fast what their skills were. Me, I could fix anything on wheels. Jase, he knew people. Just knew them. Could size them up just by looking at them. *Got a feeling*, he said. I'd learned to avoid people that made him nervous and to trust the ones he said were okay.

The man dropped his hands and waved us to the car. Jase scrambled into the back seat before I could yell at him to stop. Cursing but

committed now to trusting the stranger, I ran to the other side and climbed in as two cars crested the rise and pulled to a stop fifty feet away from us. I squinted out the back window into their headlights.

Two men unfolded themselves from each car, all four carrying short-stock M18 rifles.

The stranger still stood beside our car. *Unarmed*—I thought. Pointing his arms at the men, he opened his hands. The spheres he held blurred then disappeared. A whistling shriek cut the night. The gunmen jerked as if shot, then crumpled to lie motionless. More men piled cursing from the cars. The stranger reached toward his necklace. One of the larger metal balls leapt loose from the claw that held it and into his hand.

Again he held the ball in his palm, and again it seemed to blur. I'd figured out that somehow he could launch these spheres like projectiles. But now he held only one, albeit larger, against four opponents. Thinking he needed help, I clambered out of the car, gun in hand—just as the night exploded, and I went blind then deaf. A blast of heated air punched me in the chest, and I fell. I blinked my vision back as pieces of dirt, flaming car, and body parts rained down around me.

At least I knew why he only needed one sphere the second time. C-4 with an impact fuse, I guessed. Strong hands pulled me up and into the front seat. The stranger slid behind the wheel while I checked on Jase in the back, his face lit through the back window by the flames of the destroyed cars. "Holy shit!" Jase exclaimed. "How'd you do that?"

"Telekinesis." The man put the car into gear. "Got what you need?" he asked.

"Our bags and us. That's it," I said, still shaking from the explosion. The stranger nodded as if he approved.

"What's tele... keesis?" Jase asked as we drove away.

He smiled. "Telekinesis. I can move things with my mind."

"Oh." Jase said.

I couldn't think of anything intelligent to add so I just stared at the road, struggling to make sense of what had happened. It took a moment for the weird lighting of the scene ahead to register. The windshield was an infrared viewer. I checked out the dashboard, which had more instruments than a small plane. I checked them again before I was certain. "Jesus Christ! This is an urban hummer." The man just smiled again.

After the Plague had initiated the first stage of the Fall of Earth, the feds privatized domestic militia and police duties to the Entity. The Entity had introduced a scaled-down version of the military hummers—looked just like a full-size car on the outside. Now I knew how the stranger had arrived ahead of the others—this thing could handle practically any terrain.

“Thanks. I mean, for back there,” I said, not knowing what else to say but wanting to break the silence.

“No problem. I pulled into town as they were heading out.”

“Why’d you help us?”

“I knew Lizard,” he said. “Anyone he’d go after needs help. And usually deserves it. And...” Some inner struggle played itself out across his face. “And I had a wife and son once. If they had made it through the Fall instead of me, I’d have wanted someone to help them out.”

Jase leaned over the seat. “I’m Jase. This is my mom.”

“Mary.” I said, holding out my hand.

He took it in a warm, strong grip and held it a little longer than he needed to, giving me a good once over while he drove. “Bishop.”

I smiled, feeling no threat from his appraisal, and checked him out as well. He was lean but muscular, with a face of sharp lines and edges around a mouth out of place in all that hardness. Our eyes met, and I caught my breath. Black as old secrets, young-old like a child who has seen things a child should never see. They held me and made me want to hold him, to make those secrets, those things, go away.

He looked back to the road. Released from the hold of his eyes, my breath returned, and my gaze fell to a thin chain he wore below the short necklace of metal balls. From it hung a chess piece, a black bishop. But under the traditional bishop’s miter, a skull with two ruby eyes grinned.

I stared at that death head as random figures of rumor, legend, and out-right lies jostled and danced themselves into patterns, and finally into realization.

“My God,” I whispered. “You’re the Last Dead Man.”

Behind me, Jase fell silent and still. Bishop kept his eyes on the road. “I’ve had a lot of names, Mary.”

A lot of names. A lot of stories. You’ve heard them. Pick just one and try to settle on it. I tried, as I sat there beside the man who was either the most cold-blooded killer to emerge from the Fall or its

greatest hero. But he saved our lives, I told myself, and Jase trusted him.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, just to say something.

Bishop just shrugged. “Why? Someplace you need to be?”

Jase laughed, and I joined in. “Anywhere but here.”

“You’re in luck. I’m heading there myself,” Bishop said.

I thought of the life that Jase and I led. I thought of the past, a husband and daughter long dead. I thought of the future and of Jase, and how this man could protect him better than anyone. And I made a decision. “Mind if we join you?” I asked.

He looked at me, and I knew then that my life, Jase’s life had just taken a new road. “You already have,” Bishop said.



The Dead Man wound the hummer through the jumbled terrain as if each dry riverbed was a familiar road and every rock formation a street sign. “You ever heard of the Priests of the Night?” he asked after an hour of silence.

“Sure,” I said. “Major bad news. We steer clear of them. Started out as a network of bike gangs before the Fall, I think.”

He nodded. “When the Plague broke, the Entity used the Priests as militia in Alberta, a last gasp at keeping control before it all fell apart. They’ve grown into a small army in the prairies and upper mid-west states.” He looked at me. “You run into them lately? Or heard of them around here?”

I shook my head. He looked disappointed. From inside his vest, he produced a photograph, faded and creased in a clear plastic pouch. “Calls himself ‘The Pope’. Ever see him?”

I stared down at the picture. Shaved head, lots of skin piercing, and the inverted crucifix tattoo of the Priests on one cheek. Hawk-nose splitting eyes like diamonds, bright and sharp. Nasty grin wrapped around bad teeth. I shook my head. “Nope.”

“You’re sure?” This time his disappointment was obvious.

“Not a face I’d forget.” I showed it to Jase, and he shook his head too. “Why?”

Bishop just stared at the road ahead. “I’m looking for him,” he said, stating the obvious, and I knew that asking again wouldn’t prompt any more information.

We drove until sunup, then Bishop pulled into a cave he seemed to know would be there, and we slept. Well, Jase slept. Bishop and I made love, slept, made love, slept. There were no awkward discussions, no bargaining or manoeuvring. Just an unspoken agreement. And in truth, I found him attractive—and a gentle but passionate lover. It had been a long time for me, and the sincerity of my own passion soon caught up to his.

When night fell, he built a fire, and we sat around eating canned meat cooked on it—I couldn't identify the animal, and I'd learned long ago that I generally didn't want to.

"So how do you move things like that?" Jase asked.

Bishop smiled. He seemed to genuinely like Jase. And me too, but I assumed that was sexual. "Do you tell everyone you meet about that switchblade tucked in your boot?"

Jase's jaw dropped, and he pulled his jeans down to cover the knife. Bishop chuckled.

"Meaning you don't trust us?" I asked. He just shrugged.

"But why didn't you just pull the guns out of those guy's hands, instead of..." Jase's voice trailed off, but I knew what he was thinking. *Instead of killing them.*

"My power has limits, Jase. They were too far away."

I knew he wasn't telling us everything, but it didn't bother me. Survivors learned to keep their secrets to themselves. Trusting was another word for dead.

"What did you do before the Fall?" Jase asked. I cringed. You didn't ask people that—too many memories for survivors, all of them painful. To my surprise, Bishop answered him.

"Worked for the feds. Covert op called the Office."

"Were there others like you?" Jase asked.

He nodded. "Eight in all. We each had a unique... ability."

"And the Office called you the Dead Men?" Jase asked.

"No, Jase. That name came later. The Office used the names of chess pieces. I was the Black Bishop." He fingered the piece that hung from his necklace.

"So Bishop's not your real name either?" I said. He just smiled.

"What did you do for the Office?" Jase asked.

The smile disappeared. He didn't answer right away. "I killed people for them, Jase. We all did."

“Oh.” Jase said, and looked at me. I swallowed.

Bishop stared into the flames for a long time before he spoke again. “They’d raised us from kids, as a team, trained us as an elite assassination squad. There wasn’t a soul on Earth we couldn’t get to. At first, we told ourselves we were patriots, that our targets deserved it, that the world was better, safer without them. At first, I think we were right. Then the targets started becoming... questionable.” The shadows of the flickering fire, or of long buried memories, writhed across his face.

“Then on one target, we said no. We wouldn’t do it. They sent another team after him. We took them out. They sent a team after us. We took them out too. Then they sent Father. We called him Father. He’d brought us together. We’d served him all our lives it seemed. He stood before us that day and said ‘You’re dead men. Each and every one of you—you’re all dead men.’ I said, ‘Good—you can’t kill a dead man.’”

Bishop threw a log on the fire. “After, we took that name. Not strictly correct—three were women. And one was my wife.”

We all fell silent for a while. Then Jase spoke again, his voice low, cautious. “That last target. Why’d you say no?”

“He was just a kid, Jase. Younger than you. A reprisal against his father. They weren’t above killing families.” Bishop stared at the fire, and I knew he saw more than flames twisting in its depths. “No, they weren’t above that at all.”

I thought of the wife and son he mentioned, but it would be months before I had the courage to ask that question. “What happened to Father?” Jase asked.

Bishop tossed a last log onto the fire then stood. “I killed him.” He walked to where his sleeping bag lay and crawled into it, while I sat wondering what sort of man I had tied us to.



Over the following months, I came to realize that Bishop’s claim of having no planned destination was only partly true. Much of the time we indeed just headed for the next known enclave, usually a remnant of a town guarding stockpiles of gas and supplies. But once there, a pattern soon emerged. He would ask anyone he could find two ques-

tions: had they news of any Priests in the area, and had they seen the man in the photograph. Any answer in the positive would prompt more questions and determine our next destination.

So our lives changed but stayed the same. A life of wandering still, but with a lover for me, a father figure for Jase, and a protector for us both. A life less lonely. And safer—most of the time.

If we remained too long in any town, Bishop would attract attention. Attention from young bucks looking to carve out a rep by taking down a legend. They would try. And they would die.

Through those incidents, I learned of his ability—and its limits. The closer he was to an object, the more easily he could affect it. It followed the inverse-square law: if he halved the distance, his control increased four-fold. Best was touching something. He said that he transferred some of his power into objects, then used that to animate them, like drawing on the potential energy stored in a battery.

Time offset distance. The longer he could work with something, the more energy he could store in it. He could control an object from across a large room if he'd been in contact with it for a while.

He'd use that as a defense. He'd walk into a place, pick up a glass or ashtray or bottle, hold it a moment, then put it down and wander across the room, repeating the process. Sometimes he'd leave one of his metal balls in some part of the room. He'd do this before he'd take a seat. He wanted objects that he controlled spread around the room, ready for his use from whatever angle he might need.

But not just any object. He couldn't transfer his energy into living matter. Even with a non-living object, the more organic material it contained or was in contact with, the less control he could exert. Metal worked the best. And the greater the mass, the greater the life force required to move it.

That was why he couldn't have taken the guns off our attackers: they were distant objects never touched by him, and in contact with another person. It also explained why he wore the balls and knives: metal, in contact with him, with stored energy from long exposure, giving him instant and total control.

So some of my questions found answers. But with Bishop, questions were like nesting boxes—I opened one only to find another inside. And each box lay in a darkness deeper than the one before, until the one that hid within all the others—the box I would not open,

the question I feared to ask—dwelt in a blackness that no light could penetrate.

We'd been together for three months before I found the courage to open that last box. With Jase sleeping in the back of the hummer, Bishop and I made love outside one warm August night. After, lying under him and prairie stars, his body growing heavy on me, his breathing deepening to sleep, I asked him. Asked him of his wife and son, of the Priests, and how his hate was born.

I felt the muscles in his back tense. Then he rolled off me and reached to where his vest lay. From an inside pocket, he pulled a leather pouch, larger than the one in which he kept the photo of the Pope. He sat up and looked at me. I propped myself up on an elbow, held his stare, and waited.

Finally he spoke, his voice soft and low. "Her name was Tess. She was four years younger than me. A lot like you, tough and soft all mixed up together. Our boy's name was Daniel. He was just five when..." He stopped and turned away.

After a while, he spoke again. "Tess and I were surprised when they let us marry, said we could have a kid. Looking back, I figured they wanted to know what abilities our offspring would have. Tess could make you see things... things that weren't there." He laid the pouch down and ran his finger around and around its edges as he spoke.

"When we rebelled, the Office came after the Dead Men hard. We were easier to find together, so we split up. The rest went their way into deep cover, and Tess and I went ours with Danny.

"I figured we were safest not moving around. Too many probes and cameras in cities and checkpoints. So I bought a secluded cabin near Kananaskis. Paid cash.

"By now, the feds had given the Entity local militia powers, and they'd hired the Priests in Alberta. Finding the Dead Men was a high priority." He swallowed and picked up the pouch.

"And they found us. Or found Tess and Danny. I'd gone into town that day. Tess and I always prearranged an 'all clear' signal. That day it had been the right front window, raised partway. I came home in the evening. The window was down. The Priests were waiting for me, but I'd been warned."

He paused, jaw muscles working as I pictured him descending on

the Priests like a hound of hell. "I killed every Priest there, but I was too late. Tess was..." He stopped. "Danny died in my arms." Bishop stroked his arm as if smoothing his son's hair. A sad smile lived briefly on lips that suddenly hardened again. "The Pope himself had left before I arrived, but he'd staged the... events where our security cameras would catch it all on film. Thoughtful of him—I didn't have to miss a thing. That's where I got his picture. And these souvenirs."

He tossed the pouch in front of me, where it lay untouched—the final box, a container for nightmares—until at last, like Pandora, I reached to open it.

To release the horrors within.

The pictures, arranged it seemed in perfect chronological order, depicted the progress of the bondage, rape, and torture of Tess—the progress from a beautiful frightened woman to a thing in that last picture barely recognizable as human. That last picture—the one I threw from me, that made me cry out, sent me crawling on my hands and knees trying not to puke. That thing of blood and flayed flesh, limbless, a lump that must be a head.

"They tied Danny to a chair," he said. "Made him watch." His words fell like dead leaves, lifeless and brittle, waiting to be blown away.

When I looked back to Bishop, he was carefully putting the pictures back into the pouch. "Got to be careful with these. They're the only pictures I have of my family, the only..." He broke down then, sobbing on the ground. My mind clawed at words that skittered away from my mouth, from the memory of that picture. Finally, I said nothing for there was nothing to say—just crawled to him and held him close to me.

"You know what really scares me, Mary?" he asked after a while as we lay there. "I'm starting to forget how Tess really looked." I held him until he slept, no doubt trying to remember how she looked, while I lay awake trying to forget.

We never spoke of it again.

But I still remember that picture.



The pattern of those first months continued unchanged, except that now I knew the demons that drove Bishop. Looking back, the

taste of that time lies bittersweet in my memory. In many ways, I have never been happier. Three years we were together, an impromptu family assembled by fate and held together by necessity—and love. Yes, I came to love Bishop—even more than I had loved Jase’s father. That love lay like a safe harbor within me, a place I ran to when the horror that strode the Earth like a beast in those days passed too close.

But a different beast dwelt deep within Bishop—a thing of grief and bitterness and hate that lived with him always. And sometimes I didn’t know what I feared more: the horrors outside or those inside Bishop.

I was happiest when we had no goal but to reach the next huddling of humanity. Days of ignoring the world, of just being together, the three of us. But as we approached an enclave, my tension rose as if we were climbing to a precipice where mists hid what lay beyond. We’d arrive in the town, and I’d balance on the edge of that precipice while Bishop asked about the Priests. If he heard no news, then the mists and my fears would blow away, and I’d gaze down into a sunny valley of our next days together.

But if he heard of Priests nearby, then that valley became a place of eternal night where dark shapes lurked half-seen in shadows. Dangerous shapes. And one was Bishop.

He never took us to the towns with Priests. He’d leave us behind and come back for us after.

After. I just called it that. *After* he killed whatever Priests he found, and did God knows what else, for he always came back with more information on the Priests. And I don’t think they volunteered it to him.

But for three years I pretended I didn’t know the things he did. Then one day we were in a mountain village mapping our next destination. Winter was dropping hard and cold out of the high peaks, and a blizzard had closed the pass behind us. We’d be trapped for the winter soon. The only road still open led down the mountain—through a Priest town that Bishop had just visited.

I could see he was uncomfortable about it, but we had no choice but to drive through that town. No choice but to see, for the first time, the corpses he left on his visits. No choice but to notice they weren’t only men crumpled in the streets, on steps, against walls. Staring at Jase staring at the bodies, I resolved to finally confront Bishop at the next enclave.

That turned out to be an ugly two-story building crouching in the shadow of the foothills, a refueling spot and hostel. The lower level was one huge room with a bar to the right of the door, an open kitchen on the left, and rough-hewn wooden tables in the middle. A balcony ran around all four sides upstairs, forming the sleeping quarters. Closed in only by a flimsy railing, it provided just enough room to lay our sleeping bags.

A scrawny, greasy-haired man named Blinder ran the place. Bishop traded him guns taken from the Priests, redundant to Bishop, for gas, supplies and lodging. Blinder wore an eye patch, which I assumed was either payback or motive for his rumored target in fights. His good eye spent a lot of time leering at me, but narrowed when Bishop mentioned the Priests. Blinder said he hadn't seen any for months. I relaxed a bit but knew that I still had to confront Bishop.

Blinder left as Bishop spread our much-used map on a table. "I don't trust him," Jase said. "He's lying about something."

"He lies by habit," Bishop said, shrugging but frowning too. He'd learned to trust Jase's feelings. "If he *is* lying about the Priests, they could only be ahead of us, down the mountain."

Because you've already killed the ones behind us, I thought.

"We stick with normal procedure," Bishop said. "I'll check out the next town. You're still safest here." He nodded towards an ancient CB rig on the bar. "Call me if you need to. Remember the code phrase." The current code was "Bishop takes Queen". If we didn't use the phrase, something was wrong. Jase nodded.

Now's the time, I thought. "Jase," I said quietly, "could you please get me a beer?"

"I thought you said it tasted like—"

"Jase," I interrupted. "Please." Jase shrugged, reminding me of Bishop, and left.

Bishop leaned back, his eyes locked on me. "What?"

I didn't have the courage to look in those eyes. Instead, I stared after Jase. "He was just two when his dad died. He can't remember him."

"I'm sorry."

"He was a doctor. A good man."

"I don't doubt that. What's this about?"

"He saved people." I looked at him. "You kill people."

His jaw tightened. "I've tried to protect you."

"I'm not talking about self-defense. I mean your obsession with the Priests. That last town—Jase saw that."

Bishop said nothing, just looked away.

"He worships you, Bishop."

"Mary—"

"I can't let my son worship a killer." My voice rose, and Blinder and Jase looked over. Bishop reddened and swallowed. I lowered my voice. "You have to choose: the Priests—or Jase and me. Your hate for them—or..." I didn't finish, didn't say 'your love for us'. Bishop had never said he loved us. "Jase loves you. I... I love you. But I can't go on like this."

Jase was coming back. Bishop carefully folded the map. "We'll talk about this when I return."

"We may not be here," I said quietly.

Bishop stood as Jase rejoined us. "I hope you will be, Mary." He bent to kiss me. I turned away. He straightened, then walked out, not looking back.

Jase watched him leave, then glared a mute accusation at me. "I'm going to bed," he said, plopping the beer I didn't want in front of me. You couldn't hide things from Jase. And he sided with Bishop a lot lately. I felt a pang of resentment at that. Jase went upstairs as I heard the hummer drive off—both my men leaving me.

My conversation with Bishop played in my head through the night and the next morning. Then just before noon, I suddenly had other things to worry about.

Jase and I were sitting upstairs on our sleeping bags, reviewing his math lesson for the week, when he brought his head up. "What's that?" I didn't hear it right away, had to wait before I caught a low growl, like a pack of angry dogs approaching. I wasn't far wrong. The growl rose quickly to the thundering roar of motorcycles. A lot of them. We ran around the balcony to the front window.

Priests. At least forty, I figured.

"Downstairs. Out the back. Now!" I rasped under my breath.

"Our bags and—" Jase began.

"Now, Jase!" I snapped, pushing him towards the stairs. Scrambling down to the main floor, we turned to the back door.

And stopped. Blinder stood at the rear exit, pointing a shotgun at

us. "Don't think so, folks. Chino's gonna wanna talk t'ya, you bein' friends of the Dead Man an' all."



Bishop had been wrong. The Priests weren't in front of us. They'd been behind us, following us down out of the mountains, following us for weeks. A special hunting pack to take down the Dead Man. Seems like the Pope was getting worried.

Flanked by two Priests, Jase and I stood in the center of the room before their leader, a small mountain named Chino. He had a big round head, cropped black hair, and a smile that I would have called warm under other circumstances. About twenty Priests lounged around us, with ten more upstairs and the rest outside.

"So you're the Dead Shit's pussy," Chino said to me.

Snarling, Jase lunged at Chino, only to be punched hard in the side of the head by the nearest Priest. Jase fell to one knee, and the Priest grabbed him by the hair, holding him there.

"Stop it!" I snapped, turning to Chino. "What do you want?"

"What do you think? Where's the Dead Man?" Chino asked.

I hesitated. Chino shrugged and nodded to the Priest holding Jase. The man flicked open a switchblade.

"All right!" I said. "He's gone down to the next town."

"Mom!" Jase cried.

Chino smiled and looked at Blinder. "So we hide the bikes and wait till he comes back for these two." Blinder nodded, his head bobbing like a chicken.

I bit my lip. Bishop would die, walking into a trap. Then, of no further use, we'd die too. "Bishop's not coming back," I lied. Chino spun back to me, and I swallowed. "We had a fight," I said. "All he wanted to do was fuck me. I told him we were through." Jase stared at me wide-eyed.

Chino turned to Blinder, who started shaking. "They had a fight, for sure. Didn't know he wasn't coming back," he mumbled.

Chino picked him up with one hand. "So we sit here, while he gets farther away. And you didn't think I should know that?"

"Couldn't hear," he whined, "Just knew they was fightin'."

Chino tossed Blinder to the floor then turned back to me, his broad face creased in a frown. "Now why would you tell me that?"

You're worth keeping around only so long as Bishop gave a shit about you. Now..." He shrugged.

"If he didn't show, we'd be dead anyway," I said.

Chino tilted his head, as if reappraising me. "So what's the deal?"

"I can bring him back," I said quietly, "if you let us go." I could feel Jase's eyes burning me.

Chino's eyes narrowed. "How?"

"He's got a CB radio. I'll call him on Blinder's rig."

"Why would he come back, if you two are through?"

"I told him we were through. Now I'll say I changed my mind." I put a hand on one hip, trying to look like a woman that a man didn't walk away from easily. It must have worked.

"Blinder," Chino called. "Crank up that rig."

"Not so fast," I said. "Jase and I go free if I do this."

"Once we have Bishop, sure," Chino said.

I knew he was lying, but I had to play along. "Why should I believe you?"

Chino chuckled. "Cuz you got no choice. Cuz you're buying you and the kid a few extra hours. And who knows?" Looking around the room, he raised his voice. "Maybe the famous Dead Man will pull off a miracle and rescue you." That prompted hoots of derisive laughter from the Priests.

Just what I was thinking. "All right," I said. "I'll call him." Jase stared at me as if I'd just pumped a bullet into Bishop. *Jase, I thought, this is the only way to warn Bishop, give him time to prepare.* Time was important with Bishop.

And he was our only hope.

• • •

"Mary, is everything all right?" Coming over the battered tinny speaker of the CB set, Bishop's voice seemed a small fragile thing, and suddenly so did our hopes.

"Everything's fine," I said. "I just wanted to say I was sorry we argued. That I've changed my mind. I want you to come back to us." I hadn't used the code phrase. I bit my lip and waited. A Priest held a shotgun on Jase.

A silence followed. And grew. "Bishop?" I said.

Then Bishop spoke again. "Who's the head Priest there, Mary?"

Now the silence came from our end, as Chino's face purpled with building rage while I tried to look surprised. Chino grabbed the handset from me, shoving me aside. "The name's Chino, asshole," he snarled.

"Always glad to meet a new Priest, Chino," Bishop replied. "Kind of a hobby of mine. Here's the deal. I walk in. Mary and Jase walk out, unharmed. Me for them."

"You walk in clean. No weapons. Nothing," Chino said.

"I walk in clean. Deal?"

Chino looked like he'd just found a cockroach floating in his beer. A man like him needed to control situations. Bishop had taken over this one, and he'd done it in front of Chino's people. "Deal," Chino said, as if spitting out something he wished he hadn't put in his mouth.

"Bishop..." I sobbed.

His voice came soft and low from the set. "Mary, I've been ready to die since Tess and Danny were killed. Been wanting it. This way, I can save you and Jase, something I couldn't do for them. You take care. Give Jase a hug for me."

"Bishop!" I cried, while the Priests hooted behind me.

"Unharmed, Chino. You don't touch them," Bishop said.

Chino flicked the set off and turned to me. "Don't know how, but I know you tipped him." Without warning, he backhanded me across the mouth, knocking me to the floor.

"Mom!" Jase cried. The Priest drove the butt of the shotgun into Jase's belly. He doubled over and fell to his knees. I lay on the floor, head ringing, tasting blood, feeling with my tongue for broken teeth. "You said you wouldn't hurt us," I mumbled.

Chino shrugged. "I lied." He motioned to two Priests. "Strip her and strap her to a table." He grinned down at me, and Bishop's pictures of Tess suddenly seemed superimposed over this scene. Chino raised his hands to the crowd. "Party time!"

Tess's face drifted through the mist of pain and shame of that night, now looming frightened and huge before me, now tiny and distant, now multiplied a thousand times on jagged shards of some shattered cosmic mirror. And through the rape, I kept telling myself that I wouldn't die as she did, that they needed me alive until Bishop arrived.

But they made Jase watch.



Morning. Huddled on floor. They left me finally. Blanket over me. Jase must have done that. He's beside me, arm around me. Try to move. Pain. Like a fire inside. The smell of them. The taste of them. Shame. Nearby laughter. I feel anger. No. No word for what I feel. Yes. There is.

Hate.

I had never known hate. Fear, yes, after my husband and daughter died. Anger at their dying, but that had been an unfocused, futile, impotent anger, a raging against a world gone mad, a fury with no target. It was hard to hate a plague.

But now I had a target, faces, names. Now I could hate.

Jase felt me stir and helped me rise, wrapping the blanket around me in now pointless modesty, as the Priests ate breakfast and laughed. I walked with him to the crude shower stall in the back, under the watchful eye of a Priest. In the shower, I tried to pee but I was too swollen and when it finally came, the pain dropped me to my knees. I stared at the water spiraling to the drain, tinged with dirt and urine and blood, wishing that I could wash away last night as easily, wash me clean. Jase helped me dress, and the Priest brought us back to wait for Bishop.

Jase and I sat alone at a table, his arm around me. We didn't speak, and I realized that Jase hadn't spoken all morning. Concern for my son, for what this had done to him, pushed through my self-pity. "Jase," I said. He didn't respond. I put a hand on his knee. "Jase," I repeated gently.

"I'll kill them," he said in a voice I barely recognized.

"That won't change anything," I said, not believing it, wanting them dead myself. Wanting to kill them myself.

"I'll kill them," he whispered, his voice a dead thing. I pulled him to me, the victim now the comforter, the mother again.

And in that moment, in Jase's hate, in my own, I began to understand Bishop.



About noon, a cry came from a kid named Fly, younger than

Jase, standing at a front window up top. “He’s here!”

“Scan him!” Chino called.

Fly nodded and squinted through some sort of scope out the window. A few seconds later, he lowered the device. “He’s clean. No guns, no knives.”

“None of them metal balls?” Chino asked.

“He’s not carryin’ nothin’. Except...”

“Spit it out!” Chino snapped.

“He’s wearing that mail coat. Black, shiny loops all over.”

Blinder squinted his one eye. “Tell him to lose the coat?”

Chino snorted. “What’s he going to do? Throw it at you?” That brought laughter and a chorus of comments: “Can’t protect him... Not from all of us... I’m going for a head shot anyway... Me too... The *Dead Man*... The *dead* Dead Man...” More laughter.

Chino held up a hand. Silence fell. “Positions!” he cried, pulling Jase and me to the center of the room. The Priests fell back to the wall facing the door and the one that held the bar. Made sense. They could shoot from two angles but not be in their own crossfire. Upstairs, more lined all four sides of the railing, aiming down at us.

Forty of them, all with guns, waiting for Bishop. Waiting to kill the man who hunted them.

“Wait till he’s with ’em in the middle,” Chino shouted. I hugged Jase and lied to him that we’d get out of this. “Fly, open the door,” Chino snapped. Fly swung over the railing above and dropped lightly to the floor. Jerking open the door, he scampered back upstairs.

And I could see Bishop.

He walked from the hummer with a slow easy gait towards us, framed by the door, dark and lonely against an empty blue sky, dust devils stirred by a chill wind dancing around him and nipping at his heels like mongrel dogs.

His coat reached almost to the ground, its black covering glinting and glittering as the sun caught each loop of the mail. His head was bare. Our eyes met—and he grinned. God damn him, he grinned. Grinned that grin that always seemed so out of place, even more so now, like a happy face sticker on a corpse.

Time seemed to slow then, and I felt as if my heart was drumming out its final beats, in time with each step of some obscene ballet, with each step that Bishop took toward us.

Step.

He was almost at the door, still grinning, his long coat flowing around him like a black mist.

Step.

Inside, Chino backed away from Jase and me to the side wall as forty guns rose in forty hands. I held Jase tight.

Step.

Bishop came through the door to the sound of the metallic chink of his coat and the clicking of weapons. The room sucked in its breath and all I could hear was the chink, chink, chink of that coat as he walked toward us.

Step.

Bishop began to... *blur*. I blinked tears from my eyes but no matter how hard I blinked, the blur remained. Someone shouted. The blur got worse. Bishop seemed to expand outwards, his outline growing more and more indistinct.

Step.

He spread his arms. An opening appeared before us in the blur surrounding him—and I understood.

“Run!” I yelled, pushing Jase ahead. There in the center of the room, the Dead Man embraced us, while around us a whirlwind rose and spun and screamed, enveloping us like a force field—a whirlwind of tiny loops of crysteel, tiny loops that moments before had covered his coat, not as a network of links but each held there—unconnected and individual—by the power of his mind.

Jase and I pressed ourselves to him. Bishop was shaking and soaked with sweat. The Priests were firing now but the whirling cloud of crysteel shielded us like an impermeable cocoon. The bullets died as bright flashes in the cloud, and the shriek of the tornado about us washed away the sound of the shots. Washed me clean. I felt powerful, invincible, immaculate.

“Hold me,” he rasped in my ear. I braced myself against his weight. His body tensed and then spasmed like an orgasm. The cloud of crysteel loops, each harder than diamonds, exploded outwards from us in all directions—and through anything and anyone that got in their way.

And then it was over.

The whirlwind was gone, its shriek gone, the gunshots gone. And

the Priests lay dead around us on the floor, slumped over the bar and tables, above us on the balcony, pierced and riddled. Light bulbs destroyed, a thousand pinpricks of sunlight lit the room from holes in the walls and roof—a heaven of stars shining into hell.

Bishop surveyed the room, then walked shakily to the nearest body, stooping to retrieve a handgun. Chino was dead, but some Priests still lived, twitching where they lay. Bishop started turning over bodies, and I knew he was checking for the face that haunted him, a face he wouldn't find. He stopped beside Blinder.

Blinder looked up at Bishop. Blood trickled from a wound on his forehead, and two more red blotches blossomed on his chest. "Help... me," he croaked. "Hurt... bad."

Bishop stared at the gun he held, then at the man lying at his feet. "Mary, take Jase outside," he said quietly.

I stared at his gun too, and at Bishop. I stared at the dead and dying before me, realizing then that he had not returned just for us. Suddenly I felt as if all the dead of the Plague, of the Fall, were crawling into that room. My Sally, my husband. Tess, Danny. Every Plague victim. Every Priest ever killed by Bishop. Corpse scrambling over corpse, piling themselves higher and higher, choking the light from the room, from my life.

I realized then that still more awaited me—those that I would add to the pile if I took the same path as Bishop. A path that lay before me at that very moment.

In that moment, I chose.

My hate remained, and perhaps, like Bishop, I would never lose that hate, never forgive. But unlike him, I would choose a different path. I'd had enough of death. "Bishop," I said. "Don't. We can help them. The next town—"

"Take Jase outside, Mary," he repeated.

"Hurt... bad," Blinder cried.

"Don't do this, Bishop."

"Mom?" Jase whispered.

"Now, Mary," Bishop said.

"No, Bishop. Don't!"

Bishop shrugged. "Suit yourself." Turning to Blinder, he raised the gun.

"No!" Blinder gasped. "You gotta help me!"

“No problem,” Bishop said. And shot Blinder in the head.

Jase stiffened beside me. I grabbed his arm, and we ran to the door as if we were just two more things Bishop had thrown from himself. Another gunshot sounded as that room spit us out into cold sunlight. Still pulling Jase with me, I ran past Priest bikes onto the road. I think I would have just kept running if Jase hadn't twisted free. I stumbled and fell, scraping the skin from my palms on the broken asphalt and landing hard on a knee. I stood, ready to run again. And froze.

Jase was walking back to the building, with slow stiff steps, like an animated corpse.

“Jase!” I cried.

He stopped but didn't turn. “He's doing it for us,” he said, his voice a dead thing, flat and lifeless

A chill rode my spine. “He's doing it for himself, Jase.”

“No. For us. Because of what they did to you.”

“He doesn't know what they did to me.” He didn't even ask me, I thought. “He's doing it because he hates them.”

“I'm going back.” He started walking again.

I can remember that scene so vividly. It lives in me like a thing immortal, never changing, never fading, never dying: Jase walking away from me, that building squatting dark and ugly against a washed-out sky, the dust in my mouth, the wind cold on my face where it dried my tears. And the crack of Bishop's gun, repeated again and again and again.

But one thing I can't remember—what I called to Jase, screamed at him, cried to him before he stepped back inside. Maybe I didn't say anything at all. Maybe I just stood there, waiting. Waiting for the sound that would tell me I had lost my son after all. The sound that finally came.

The sound of a second gun, joining with Bishop's.



Bishop and I didn't talk that night. We slept apart. In the morning, he was gone. He'd left us the hummer.

We never saw him again.

The Fall bottomed out the next year. The Entity had established some power bases, rebuilding the Earth under its rule, consolidating

local warlords into itself or eliminating them. Jase and I were living in a mountain enclave when the Entity hit it. They separated us, put me on reconstruction teams, maintaining vehicles. I heard they sent Jase off-planet.

I never saw him again either.

• • •

You asked me of the Dead Man. And I have told you.

Now, do you want to know the question you should have asked? The question I've asked myself every day since then?

Why did he walk in there that day? Was it to save us, or kill the Priests? What drove him? Love? Or hate?

Both, you say?

Yes, I suppose. But that's not the answer I wanted.

You say he's dead now. You say they finally caught him.

I don't believe you. You can't kill a dead man.

So if you see him, tell him... tell him I forgive him. For Jase. For everything. Tell him I've learned what hate is. That I finally understand him.

And tell him I still...

No. No, damn him. I won't say it.

Just tell him I still think of him. •



Alberta
Foundation
for the Arts

You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

"What can ya do?" Joe sighed.
"If we can land a man on the moon, why can't we give the average guy a decent wage?"

Ice Cream Doors

Alan R. Barclay

"Nike returns you to Man's First Steps on The Moon!"

The advertisement ended and the television displayed two polished news anchors. The square-jawed man spoke while the blonde woman stretched a glossy smile. "We do remind you that we are live with the astronauts of Moon Shot One in this momentous day of July 7, 1996. Commander Stone Walters is about to become the first human to set foot on the moon."

The woman picked up the patter. "Commander Stone is poised at the top of the ladder, prepared to step down. We now go to live coverage. All humanity awaits the Commander's first impressions as he sets foot on this new frontier."

The scene changed to a low-angle shot of a bulbous humanoid suit, decorated with corporate sponsor decals, hanging from a ladder above the gray lunar surface. The side of the ladder cut across the screen diagonally, decorated with more decals.

Joe couldn't help feeling something was wrong. When he was a kid, he had dreamed about going to the moon. He had gorged on the space program, watching the stilted animated artist's interpretations, the manned orbits, the space station. But then came the Russian lunar disaster. The moon program petered out by the time he got to

high school.

He should be excited about the Moon landing, but it seemed distant. Something else bothered him now.

Commander Stone lowered a foot and stepped away from the Lander as the anchorman said, "Commander Stone is lowering his foot and stepping away from the Lander." The rustle of breath cut in. "Now Commander Stone has some words for us." Commander Stone began to speak—

Joe shut off the TV.

"Hey, what are you doing!" said Alice. "We're missing what he has to say."

He sat running his thumb across the bumps of the remote. Sweat tickled down his cheek. "I—" he began. "I—George wants me to meet him again for lunch."

His wife glared at him. "We talked about this. You were going to tell him no."

"I've been thinking. If there's going to be a change, someone has to start it."

"Well, it doesn't have to be you." She waved around their cramped apartment. "We should be grateful for what we have."

"But—"

"People had it hard for thousands of years, Joe. We've got it better than they did. Turn the show on. We're missing a big moment in human history."

Joe's mouth felt heavy. He thumbed the TV on. A plush blue alien lounged in the lap of a bikini-clad blonde, sucking on a coke.

• • •

Joe showed his security ID to the bored InfoCore guard, then swiped his card through the time-in clock. He was six minutes late, and had lost the on-time bonus. He cursed to himself. The thought of blowing off the whole day popped into his mind. But of course, he would lose the wages, and InfoCore would dock him for unauthorized time off.

He navigated the dark aisles between shoulder-high cubicles. Each cubicle held a worker, hair cut short, neck shaved, white shirt, black belt, and gray pants. Fluorescent desk lamps threw icy white light on

some desks, while others glowed computer-display green.

He passed Dave's desk. He was Joe's team leader but they had a beer once in a while. Joe thought they might be friends, if they ever had the time. They exchanged waves, but Dave turned immediately back to his work, so Joe went to his desk.

He buried his guilt in pages and pages of database query code, refining the company's ability to choose exactly the right customers to target with the next marketing campaign. He filled out the morning progress report, and at ten twenty-three, he clocked out for a quick break. In the washroom he paced, thinking. Seeing George would use up his lunch break, and God knew the half hour was barely enough time to cram down a sandwich. Still, he should give it a chance. He could always back out later.



At twelve thirty-six, he walked through the exhaust expelled by a passing SUV and crossed Yesler to Pioneer Square Park. His hand went to his filtermask. Seattle atmosphere was never very good, but today the gray haze swallowed the skyscrapers down to the twenty-fifth floor.

Vagrants sprawled on benches with paper-wrapped bottles lolling nearby. Others milled about, some yelling at unseen demons. Joe turned away and spotted George walking down First.

He spotted Joe, but kept walking, smoothing his hair and looking around. When the hand dropped, his black hair remained disheveled. He stopped and offered his hand. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Hi, George." Joe took the quick, firm handshake, then shifted nervously.

"Did you think about what we talked about?"

"Yes. It sounds dangerous."

"Joe, what do you have now? A job you hate that barely pays enough to get by, and no hope for better treatment if you go to another company."

"Six years of college. Still fifty-thousand in debt for it too."

"Me too. Molly and I have cut our budget to the bone."

Joe glanced around. "Aren't you afraid of what they'll do?"

George rocked back, breath hissed into his nose. "Yes. But we're all going to act at the same time. They can't ignore millions of us."

“Millions?”

“For one day, we’ll take back our world. The average person spends two-thirds of their waking life getting ready to work, working, and recovering from work. We have to conform to company rules, obey company superiors, and accept marginal wages. We live in tyranny two-thirds of the time, and in exhaustion the rest. If we make enough noise we can get things changed.”

Joe fidgeted and checked his timex. “Crap, my break’s almost over.”

“There’s a meeting tomorrow night. Here’s the address. The password is ‘Teddy.’ You can come and ask more questions.”

Password? “Okay.”

George clasped Joe’s hand. “Thanks.”

• • •

Back at work, Joe logged another progress report, then went back to his computer coding. His stomach growled about his missed lunch. He remembered Alice and felt guilty for shutting off the TV when she had gotten up early to see the landing. He would apologize when he got home.

At two-thirty, he took a break in the company lunchroom. The sandwich vending machine was out of tuna. He hunted for the ham and cheese with the least wilted lettuce and swiped his employee card. *Bing*. Another seven dollars off his pay.

As he sat, inspecting the sandwich between bites, Dave came in, got a chocolate bar, and sat with Joe. “Hey, did you catch the landing?” Dave asked.

“Most of it.” Joe hesitated. “I had to come to work.”

“Yeah,” Dave said. “You should go for promotion and get flex time like me.”

“Fifty hours a week is enough for me.”

Dave leaned in. “This place is a sweatshop and the bosses are bastards, but what can ya do? We gotta feed the kids. Between Lisa’s job and mine, we’re getting by, and I got to stay home and see Stone walk on the moon. I’ll make up the time on Sunday.”

“What can ya do?” Joe sighed. “If we can land a man on the moon, why can’t we give the average guy a decent wage?”

Dave shrugged. "We're lucky to have jobs. You know the moon program is ahead of its time. I read that the sponsoring companies barely expect to make a profit. We're lucky to live at a time when they're adventurous. It could have been years—maybe even the next century."

"There was a government program in the sixties."

"And we'd still be waiting for them. All the best things are achieved by good old free enterprise."

Joe waved his seven-dollar sandwich. "I'm not so sure about that." Then he tossed it in the wrapper.

Dave frowned and leaned forward. "You okay? I can get you a discount on time off—"

Joe shook his head. "Couldn't afford it, even if it were free."

"Well, don't give yourself a breakdown." Dave patted his arm. Joe smiled back. Dave always had time for him.

"Gotta make up for my leisure!" Dave said, and left.

• • •

When Joe returned to his desk, he found an e-mail message waiting on his terminal. His heart rate jumped. Did they know he'd been out to see George? No, no, that was silly. He opened the email.

"OVERTIME REQUIRED." His stomach sank. Crap. Overtime with only three hours warning.

"All programmers will work an additional two hours today, and for the coming month. I know this is tough on all of us, but if we pull together, we can get the project done on time. Thanks for your cooperation. - Bill Kost, VP Production."

Only four months had passed since he had last worked such a schedule. Joe remembered the tension with Alice—and not having any time to himself, not even for TV. His face burned. He had to vent at someone who would understand.

Dave would be okay. He'd be someone to share gripes with. Joe started an e-mail to Dave. "... these hours are really getting me down. Management spends all its time tracking progress, they must know weeks in advance when a push is coming. Why don't they have the respect to tell us?..."

He pointed at the send button, but began to sweat. He glanced

over his shoulder. Even if the company somehow read the message, it was just harmless ranting to a friend. Wasn't it?

He sent it and went back to work. It felt good to vent a little steam. He would get these extra hours done and go home. He might still have time to apologize to Alice.

• • •

When he sat on the bed, Alice rolled over, eyelids heavy and half-open. She murmured something and reached out a limp hand. "Long day?" he asked.

"Uh-hunh. Stay la' t'morrow too." She did not focus on him. He knew she would not remember anything he said, so he just kissed her and pulled himself into bed.

But what can ya do? Shit, shower, shave, then work, then TV and sleep, every day. Except he had not even had time for TV this evening. He wondered what the plush alien was doing with the blonde tonight.

• • •

The next morning, Joe arrived at his desk on time. For a moment, he sat erect, then he sighed and bowed his head and started work. Five minutes later, he opened an email.

"Hi Joe. Dave forwarded your message to me. He was concerned about your attitude. Come see me when you get in and we'll talk. I'm sure we can work things out. - Barry Smoot, Manager."

A chill shot through Joe. *Concerned about my attitude?* He chased down his original e-mail and read it. It wasn't that bad, was it?

Then he felt a surge of anger. Dave had betrayed him. Joe stood, took a step toward Dave's distant cubicle, then stopped himself and sat again. Bastard. It was too late. They would probably suspend him. He couldn't afford that—the rent had just gone up. And a black mark would go on his permanent record to show up on every wage review from now till he died. He clutched a pencil with both hands and tested its strength.

• • •

Joe entered his manager's office. Barry Smoot sat behind an expansive desk, wearing a pastel cardigan vest, with shirt and tie beneath. A gold watch glittered on his wrist. Dave, seated in a leather chair, greeted Joe with an apologetic smile as Joe squeezed past him. Joe sat in the hard plastic chair in the corner.

"Joe, it's a good thing you sent your concerns to Dave. Someone else might have spread them around the office. You know how important morale is when we're working hard." He glanced at a sheet, which Joe supposed was a copy of his message. "I'm surprised to hear this from you. You've always been a good worker."

Perspiration itched on Joe's scalp. He waved his hands. "It's just the extra hours. They took me by surprise. I was just letting off some steam."

Barry patted the desktop. "Joe, this is what you signed on for."

"No one else has complained, Joe," Dave said.

Cold fingers gripped Joe's stomach.

"Have you considered seeking a different position?" Barry said.

The cold spread through his body. "No. Please, we can't afford that. I'll—be okay."

Barry shot a glance at Dave, who put a hand on Joe's shoulder. He said, "Joe, I saw you meet someone at lunch yesterday. George Sinclair is an agitator."

Joe swallowed. Their black eyes squinted at him.

"We understand the agitators have meetings. Have you ever been to one, Joe?"

Joe bit his lip. The meeting address lay on George's note in his thigh pocket. "No."

"Good. Good," said Barry. "But we have a favor to ask, Joe."

"Favor?"

"Yes, Joe. These agitators are hard to pin down. We'd like to know more about them. If you attended one of their meetings, and told us what they're talking about, we can overlook—this."

"You want me to spy for you?"

"Not spy, Joe," said Barry. "InfoCore cares about its people. We just want to know what people are concerned about."



Joe walked out of Barry's office loathing himself. He had accepted a miniature tape recorder. He had hinted that he might have something for them soon.

Heartburn set in an hour later.



After the twelve-hour work day, Joe took a crowded bus to the meeting. He was two hours late, but if he could record something, maybe Barry would get off his back.

The late-setting sun of July still fought through the evening haze. Scraps of newspaper swirled above caked garbage in the empty street. The old brick factory stood only three stories tall, a pygmy compared to the corporate offices downtown. The fading, peeling paint hinted at an old mural showing a pair of shoes.

George's note said, "South Door." Joe walked around the building and found a short set of stairs descending to a battered, graffiti-scrawled door. He glanced at the dull, black intercom, then fumbled inside his coat to activate his recorder. He pushed the intercom button.

The battered grill crackled, "Yeah?"

"It's Joe Landers. Uh, George said the password was 'Teddy.'"

The door opened. A grim man in business clothes ushered Joe down a corridor. The sound of voices increased until he emerged in a high factory room. Scars and holes showed in the dirty floorboards where heavy equipment had once been mounted. A circle of perhaps a hundred men and women sat on boxes or folding chairs or stood.

A tall blonde woman was speaking. "—I still wonder if it wouldn't be fair to try to bring grievances to our managers first. Once they see how many of us are concerned, they might start talking with us."

A rotund man stood. "I've seen what happens when someone tries to change things. Management just closes ranks and starts telling us that change isn't in our best interests."

"And we believe them," said another man. He shook his head. "I didn't understand how isolated I was until I spoke with you all. I thought I was the problem for not liking my job. It's not me, it is the job. The United States was founded as a democracy to make the best life for everybody, not just the stockholders and managers."

Joe saw all the nodding heads. Something was going on here and

his heart was pounding again. He spotted George standing just outside the circle, listening. George nodded at him, handed a clipboard to a woman with black hair and started toward Joe.

“—again, this has to be a peaceful action. We don’t want to give the employers an excuse to bring in muscle. If someone insults you or gives you a hard time, just let it slide. If the cops want you to move, just sit down.”

George arrived. Within the noise of the larger discussion, they spoke privately. “Hey Joe. Glad you could come.”

“This is amazing. Isn’t anyone afraid for their jobs?”

“We all are, but there comes a time when something has to be done.”

Discussion went around the room. They seemed to be working their way up to some sort of decision. Joe could not recall when he had seen so many people discussing as equals.

“What I don’t understand,” he said. “Is how you can believe things will be better. I mean, we’ve got it better than most people who’ve ever lived and people in places like India and China. Why should we rock the boat?”

“Oh boy, Joe, you ask big questions. Yes, we’ve got it pretty good compared to Victorian factory workers and lots better than the Ethiopians right now. But it’s not about us grabbing a larger share. If we change the power balance, we change it for everyone.”

“How do you know that? How do you know that the world can be any better than it is?”

“I’m a visionary.” George twitched a wry smile. “I’ve seen it.”

Joe frowned.

In the meeting, the woman with the clipboard was saying: “...the right to approach our employer as a group without risking our jobs, a forty hour work week and overtime—” Across the room, people were turning toward the entrance. The doorkeeper went down that corridor. “On the day of the general strike, we’ll have numbers they can’t—”

The doorkeeper ran back. “Corporate security! They’ve got—” A blast rocked the room. The big metal door flew out and slammed him to the ground in a cloud of dust. Through stunned ears, Joe heard yelling and other voices. “Keep calm. Keep calm. Use the escape route.”

George steered him into another passage, with others crowding

around them. Behind, muffled clatters and thumps sounded. "Tear gas!" someone shouted. Joe's heart pounded. Had he led the cops here?

The black-haired woman at the front of the group opened a hidden wall panel. Beyond it swirled a strange wall of creamy white and blue. While the woman held the panel open against a set of spring-loaded hinges, the escapees filed through and disappeared into the swirl. Before Joe could think, he was following them.

He pushed into the frigid softness, still feeling George's grip on his elbow. A mask of cold, glowing white covered his eyes. It was like swimming through ice cream.

Then he emerged into clear, warm air. His hands and clothes were dry. Oak trees stood around him and a green canopy of leaves filtered the light. He looked back, expecting to see the white swirl hanging in the air, but only George stood among the trees.

"What the hell was that?" Joe asked. "Where am I?" His ears still rang from the explosion.

"I think I know where we are." George strode past several trees. "Yeah, it's the Capital Hill park."

"There's no park like this on Capital Hill."

George waved Joe forward. They pushed through a denser layer of bushes and stopped at the edge of a hillside meadow. A couple hundred yards north, a road crossed the meadow. Below them, a city stretched along the waterfront. It had a familiar geography, but the skyscrapers were missing and there was too much green. Then Joe spotted a familiar landmark.

"The Space Needle!" He scanned the view again and laughed nervously. "What is this, a parallel universe?"

George waited.

"That—that ice cream door took us here?"

"Ice cream door?" George grinned. "That's good! Yes, it did. Doors like that are scattered around the country." He turned toward the road. "The only problem is: you go through one and step out anywhere up to three miles from your original location. So all those people from the meeting will be scattered all over the city."

Joe looked down at the long grass, smelled the perfume of meadow flowers. The city itself looked clean, with trees lining the streets and many green parks. A cold thrill ran down his spine. "I might not want

to go home.”

George laughed. “I said the same thing.”

“You aren’t from here?”

“Not so lucky. I’m the same guy you went to McCarthy Technical with.”

A few paces into the meadow, they came to a bark-covered path and followed it. A family having a picnic waved at them. Later, a triangle of teens waited for Joe and George to pass before tossing their Frisbee again. Their little dog bounded after the toss, then skidded to a halt when the disk was caught.

Joe smiled. Alice would like this. They could cook hotdogs and lie on the grass. The sky was so clear, they might even be able to count stars after dark.

The path left them at a parking lot. There were no cars, but there was a bus stop. Joe halted. A uniformed man stood on the curb, mouth lax.

“That looks exactly like an InfoCore cop,” Joe said.

“It is,” George said. “Must have followed us through the door.” He shook his head. “It happens.”

Looking at the cop, Joe remembered the recorder. His chest tightened. “Well, I’m not sticking around,” he said.

George gripped his elbow. “He won’t know you. They weren’t raiding for specific people.”

Joe bit his lip. The cop might recognize him, not because he was a suspect, but because he was the stool pigeon. But he waited as George walked up to the man.

“Excuse me, you look lost. Can I help?”

The cop eyed George. “Uh, yeah. You know where I can get a ride to Seattle?”

“This is Seattle.”

“Don’t give me that shit.” He waved a hand at the skyline. “Where are the high-rises?”

“But the hills are right aren’t they? And there’s the Space Needle.”

As the cop looked, so did Joe. He felt the awe, again, of recognizing the city, and yet not recognizing it. It was hard to deny.

The cop turned back to George. Confusion crossed his face. “Yeah,” he said. “Hey, you ever see this swirl of—” The cop stared across the familiar, but disturbing hills.

George hesitated.

“Forget it,” the cop said. He turned away and squinted at the bus schedule.

Seeing a corporate cop looking so lost gave Joe a strange, unsettled feeling, a mixture of pity and satisfaction. The cop was small, the corporations a little bigger, but all around him was proof that the universe dwarfed them all. Joe groped the recorder through his jacket and swallowed. He should tell George about it. Confess.

When George returned, Joe whispered, “Shouldn’t you tell him?”

“He needs time. If I tell him now, he’ll connect me with the raid—”

“Oh, yeah.”

George looked him up and down. “Are you okay?”

Joe shook his head. He pulled the recorder out. “George, I think I led them to you. They saw me speaking with you and my boss threatened my job.”

George’s face hardened. “How much did you tell them?”

“They made me promise to go to a meeting, but I didn’t tell them I’d already been invited.” He popped the cassette and threw it on the grass. “I’m sorry, George.”

George, glanced down at the tape, then put a hand over his mouth and stared into space. The gaze gnawed at Joe. If only he had held out—if he had known about this place, he would never have agreed to carry the recorder.

George picked the black plastic tape from the pristine grass. Joe braced himself. Explosive anger would come next.

Instead, George tapped his finger with the tape and said, “If your boss knew about a raid, he wouldn’t have had you tape the meeting. Most of the cell will have escaped. That’s the advantage of having the doors.” He pressed his lips together, thinking again.

“You don’t think they followed me?”

“What? Someone else might have leaked the location.” He tapped the tape again. “What can ya do? It’s one of the downsides of voluntary action.”

Joe blinked. He’d been expecting George to be like Barry—to lay blame and apply pressure. This reasonable reaction was stunning. Joe had an insight: he lived in a cage of fear—and he was his own keeper.

George took his elbow. “Come on, we’ve got to get to the factory and close the door.”

“What?”

“We’ve learned how to close the doors. A large electromagnetic pulse makes them go away.”

“How do you open them?”

George shrugged. “We don’t. They’ve been showing up at random, and more and more often, over the past decade. It’s getting hard to keep the secret.”

“Even from the people here?”

“We have some friends here who’ve agreed to help.”

A bus hummed up to the curb and George paid two fifty-cent fares. The bus driver acknowledged with a smile. The cop followed and dropped coins into the farebox. The fare machine buzzed and spat coins into a hopper.

“Hey buddy,” the driver said. “There’s something wrong with those. Pay your fare again.”

The cop fished the coins out and glowered at them.

“Maybe try different coins?” the driver suggested.

“These are legit,” the cop said. He dropped the coins into the box and again it rasped and spat them out. “What the fuck?”

The driver gaped. Before anything else happened, George said, “I’ll trade you.” He dropped coins into the machine and scooped up the rejected ones. George headed back and sat with Joe.

The cop followed George. As he passed, he gave a quick nod, then sat two seats behind them.

Joe squirmed, but stayed silent as the bus accelerated. George seemed determined to go back to the other Seattle. To change that world. Why? Why not stay here? Joe had so many more questions, but didn’t dare ask with the cop so close.

The park gave way to buildings. They passed neighborhoods where larger homes interspersed between more modest homes. Every four or five blocks was a park, or a square surrounded by retail and office buildings.

“I don’t see any chain stores,” Joe said. “Where’s McDonalds?”

George laughed. “Local ownership and small companies. Keeping companies small allows real competition.”

Joe lowered his voice. “How do they handle big projects? Little businesses can’t do that.”

“Co-ops own the expensive equipment, and coordinate that sort of

thing. They aren't allowed to take profit or pay anyone, so all the work is volunteered from the smaller companies."

"Left-wing bullshit," said the cop behind them. "We in some hippy-dippy Oregon town?" The guy had good ears. Joe's throat felt wadded with cotton.

George turned around. "What city did you say you were from?"

"Seattle."

"You like it?"

"Eh. A city is a city."

George pulled out a card. "Here, if you get lost later, give this number a call."

The cop eyed the card.

"They're travel agents," George said.

The cop shrugged, put the card in a shirt pocket, and looked out the window.

"Our stop's next," George said.

They got off in another square. Men and women walked by in bright clothes. A mother pushed a baby carriage over the cross walk. Joe just stood and breathed the clean air.

George watched the bus drive away, the cop still in his seat. "Scuse me," he said and went to a phone booth. Joe followed. George punched a code, spoke into the phone. Joe overheard, "...InfoCore cop on the number thirty-one bus. I slipped him a tracer but he might ditch it soon... arrange pickup. Good." He hung up.

"Jeezus, is this some spy operation?"

"It's one of the things I don't like. We have to keep it quiet."

"Why don't you just start bringing people over in secret? We could leave our world to Barry, the managers, the lawyers—"

George laughed. "That would be a sight! But, Joe, we made our world—or at least we let it be made. This one isn't ours. I don't think it's fair to lay thousands—millions—of economic refugees on the here and now."

George led him down a side street. Joe looked at the trees by the sidewalk, the manicured grass, the well-kept buildings, the people. His heart ached. He thought about his expensive apartment, about Dave and Barry and long hours. "What if I just bring Alice here and stay?"

"We won't stop you," George said. "Even that cop can stay or return if he wants. He'll probably stay when the truth sinks in. You

know, everyone has some secret dream—something that’s missing from their world. This is a great place to find those dreams.”

They rounded a corner. At the end of the block, a brightly painted sign on a wide three story building read ‘Herschel Shoe Factory.’ While Joe frowned and thought, George led them down steps and through the south door.

The scent of leather and clean oil filled the corridor. When they emerged on the factory floor, a few people were sweeping, others were polishing machinery. One gave George a happy greeting.

“We have some friends here—otherwise we couldn’t get at this door.

Joe spotted a newspaper on a worktable and stopped to read the headlines. He leaned closer for a long moment, then he straightened. “George,” he asked, “When did these people get to the moon?”

George blinked. “Nineteen seventy-one.”

Everyone has a secret dream. Joe felt his chest expanding. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Maybe he could lay the foundation for someone in his world to live that dream. He scanned the headlines again. “I’ll go back,” he said. “I’ll go back and help you.”

George raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t think you’d decide so soon.”

Joe read the headline again: *Day 126—Mars Crew A-OK.*

“I see what my world could be,” he said. •

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You look at doors and
you wonder every time.
Where does it go?
Where can it take me?

Los Empujadores Furiosos

Elizabeth Bear

Where does it go?

That's what you ask of doors, isn't it, assuming they go somewhere; they're there for a purpose—the purpose of getting you from *this* place to *that* place and possibly back again. If you're very lucky, or very careful, that is. Over the course of my life, I find I've never had much luck with them.

This particular door was outlined in arches that made me think of triangles, even though they weren't triangular. A long proportional curve in nut-brown, mottled stucco rose into an airy frame, inviting thoughts of peace and meditation. Of progress. The air smelled of mission summer—eucalyptus and bougainvillea. Of sunheated sand. And blood.

And beyond the door, I could hear the rustle of a crowd that had come to watch a man fight for his honor, and the honor of a woman as well. *La Tauromaquia*. The battle of the bull.

There was no handle on this side, just a bar of brass running across the equator of the not-quite-pointed not-quite-gothic shape, just below two windows too bright with sunlight to see out. It looked heavy.

You look at doors, and you wonder every time. Where does it go? Where can it take me? And always, of course, when you're lost—is

this the right one? Finally, the right one? And if not, where does it lead this time?

The metal was cool to the touch; the wood was warm. *How do I get myself into these things.* A thought that stopped having a question mark on the end of it fifteen years ago.

At least.

I laid my hand flat against the wood and shoved with all my strength, and came into the Plaza de Toros at Puertofuego blinking against the glare, the heat ruffling the fine hairs at my nape. My cloak was in my hand. My ancestral sword was left behind, along with my ancestral name, but I smiled at a cheer that rose to meet me: the first such I had heard in many years. At least my cause was better loved that day than I, myself.

On an expanse of dazzling sand, my bull waited for me.

How do I get myself into these things.

Quartz crystals glittered white as salt underfoot. Where my boot pressed them down, sometimes I could see red stains they had been raked to cover. I kept my eyes on my opponent as I advanced, and on the portly black-clad master of ceremonies who stood beside him. The roar of the crowd, glare-hidden in the towering seats, the heat of the sun oppressing my head—and still I had eyes for nothing but the bull.

The bull that was a legend: roaned like a cliff of red granite, thirty-nine gilded notches in his steel-shod horns, and I could see by the gleam in his eye that he expected me to be the fortieth and the price of his freedom. The insipidly wealthy Don Antonio wouldn't buy anything but the best.

El Zorro Rojo. The reddest red fox of them all.

"Toro," I said, bowing low.

"Señor Benedicto," el Zorro said. The master of ceremonies stepped away to permit us speech. "I'll kill you if I can."

"You're but Antonio's champion. You know I've been in many wars, el Zorro. There's no shame in it if you yield."

"There are rumors," he answered, "that you have not always acquitted yourself so well." His cleft hoof harrowed the sand, turning over grains mottled red and white, roan as the massive wall of his side. I raised my head like a galled horse and fixed my gaze on Antonio over the bull's impassive shoulder. Antonio—sitting in the lowest tier, where hot blood might even splash him—turned his head and spat upon the

sand. "If you do not wish to die, you may still apologize to my master. If I win today, or if you yield—" he turned his head, those horns gleaming like halberds on a level with my breast—"I am released."

It didn't happen often. Only a dozen gladiators in any generation might survive to retire and father the next generation of warrior bulls. Even when the bull usually wins, forty wins are a great many to collect when one loss ends a career. There were no seconds here, in the Plaza de Toros. Just a man and a bull and the skull-throbbing roar of ten thousand voices, and a decision.

Another insult, I might have let slip past. But not what Don Antonio had called me—not for a thousand reasons. Not the least of which was the loss of the glory that was my home when I was young and bore a name. I might have failed a brother on the battlefield. I might have shown weakness that should have been beneath my blood, and been called a coward for it.

All that, yes. I might. And had Antonio called me a coward I would have swallowed it. But I have never lied, and I have never broken my word.

So I had chosen to stand on my honor and fight. Perhaps to recollect this day the name that used to be mine. I drew a thick breath redolent of clotted gore and the sweat of the bull. "Your master called me a liar and his sister a whore. I'm here to win his apology."

"I'm here to *take* yours," the enormous gladiator, my enemy's champion, said. Stately and magnificent. "Shall we begin?"

I allowed the cloak to unfurl in my right hand, the edge brushing the sand like a waterfall of blood. The master of ceremonies handed me a lance and ran to the wall.

The shaft dripped bright with ribbons. The roan bull tossed his head in salute. I bowed, concealing my body behind the cloak.

The thunder of the host around us, so like the thunder of the sea, crested and faded to a whisper. Over the back of the bull, Antonio smiled, and the glossiness of his black hair in the sunlight made my lip curl in disgust.

The dance began.

The bull moved first, head slung low under an Alp of shoulder, feinting on ridiculously dainty forehooves. He lunged, the head-bob sharp as a striking snake followed by an avalanche of flesh. The cape was an illusionist's toy: it hid the matador's body, gave dancing feet a

chance to elude the warrior beast beyond. There are bulls, and there are bulls.

The slave showed courage, a beast's nobility: I did not want to kill him in the place of the man whose bidding he did.

I whirled aside as he came by me, my lance a sad little stick in my hand. Ideally, the point should go deep into the muscle of the neck: barbs hold it there, and the matador comes back with another. And another. Until the bull, exhausted, permits a coup de grace with a blade.

Ideally. But in Puertofuego, the matador often does not win. The black bulls are canny; the red cannier still.

El Zorro Rojo's shoulder brushed me aside like a toppling wall. The earth broke away from my boots and slammed my shoulder and the side of my head. I tasted blood and sand. The dirt trembled under my palms. I rolled, scrambled on all fours, no time to rise. Sand flew and stung as quartz-hard hooves plowed through the earth where I'd lain, and a razor-tipped horn drew a line in fiery ink across my thigh.

I yelped and dodged, somehow finding the cape as I rolled to my feet. El Zorro hauled himself to a stop, grit spraying, whirled like a cattle pony and eyed me, snorting, across thirty feet of sand. He could turn like a snake, within the length of his own stride.

The bull wasn't interested in showmanship, either.

"First blood," el Zorro said. Antonio sat perhaps twenty feet away over my left shoulder, cheering as I minced one testing step. The leg would bear my weight.

"Lance," I said, and another lance was pressed into my hand. I concealed it behind the cloak, and we began again.

Pass and pass again—parry and stroke, push and retreat. Twice I wounded him—low on the neck and in the meat of the shoulder—and one more time he let my blood. We drew crimson spirals on the ground as the afternoon grew weary and the spectators panted in the heat, my hair as dark with sweat as the red bull's hide. Slow red trickles crusted us. I swayed on my feet on the blood-rich sand, and el Zorro Rojo circled—clever, wary, never quite ready to come within range of the lance.

We were evenly matched after all.

I heard Antonio cough into his hand—growing bored as the sun encroached on the shaded side of the Plaza, no doubt. *A ha.* And then

I smiled, letting the cape drag behind me like a bloodied wing, my lance held loosely in my right hand, and I turned my back on the bull.

Casually, dismissively. As if I thought el Zorro too tired and bloodied to fight further. I raised my eyes to Don Antonio, straining for the sound of hoofbeats. "Apologize for the words with which you dirtied your sister," I called up to him, "and your servant can leave the Plaza alive."

Antonio wouldn't so much as meet my eyes, but I saw him fight a smile and knew the bull must almost be upon me, although I hadn't heard him move. No time to breathe—no time to think—I spun on the ball of my foot, threw the cape aside, and braced the lance with both hands, couching it like a pike. Standing within—between—the span of his horns.

The shock of the bull striking the tip plowed me down and to the side. It savaged his hide, rent muscle, skipped along bone. A blow to my belly like a roundhouse kick; a knifeblade piercing my shoulder. I lost the lance and landed hard, covered in the bull's blood, my own blood, wiping gore from my eyes.

The earth rattled as the red bull went to his knees astride me, but I don't remember a sound from the crowd.

I pushed myself up, dragged myself back, ribs creaking agony, left arm dangling. I looked down at a torn shoulder, thought it might be dislocated, and looked away. "Sword."

A torero put it in my right hand; I walked to the bull.

Dark blood rippled slowly down the shattered lance, drenching the ground under his knees. He swayed but did not topple, got one foot under him and then went to his knees again. His blood stung my eyes. I laid the tip of the sword against his massive throat, under the angle of the jaw where ran the pulse of his splendid heart.

"Well-fought," he whispered.

His blood filled my boots while I stood there, listening to the cheers and the silence of the crowd. By the smell and the color I could tell the lance had missed his aorta. He could live: it wasn't a mercy stroke I offered him, but a deathblow. "And you, el Zorro." The sword—not my father's sword, but a sword of cheap modern steel—pricked his hide. He shuddered as if stung by a fly. I looked up into the booming crowd and found my libeler's regard. "Antonio, apologize."

He met my gaze for a moment while the sunlight glittered in his

jade-black eyes, and for that moment I thought he would stand and buy mercy for the gladiator at my feet. But then he did—stand, I mean—and he turned his head once, slowly, and spat onto the bloody sand. Again.

"Buy it," he ordered, and turned to climb the stair.

My hand clenched on the blood-slick hilt. I could feel my left arm again, and regretted it. I looked down at the bull, and the bull did not close his eyes. "No blame," he whispered.

I closed mine. "Antonio!" He didn't look back. "Antonio!" Still climbing. Being booed, and climbing, while I waited for a chance not to kill.

Ah, Benedicto. My father's voice. When will you learn to kill when you should?

Not today, Papa. A defiant gesture completed, the hilt slid from my numb hand. I threw back my head and shouted as the sword tumbled end over end. "Antonio! I am sorry! Antonio!"

He did not turn. I did.

I turned and walked away in the sudden, comprehending silence from the stands. The hurled sword rang against the stone wall long before my hand found the waiting door, the plain looped handle on the outside. I heard running footsteps: the surgeons coming for me, for the bull.

The bull, whose honor was as stainless as Cecelia's. The bull, who would live to father another generation of gladiators to bleed in the corrida.

The bull who would live.

Another failure I cannot regret as deeply as I should.



I stop in the cobbled street, my arm aching in a sling, and look up. At first, all I see is a white wall. And then I see the wall isn't white, not really. Not white like an eggshell, or white like a dove. It was white-washed once over yellow glaze, but the rain and the sun have baked the limestone paint off, peeled the mustard-colored ochre beneath, exposing the browns and auburns of stucco. There's a window on the second floor, the shutter hanging open on a crippled hinge, a bluebird's wing broken and healed askew. Geraniums red as fairy-tale

heart's-blood—and as sharply scented—pulse in the window box. Below, just as crooked, a poorly-hung wooden door.

I hear voices within. Cecelia. Who was my friend—only a friend, nothing more, and I had few enough of them. Who was Antonio's sister, in whose defense I spoke. She lives here now. She is no longer welcome in her brother's home.

I should go inside. I should make amends, if she'll permit, for my failure at the corrido. I close my eyes against the sunlight and place my hand on the warm wood of the door. It's bright outside, but I can smell the cramped poverty within.

If I were adequate to the nobility of my name, I would go inside and I would bite down on my pride and I would apologize to her, as well. I would beg her to plead with her brother and see if he would take her back.

But if I were adequate to the nobility of my name, I would not have been a man too weak to kill a fallen enemy, and I would not be here to think this: How do I get myself into these things.

Which is not a question. Because I know.

It's bright outside, but it's a small, dark window. Too small for looking out. Too dark for looking in.

The wood is splintery, peeling paint, warm with sun. My pride won't wedge through the doorway. I'd have to scrape it off to get inside. I cannot ask Cecelia to plead with her brother; her stainless honor could not support it.

But perhaps her honor can support forgiveness for a friend.

I lower my head and I push hard against the door. •



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It seemed unfair, somehow,
to make someone feel what
he did not want to feel, but
surely it was a small price
to pay for immortality.

The Smell of the Earth

Joan L. Savage

“How much will you wager on your belief?” The wizard tapped her fingernails beside a puddle of spilled ale on the table and leaned so close that the sweetness of her perfume only half hid the acridness of her sweat and the longing of sex. “You Jongleurs say you can affect any heart with music. Will you prove it?”

I pulled my cloak a little closer to cover the hole in my tunic. Why was she talking to me, she in her jewels and furs? She obviously had riches and power enough to buy whatever she wanted. Why speak to me—a Jongleur, gypsy, outcast.

“Prove it?” I asked stupidly.

“What will you wager? All men desire something.”

In a whole lifetime of loss, how many people have a chance to gain what they long for? Who can discover what they long for, given a month to think? I had too much ale in me and her warm, full breasts pressed over her arm on the table until they blossomed at the top of her bodice and her eyes trapped me on my bench, demanding an answer.

My mind flitted over the things that all men want. Riches, fame, sex. With her watching me from the depths of those compelling eyes it was hard not to think about the sex, but as well ask a star to come

down from the heavens and share my bed. And what good were riches? With my wife and son dead, I had no one to spend them on.

“I want to be known as the greatest Jongleur who ever lived.”

I listened to the words coming from my mouth. Was that really what I wanted? Maybe. Maybe that was the only way not to be forgotten in the silent emptiness of a grave. My wife had been so silent, when I laid her in the earth. So still, so cold.

“Done,” the wizard said. Her smile sent shivers across my skin. “If you win, I will spread such stories about you that people will say, ‘He is the greatest Jongleur.’ If you lose?”

What was my deepest fear? Music comes from the heart but it takes hands to free it from silence and I could not bear for her to silence me. I tucked my hands under the table and shuddered at the thought of that loneliness. All the doors that cracked open to let me sneak in and play by the fire for my bread would slam closed. I would have only the cold, empty road, and not even a song to play, for remembrance.

“Done,” she said. “If you lose, I will chop off your hands.”

For a moment, I could not catch my breath. She stood to go.

“Wait, what wager—I don’t even know—what’s the bet? Why do you need me? Why do this for me?”

She ran one finger through my hair, her nail pricking against my scalp, and heat rushed into my loins. I barely heard her over the blood throbbing in my veins.

She leaned so close that her breath tickled my ear. “The best vengeance is always through another. And some loves must be paid for. You know that. You’ve paid for your love a thousand times.”

A flash of memory. My wife laughing in my arms, smelling of spring, with her fingers tousling my hair. Then she was gone and I had only the terrible, aching emptiness left where once she had filled me. The silence. Yes, I had paid for my love. Every night, with every memory. And I would pay again, and again. A thousand times more, if it would bring her back.

“See the man by the window? Change his heart so he forgives his little peasant wife. A simple thing. A good thing, forgiveness.”

Her fingertip traced a river of fire down my neck and I nodded silently. I would do this thing. For memory. For love.

“That is all.” She paused. “Within this hour I will come back for your hands, if you fail.”

She pointed to where my hands hid under the table, then turned and swayed through the inn's doorway, taking her agonizingly alluring scent with her. The other patrons ducked their heads as if afraid to look at her. I looked at the man.

He was plain, with dusty, lanky hair hanging across his face. His hands were brown and worn, with calluses rough from the plough. A pint of ale sat barely touched on the table before him but he did not look at it, or at the other patrons. He stared steadfastly into his lap, at a small rock the size of a knuckle.

I wondered what his wife had done that was so terrible he could not forgive her. I would have forgiven my wife anything. I laid my lute across my lap and plucked the strings with one hand while the other fingered random chords. I had nudged a man's emotions before, but only once. It seemed unfair, somehow, to make someone feel what he did not want to feel, but surely it was a small price to pay for immortality. To be remembered.

I settled into a melody that had been my wife's favourite—a melancholy dance, full of the seduction of love and the sweetness of yearning. I plucked the melody into the air and touched the man with my Jongleur's gift, my gewaer. He felt pale, like a winter's sunrise that promises more cold without any prospect of spring to warm it. With my gewaer, I gave him the song, for his care and comfort. A piece of my heart in return for a glimpse into his soul.

He met my gift with such a flash of despair I almost stopped playing. Most people showed me flashes of colour or moods when I sang to them. He projected an image into my mind so brightly I almost had to pull my gift away. A girl, maybe sixteen, dancing down a cart track with her skirts hiked up around her knees, leading a pig.

Then the man's voice rumbled in my head, remembering. His voice was deep and as worn as his hands, his tone dull and sorrowful.

"My wife knowed it was my most favourite pig when she sold it to Gerg. Some neighbour. I'd knowed him for forty years. Had knowed, had been a friend. Ariana thought the price so good for the sow that she was a-dancin' when she carried it home to me in her skirts. She so wanted a baby. I wanted another babe, too, a son with my new wife, but since the plough tore my flesh that wasna gonna happen and she thought she'd found another way to give me a babe." Her face dazzled in his mind, her smile frozen then fading to despair when she realised he wasn't happy with her gift. *"Gerg's son*

Tan's a strong man, good seed. But it ain't my babe."

I played a gentle chord, soothing, and projected my thought with it. His wife had done it out of love for him. She had tried to please him.

The man turned the rock in his lap.

"Ariana hadna meant to hurt me. Not knowingly. And it bein' so soon since the weddin', how could she've knowed that sow could open gates and find her way home from anywhere herself? How could she've knowed Gerg would blame me for his trampled corn and ruined garden?" An edge of anger touched his remembrance of Gerg's flushed face and shaking fist.

The hour was slipping away beneath my fingers, and my hands trembled on the lute. All I could touch in him was anger and resentment. How could I push those feelings into forgiveness? Maybe my task was impossible. Sweat beaded on my forehead and trickled into my eyes, stinging, but I dared not break the spell of the song to wipe it away. If I couldn't make him forgive his wife, the wizard woman would silence my music and leave me with no way to touch others, with no path for them to accept me. With no way to cast those I had loved into song. I played a minor chord with a hint of longing in it. He should remember how much he loved his wife.

I remembered how much I loved mine. The scent of her hair, touched by sunshine. Her hand over mine, how rough it was, but how gentle. Gone now, laid in earth. The damp smell of the earth of her grave would always be in my nose. Maybe, when they said of me that I was the greatest Jongleur who ever lived, they would remember her, too, as the greatest woman ever loved. She was so cold and silent when I laid my face against hers, before the earth took her. She deserved to be remembered in song only I hadn't had the heart to write it yet, not so soon, and to be silenced now meant her memory would be lost. I couldn't let that happen. I shifted the music into a song with more urgent longing.

The man poked at his memories, like prodding a sore tooth with his tongue, unable to let it rest.

"I do love my Ariana. She with her tiny hands and gentle heart that makes her run from the farm when it comes time t' slaughter the lambs." He ran a hand across his sweating face, though the room was cool. *"I love her more 'n anythin', more than Betric who bore my only boy. Eight years now, since Betric died? Stars bless her, she were strong. She didn't need me. Ariana needs me even more 'n I need her."*

He needed her so much he ached with it. The flash of memory of them making love left my pulse pounding again and I almost lost the thread of the song.

The hunger for the feel of her slight body was just as quickly replaced by a cold rush of despair. *“What was she thinkin’? How could she’ve shamed me like this?”*

Pictures flashed, dazzling in their clarity. Gerg letting his cows through the man’s field, just for spite. *“I hit Gerg then—I’m not proud o’ that. Then our boys fought, bein’ of an age, and my own boy, oh my Aron, you were too angry for your papa’s sake and Tan, he hit my Aron too hard and then there was the blood and the long, long sleep before my boy slipped into death.”*

That memory brought a rush of grief that forced the music into dark, hushed tones. I had no answer for his emptiness—it was too close an echo to my own. I began to wonder what my wager might do to this man. Why should I torture another man’s soul with remembering? What gain was it for me, this immortality? Soon I would lie beside my wife and what gain, what gain was life or fame against that silence?

I should have left him alone with his unshed tears. His memories flooded me, rubbing against my own, too close, and I wanted to let him be. He deserved that. But where would that leave me, with no hands to shape my memories into remembrances? I thought, what harm could it do for him to remember? The pain must always burn his heart. He must remember, whether I urged him to or not.

The man thumped a hand on the table, startling some of the other patrons who stared at him and edged away. His thoughts went on, unhindered by their notice.

“Silly girl. She shoulda knowed it was my bestest pig, shoulda knowed that ever since she were a tiny piglet she’d come home from wherever I’d tried to sell her. After Aron died I just didna know what to do an’ they said lord Gareth was a just man so I went to him. Oh, why did I go? Who will give me justice for my dead boy?”

Gareth, lord of Traes, was a good man from all I’d heard, but young—only eighteen. A dangerous age, when you know everything and aren’t old enough yet to realise that you’re wrong.

The wizard woman was there, in the man’s memory of lord Gareth’s hall. Even in his memory I could smell the seductive scent of her and I wanted to hide my hands but if I stopped playing it would break the magic of the song and end my glimpse into the man’s mem-

ories, my influence over his feelings. My hour was fleeing. I needed my hands. I needed my music to fill the long, empty days of wandering, and the colder nights. With fame would come food for my belly, warm blankets at night, and maybe enough security that I could stay in one place long enough to learn to know someone. A woman. She could never replace my wife and son but it would be someone to comfort and warm me. Someone to be with. This old man had found a second wife to share the turmoil of his life. Someone he cared about. Why would he cast that away?

In the man's memories, the wizard bent low and whispered in lord Gareth's ear, her breasts brushing his shoulder.

"The lord atold me it was all my own fault—my boy's death, my wife and the bastard babe, the poor old sow. The woman, his wizard advisor, atold me herself that I'd to pay back Gerg for the trampled garden but not a word about my cabbages all churned up and eaten by them cows. Then the woman gave me a useless lump 'o rock, as if a lump 'o rock could help me."

In a few short moments the wizard had destroyed the man's hope, his dignity. Why?

The same reason she was destroying me?

The thought sent prickles of fear across my chest. My fingers stumbled on the strings. She had no reason to destroy me. It was a foolish thought.

The man looked up and our eyes met. If he knew I had been spying on his memories and pushing his emotions, he gave no sign. His attention returned to the rock in his lap.

The wizard had destroyed his dignity, but not his love for his wife. He clung to that love as to the last floating board in a shipwreck. I felt it in the desperate churning of his hands as he rolled the rock over and over again.

For the first time I saw the rock clearly, through his eyes. It was a crystal, gnarled and black. Seeing it, I knew I had blundered into something too big for me. Crystals were dangerous things, contorted by wizards to affect their holder in treacherous ways. Always the holder had to do something, perform some act, before the crystal could bind them but once bound, there was no freeing them. I had met a man on the road, bound to a wizard's crystal, who could only walk east, never west; he could never get home. Another, in a town, could not use his legs from dawn 'til dusk. How the crystal in this man's lap would

bind him, I didn't know, but in some way it would torment or cripple him. For now it was quiet, and I prayed it would stay that way.

The water clock on the mantle dripped relentlessly, drowning my hour. Only a few minutes before the woman returned. How could I save this man from the woman bent on destroying him and still save myself? My mind raced without finding any answers. He felt the same as the crystal—cold, dark, withdrawn. I had no idea what action would spark this crystal into life. Should I use the last moments of my hour to run across the room and dash it from his hands? But what would stop him from picking it up again once the wizard had come for me and my hands were gone? All I had was my wager. Win it or be silenced. This man didn't deserve whatever fate the wizard had devised for him.

I didn't deserve silence. Not yet. My wife, so silent, her cold lips under mine. So mute, laid in the damp earth that covered her hair. I needed to write a song to remember her as she was before the scent of earth covered the warm saltiness of her skin. To remember her before her silence. I couldn't lose my hands, whatever might happen to this man.

Music is a strange beast. Hard men cry when touched in the right moment by the right harmony. An enemy's heart can be changed and peace brokered. Frightened men can be pushed into battle. How many children have been conceived beneath a melody's seductive fingertips?

Yet it's a difficult master, more compelling than the opiate drugs. Once is never enough to fill or content and so the music drags me back again and again, looking for that purest chord that can shift a man's anger into joy. For the harmonies that might warm a heart to forgive or a melody that might open a woman's thighs, all the while hoping for myself to find that moment of ecstasy when the music shifts me, warms me, opens me, and I feel everything. Even to feel loss is better than knowing emptiness.

The clock dripped to fill up the hour, moments away, three drops, two. I played a note and touched the man. A moment of forgiveness. That was all I needed to create. Just one moment. His love for Ariana was so close to the surface now, so tender, I just had to touch it. I played a thick chord, heavy with longing at first but melting into something fragile, a bubble he dared not touch lest it break. It was so fleeting, suspended there, a blink of time that was the span of his life and then it would flee, burned away like the summer grass, and he had

only Ariana in that moment, only her to share his fleeing life with. The bubble shivered before him, so fragile, so easily lost.

In my mind, I saw him reach for it. He could not lose her, too. Could not let his moments with her shatter beyond repair. He could love her. The babe, too. He could make the babe his own. His child.

The crystal in his hand leapt into fire and I dropped my lute to shield my eyes from the glare. I thought the man screamed, but I couldn't be sure. There were so many people screaming. Tables toppled and benches skidded across the floor as people ran from his burning.

I couldn't move. It had been a perfect note and I had felt his love for her blossom into forgiveness. The feeling still burned my chest, hotter than the crystal's glow. I knew he was dead. Only death carries that profound a silence.

I lifted my eyes. The wizard stood across the room, watching him, her body arcing with satisfaction.

"He would accept this bastard babe, would he? Love it?"

She turned and met my gaze. Unshed tears glittered in her eyes, like ice.

"I told you that some loves must be paid for. I spent years looking for my peasant bastard father. He was so young, fulfilling his service time with his lord, when he left my mother in her lord's kitchen with a full belly and no man to protect her. Then, after all these long years, he came to lord Gareth. He came to me.

"But even after all the sacrifices I made to become a wizard so I could destroy him, I couldn't. Not before seeing what kind of man he was. I needed to know how much he could love, and forgive, when he wouldn't forgive my mother, or love me."

She had used me. Had used my love for my wife, my need for remembering, and made it dirty. I stood and backed away from her but could not rid myself of the bitterness in my mouth that did not come from the smell of charred flesh.

For a brief flash, I felt the brush of her wizard's gift. Her anger beat against me, as deep and desperate as pain, unassuaged by vengeance; her rage demanded that all great loves be sundered. And forgotten.

The word echoed through my head, pounding against my skull. Forgotten.

The wizard lifted her hand and batted away my awareness of her feelings as easily as if I had been a drift of smoke. "Do not dare to look at my emptiness. You, too, have lost your love. Take the fruits of your wager, and go."

I fled.

To this day, they tell stories of me. How I stormed castles with my songs and felled giants. None of the stories are true, and I'm haunted by the memory of that one perfect note. I cannot play. I can't even think of music without smelling the charred smell of death and hearing the terrible silence where the man's heart had been. I touched that heart, shared its grief. Silenced it.

I wish I had let her cut off my hands. Then maybe I could still remember the smell of the earth where my wife lies, waiting for me. Maybe I could hum a song. •

• Special Notice to Our Readers •

We have determined, at long last, that the purchase price of *On Spec* must increase, to keep pace with the ever-growing costs of production, printing and distribution of the journal.

As of July 1, 2006, a single issue will be \$6.95.

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The *On Spec* Staff & Editorial Board

"Last April you wanted to find the Easter Bunny's warren and it took the park rangers three days to find you."

Playing Games

Susan Forest

"Tonight, I'm going to find out where Santa's elves come from." Zekielina stroked her long nose and peered sidelong at Patty, her voice as dark as chocolate. They sat together in cotton panties and sleeveless t-shirts that bumped out where pubescent nipples hid, in a newspaper fort beneath the dining room table. Zekielina said they were playing hide and seek with her mother. Or, maybe it was cat and mouse.

Grace called from the balcony, the deck, the basement, the upstairs bedroom, her footsteps pounding on the stairs, her voice rising in pitch with every shriek.

Patty chewed on the tip of her braid, one of a medusa mass that arched from her head. "Last April, you wanted to find the Easter Bunny's warren and it took the park rangers three days to find you." She lifted the strings on Zekielina's fingers, twisting them into a cat's cradle.

"A few more hours, Patty. That's all it would have taken. I would have been free." She let her eyes slide over Patty's lips and down to the white silk bow pinned to the neckline of her t-shirt. "You know, Patty, a warren doesn't provide privacy for Grace's bunny-cuddle-games, no matter how small you are."

"How small were you?"

"I kept both sides of the mushroom."

"Zekielina!" Grace's voice rattled the paper over their heads. Zekielina's mother's support-hosed ankle gleamed above her black pump inches from the lower edge of the newspaper fort. Zekielina arched a brow at Patty and stretched out a thin finger. She wanted to touch the stocking with her fingernail, stretch the Lycra into the hollow between her mother's anklebone and heel, just until her nail brushed the skin through the stocking. Patty shook her head and pulled Zekielina's finger back.

Then Grace stumped away, and the moment was lost.

"Grace doesn't see the real me, Patty."

"The lament of children everywhere."

Zekielina folded her long fingers, one after the other, over her hands, squeezing until they turned white. "I have to get out of here," she whispered.

"You push too hard, Zeke. In August, you laid a trap for the Tooth Fairy that severed the tip of your middle finger, and where is it now? Maybe the Tooth Fairy didn't want to play your games," Patty said. "Don't go looking for Santa's elves."

"But Grace enslaves me, Patty." Zekielina slid her fingers inside her panties. "She's redecorating. She rips up tile and strips old dressers. She loosens floorboards and pulls antique showerheads from their sockets on the wall. She wants to create faux finishes in every room of the house. I have to paint until my arms fall off, until I'm overcome by turpentine fumes, until black cats break mirrors under my stepladder."

"You're exaggerating, Zeke."

"Do you want to come with me?"

"When?"

"Tonight. A man who claims to be an agent from the North Pole is coming at midnight. I met him yesterday."

"Don't trust agents of the North Pole, Zeke."

Zekielina slid her eyes beneath half-closed lids to look down at the smaller girl and took the string from her hands. "You'd better go home, now, Patty. Your mother is waiting."

Patty slithered out from beneath the newspaper fort with a fluid motion that belied the softness of her round belly. "Let it go, Zeke. You

have everything you need right here. You have your newspaper tent. You have me to play Patty-cake."

"That's not enough, Patty. I've taught you all of Grace's games. I'm going. Good-bye, Patty-cake." Zekielina slipped without a breath of sound from beneath the paper fort to worm her way between paint cans and boxed treasures, stacks of tile, old televisions and conversationally grouped floor lamps, to hide, first in the dumb waiter, then in the scrubbed, sanded and masking-taped pantry, and finally, as the sun set, beneath the netting of her princess-style bed.

"Oh, my poor boo-boo," Grace said when she found Zekielina scrubbed, brushed and tucked to her chin under fluffy duvets, within the light of the tiffany lamp. "I've been looking for you all day, searching for you high and low. I thought we could have so much fun together, tating lace curtains for your French windows."

Zekielina stared with frog-eyed solemnity at her mother. "I like blackout blinds."

"There, there, Lina-lina. You've had a long day. Go to sleep. Tomorrow, you and I can glue doilies to your claw-foot end-tables."

"Mother."

"Yes, Love Child?"

"Where do Santa's elves come from?"

Grace laughed a tinkle-laugh and mussed Zekielina's hair. "Bitty-Boo! They're born in flowers that open on the first day of spring and dance to his workshop in golden shoes to the music of snow-melt waterfalls."

"Like the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy?"

"That's right."

Zekielina let her lids droop.

"No kiss-kiss tonight? No? Then, maybe tomorrow. Night-night, Doodle-bug," Grace whispered. She slipped the book from Zekielina's fingers and closed the door quietly behind her.

Zekielina flipped the duvet back and sprang, fully dressed, from her bed. She listened at the door, locked it, and pulled her backpack from her closet, already filled with stolen mushroom, a pinhole camera, her favorite ukulele with one string missing and a pack of chocolate eggs. She threw in a trashy magazine, just in case the search took a long time.

She pushed aside the blackout blind, lifted the sash on her window

and stepped out onto the roof over the garage. Patty was already sitting on the roof over her garage. "What took you so long?"

"Grace wanted to talk about tatting lace."

"Ah."

"I thought you weren't coming."

"I'm here to keep you from a fate worse than death."

"Do you think it might snow?"

"At the North Pole? In December? It's a sure thing."

Zekielina looked at the low clouds, dull grey above the pools of streetlight. The odd flake, scorching cold, drifted lazily from the sky. She closed her eyes and let her brows rest on her knees, arms wrapped about her legs against the cold.

"He's here. The agent," Patty announced.

Raising her head, Zekielina saw the tall, thin man in the blue stovepipe hat and tailcoat. He sat in a small sleigh harnessed to a single, velvet-antlered reindeer. Grey pinstripes on his pants made his legs appear enormously long. He took the hat from his head and held it in the crook of his arm. "Zekielina. And a friend, tonight."

"I'm not coming," Patty said.

"Zekielina?" The agent gestured toward the seat beside him.

Zekielina walked her feet down the roof, dragging her rear end over the shingles.

"Don't go, Zeke."

Zekielina stopped at the drain spout. "Haven't you ever wanted to know, Patty? Wanted to know why? Wanted to know how?"

"Yes, but not this way, with a stranger in the middle of the night."

"Zekielina!" Grace's voice shrilled from the window, through the muffling of blackout blinds and locked oak door.

"Good-bye, Grace."

Zekielina dropped from the roof edge to the pile of discarded carpet on the corner of the driveway, and onto the frozen lawn. She sprinted to the sleigh and threw herself in just as Grace's face appeared in the window.

"Zekielina!"

The sleigh rose lightly into the air, and Zekielina gripped the agent's bony arm as the wind streamed past her face.

The ride was magically short, whisking them over patchwork Christmas cards of snowy lanes, farmhouses with twinkling lights and

peaceful villages punctuated with quaint church steeples. Then, a vast blanket of pillowy snow stretched out before them. A cozy house, stables and workshops appeared, curled up next to a candy-cane pole.

Zekielina's breath stopped as she stepped from the sleigh. She opened her eyes as far as she could to take it all in. A feeling of deep peace welled up inside her.

"Santa's in the workshop," the agent said.

"I want to see the elves. I want to show them new games."

The agent led her to a long, low building with snow collecting on the roof and drifting across windows frosted like candy. He opened the door to a brightly lit room filled with the aroma of sugar and the music of tiny hammers and saws. Color and motion swam before her eyes. "Santa's elves don't play games, Zekielina. They work."

Zekielina crossed the threshold.

As she did so, a peculiar buzzing sounded in her ears. They tingled and seemed to move on their own. She put her hands up to them, felt the cartilage shift shape, grow into points. She looked up at the agent, taller than ever, as she shrank to the height of his waist. Her clothes, puddling momentarily about her feet, shrank as well, changing form and color to green and red waistcoat and breeches, with a short, natty jacket.

Santa stepped up to the entryway. "Ho, ho, ho, Zekielina! I think you could start on... ukulele repair." He pointed the way and waved a jolly mitten.

She looked down at the assembly lines, filled with sorrowful-eyed elves, row after row stretching into the dim distance, all stringing the ukuleles. The agent gave her a nudge. "So, Zekielina. Now you know where the elves come from." •

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"It took me three months to accept that he wasn't just another nut hiding out in the desert; that everything he'd said was the truth."

Blues in the Shadows

Bruce Barber

"I've told you a dozen times," said the haggard prisoner, slumping further in the chair beneath the bare light-bulb. Then he covered his face with his cuffed hands; almost sobbing, he spoke through spread fingers: "The old bastard stole my shadow, that's why I had to kill him! I had to! *Look* at it! Look at my shadow—can't you see what he did to me? *Just look at my shadow!*"

Of the three other men in the small cell, only Police Sergeant Amos Granger followed Frank Diaz's instruction. With some surprise, Amos noticed that there really *was* something odd about Diaz's shadow. It pooled in a small, shapeless blotch at the base of the chair, as if hiding from the harsh white glare above; it looked blurred to Amos, not etched so deeply into the cold concrete floor as everyone else's; sick, somehow. A *shadow* of a shadow was the best description he could come up with.

"Watch your wetback mouth, Francisco!" Chief of Police Roy Barron growled, cuffing the thin Hispanic across the face.

"I'm no wetback!" Frank Diaz mumbled through a trickle of blood. "My family have been citizens for three generations! I've lived in Silver Rock all my life! And my name is *Frank!*"

Barron hit him again, harder. Amos winced, but said nothing, nor

did the other sergeant, Mose Dixon, who stood as far away as possible, distancing himself from Diaz's shaky machismo and Barron's racism, which, although not generally condoned, was for the most part ignored in the tiny, out-of-the-way town of Silver Rock, Arizona. Dixon appeared to be trying to merge his own blackness with that of the south corner of the cell, perhaps remembering when it was men of *his* colour handcuffed beneath the fists of thugs in uniform, not so long ago.

"Easy, Roy," Amos said quietly, interrupting Barron, something he dared to do only occasionally, and which Dixon never dared at all. "We don't want him too banged up... especially after the last one."

He was referring to the young gay man that Barron had sent to the hospital last year, who had ostensibly been in their custody on a charge of vandalism.

Barron snarled unintelligibly, but had evidently decided to be in (by his definition) a benevolent mood. He raised his hand again, but this time only to slap the overhead light, guffawing loudly as Diaz tensed up for the expected blow. Then Barron swaggered out of the cell. Shadows scrabbled madly up and down the walls, propelled by the erratic swinging of the light bulb on its cord. Except, that is, for the prisoner's shadow, which still cringed beneath the chair. Barron looked back over his shoulder.

"Get his confession on paper, get him processed, and get him the hell out of here. I'll be down at the Triple-B having lunch." He grinned lewdly, as he always did when making this announcement—the Triple-B had five motel units attached to its diner, one of which served as the "office" of Silver Rock's sole professional hooker; Barron liked to think of it as efficient that he could satisfy two of his appetites in the same place in just a little over an hour.

Dixon sighed loudly as he came out of the darkness.

"Want a glass of water, man?" he said to Diaz. There was a weak nod in response. "Coffee, Amos?"

Amos nodded as well, but with even less enthusiasm than the beaten man in the chair. Dixon whistled some Robert Johnson on his way out, which he did when upset; when he was happy, he most often invoked John Lee Hooker. Amos pulled a chair over beside Diaz and backstraddled it, holding pen and steno-pad at the ready.

"Tell it to me again, Frank," he said. "One more time and then we can transfer you upstate... *away* from the Chief."

Diaz relaxed a bit, as much as was possible given the circumstances; his manner became somewhat more confident. It was Barron who frightened him.

Dixon returned with water and coffee, then retired to man the phones and strum his mournful guitar.

"Okay, from the top," Amos prodded gently, pen poised over pale blue lines. Diaz sighed, then began:

"Three months ago, I was on top of the world. My job was good, my marriage was good, my health was good... and I hadn't killed anybody. My whole criminal record was one count of assault when I was sixteen and three overdue parking-tickets. Now I'm a murderer! But I had to do it! I *had* to!"

"Slow down," Amos said in the firm-but-soothing voice he had once used with erratic success on young offenders back in Chicago. "Just tell me the story as it happened. The clearer you make it the easier it'll be for your lawyer to help you. Just remember that the Chief will be back in an hour."

With that motivation, Diaz continued, and this time Amos got it all down.



"It's the goddamn desert. If I hadn't gone wandering around out there, yelling like a kid, full of myself, none of this would have happened. But I was so happy that day... I'd just closed a huge land deal in Tucson, the biggest ever, a lot of money involved; Angeline and the kids were healthy and content, and a whole new chapter in our lives was about to open up—we would actually be able to move away from Silver Rock! I just wanted some time to enjoy it by myself, I guess, so I drove out into the mesquite to be alone with the sky or something; I'm not sure now. I was so giddy with my own good fortune, maybe the desert gods heard me and thought I should be taken down a peg...

"Anyway, dusk came all of a sudden, like it does out there, and then this weird wind started up, but it wasn't a wind at all—it was a *voice*, singing. I should have got back into the jeep right then, I should have got away from the goddamn desert as fast as possible and never gone back to it! But I followed the song, into the hills, through a nest of scorpions, through a hidden gap in the rocks and up a twisting old

trail to a cave in the hillside, facing the remaining sliver of sun. Light shone from the cave mouth, firelight that flickered in time with the singing; the voice cracked, old but still strong, like steel wire covered with rust, and... I—I thought I could hear my own name so I answered the call: I went into the cave. He was sitting there, the Native grandfather—Hopi, I think—on the other side of a fire, only a foot or two away from me. I sat down across from him, and waited.

"I don't remember the next part too clearly, but he spoke to me in some common language, telling me that he was very old, much, much too old even for his own liking, diseased, in pain, and doomed to live forever in that condition. Once, he was a powerful shaman, now he was nothing but a sick and ancient man, cursed with immortality. It was punishment, he explained, for betraying his tribe 'to your ancestors with the metal skins.' Then he told me why I had been called to him: he wanted me to kill him, allowing him to at last pass into the next world. I refused, of course—I wasn't *that* far gone!

"He didn't say anything for a while, just sat there rocking back and forth. Then, without warning, he flung himself across the fire toward me, like a rattler striking; he was holding something in his hand, and I thought he was going to attack me, but it was only a long strip of leathery snakeskin, with knots in it. As he knelt in front of me, it *looked* like he was measuring my shadow, and when I asked him if that was what he was doing, he nodded and told me that the act of measuring it had also stripped it from me... and *it was gone*, I swear, my shadow was gone! He told me that without a shadow I had no spirit, and without a spirit my life on earth would be filled with torment by demons. But all I had to do to get it back was what he asked of me: ending his life would end the magic. It was full dark outside now and his fire was fading. The loud hooting of an owl sounded from beyond the cave mouth, and I snapped out of my dazed state, laughing at him, while I scrambled the hell out of there. Crazy old fool...

"It took me three months to accept that he wasn't just another nut hiding out in the desert; that everything he'd said was the truth...."



The rest of Frank Diaz's story was sad and unfair, and chilled something that lived at the base of Amos Granger's spine. He had no

idea how much of it was fact, except for its outcome. Frank's life fell apart at a breakneck pace: he lost his job; one of his children died in an accident; he took to drink; his wife left him... it went on and on, until he could no longer bear up under it all. In desperation, he returned to the cave in the desert, and found the old man still there, in the same position, as if he had not moved in three months. Diaz begged and bribed and threatened, but the bargain to be struck remained the original one—except for one thing, the shaman warned: Diaz had put off his return to the cave for too long, with the result that his shadow was greatly weakened by living uncast in the cave for so long, denied the sun. It would never quite recover, which meant that what was already done could not be undone, nor modified in any way, nor could Frank expect a run of good fortune to offset the bad. But, his luck would get no worse... if he cooperated. The old man was able to promise one additional thing: when the appointed time came for Frank's own death, no matter what the circumstances, it would be painless.

Again Diaz's memory had failed him. He recalled only a red haze behind his eyes, and winding something around his tormentor's neck, then an eerie white brilliance. The next thing he knew he was in the police station, confessing incoherently to Roy Barron. The ensuing investigation revealed that there was indeed a cave, as well as the recently-dead body of a nonagenarian Native who was now buried in an unmarked grave out beyond the church. Frank Diaz would soon be tried for murder.

With a story like that, Amos thought, the best the poor bastard can hope for is life-imprisonment in a facility for the criminally insane.

• • •

Mose Dixon was reading the official report on Diaz, shaking his head at the pathetic madman's account, when Amos came to relieve him for the night-shift. Amos rubbed at his eyes. For just a second, in the dim illumination of the horned moon shining through the window, his friend had looked like a shadow made flesh.

"You believe any of this?" the shadow asked, becoming Dixon again.

Amos shrugged neutrally as he poured a cup of oily coffee from

the urn. "What's not to believe?" he answered, trying to sound wry and cynical. Dixon responded with total seriousness.

"How could a man walk around for three months without anybody noticing that he didn't cast a shadow? You ask him that?"

"As a matter of fact, Dix, I did..."

"And?"

"He asked *me* how much time I spend looking at other people's shadows. When I thought about it, I guess maybe I *wouldn't* have noticed."

Dixon made a grumbling noise in his throat, then set the report down, picked up his guitar from behind the desk, and began decorating the night silence with a fine mist of notes. The little leather bag he called a mojo swung back and forth from one of the tuning pegs; Amos had no idea what was in it and had never asked; it seemed a very personal thing. He knew only that it had something to do with the swamp magic of Louisiana, where Dixon had been born. Did the oozy hoodoo from the wet, warm mud of the bayou protect him even here, on the edge of the Sonoran Desert's mystic expanse of sand and sage and saguaro?

It was an open secret that Barron held his black sergeant's "slave-music" beneath contempt, but so far Dixon had come to no harm from the Chief, which was an ongoing source of pleasant surprise to Amos, since Dixon was neither particularly big nor threatening, nor would he defend himself. He had hinted to Amos when he had signed on in Silver Rock a little over a year ago that he hoped to keep a very low profile, due to some trouble back in New Orleans, trouble that he preferred not to discuss in any detail. This desire to keep under any official radar made him a very quiet and deferential man, even when confronted by Roy Barron's white-hot intolerance. Given all of this, Amos had conceded to himself that perhaps it was the mojo which kept Barron off Dixon's back, for the most part.

After a few minutes of small talk, Dixon packed up and went home. Amos had the place to himself; Diaz had been transferred that morning, and there were no drunks or teenaged troublemakers in lockup. It was a rare time of peace, to be treasured. There were long hours of inactivity in Silver Rock, of boredom, of mindless and unsatisfying rote, but very little honest tranquility. Barron's overbearing, immovable personality made sure that such things as harmony and

serenity were nothing more than a bittersweet daydream, even when he wasn't present in the flesh.

Amos remembered how relieved he had been upon first meeting his new boss that Roy Barron looked nothing like the stereotypical southwestern lawman, slovenly and pig-eyed, beer-belly indecently overflowing the confines of his belt, and so on. Barron was in fact one of the most physically fit (and good-looking, Amos had to admit) men he had ever met: tall, well-muscled, with a washboard abdomen and sturdy athlete's legs. His features were regular, well-sculpted, and he still had a rich thatch of ginger hair, even though he was in his late fifties. He didn't smoke, drank in moderation, and maintained a balanced, Spartan diet, disdaining greasy fast foods as well as the local heavily-spiced cuisine.

It hadn't taken Amos long to learn that, on the inside, Barron dripped fetid malignancy like Spanish Moss, that he was in reality a violent, racist sociopath who had somehow managed to slip past all the safeguards and through the cracks in the system, landing in a position of public trust, a position that when abused could result in serious physical harm to those it was intended to protect. And Roy Barron caused harm on a regular basis. So far, the damage had stopped short of any fatalities, but both Amos and Dixon believed that it was only a matter of time until Barron crossed that line as well, unless something was done to stop him.

It was not as if they hadn't made attempts to have Barron's behaviour examined officially, but their avenues of protest were few, short of refusing to follow orders. Barron laughed off their direct disapproval of his methods, threatening them with pay-cuts, suspension, even outright dismissal if they were too insistent. They had tried formal channels as well, registering complaints with the county seat, but no action was ever taken, and their calls to government representatives who might be of assistance were never returned. They also failed in their search for any skeletons in Barron's history prior to his arrival in Silver Rock three years ago. Amos had at last concluded that the Chief was somehow protected at higher levels, untouchable, by underlings at least. On the plus side, Barron didn't seem to know about their attempts to have him investigated; if he *had* known, there would surely have been repercussions. This led Amos to speculate further that, while Barron might be shielded, he was not approved of. Small comfort

to his victims.

Then, an irregular and tentative knocking at the door startled him.

"Come in," he said. The door creaked, opened, and Peggy Tewawini limped through it.

"Good God, Peg!" Amos leaped to his feet and rushed to help her. "What happened?" Her face was piebald with fresh bruises; tear-track arroyos streaked patches of rouge and mascara; she held her stomach tightly.

"What do you *think* happened, Amos? Roy Barron, *that's* what happened!"

She sat, carefully, favouring her left leg, then buried her face behind emerald-green nails, and cried. Amos was, among other things, stunned—Peggy in tears was somewhat like the sun rising in the west: it simply did not happen. Although not privy to the story of how she came to hold her unenviable position as Silver Rock's only prostitute, he knew her to be a realist, tough and prickly as cactus. And, although she could be aggressively foul-mouthed and abusive after too much tequila, she was essentially a decent human being. Amos had tried to be her friend, as far as he was able, but the burst blood vessels on her face testified to his failure.

"Tell me," he said, lighting a cigarette and handing it to her. Even so badly battered, she looked extraordinary, a synthesis, even an enhancement, of all that was good in all of the people thereabouts: Aboriginal, Hispanic, Black, White... It made her, in Amos's opinion, one of the best arguments against "racial purity" he'd ever seen, at least as far as physical beauty was concerned. And she was also very, very bright, if not particularly well-educated. It was entirely possible, Amos thought, that she might eventually rise above this station in life, that she might even go far; but first she would have to literally "go far"—from Silver Rock.

"You know that he says I'm the best he ever had?" said Peggy. "He says with me he gets all his kicks at the same time 'cause I'm everything he hates all rolled up in one package... he's getting worse, Amos—the sonuvabitch near killed me tonight! Next time he will, and nobody'll do anything about it, 'cause he's the Chief of Police and I'm a half-breed whore!"

"We'll do something..." Amos said, helplessly.

"Like what?" she snorted, her iron spirit re-asserting itself. "Go to the Law?"

There was no answer to that. Amos gave her what first-aid he could and made her promise to see the doctor as soon as the clinic opened, then locked up the office and saw her home.

As he made his rounds, checking doors and shining his flash into unlit corners and alleyways, he considered again the irony of his moving to Silver Rock two years ago in order to escape violence—not only to avoid being the victim of violence, but fleeing the necessity of inflicting it as well. He came from a family of policemen—his father was a beat-cop in Chicago, his grandfather a county sheriff in the mid-west, his great-grandfather a U.S. Marshal; there were even a few lawmen on his mother's side of the family—and it had always been assumed by everyone, Amos included, that he, too, would one day be a cop. Pretty much on schedule, he joined the Chicago P.D. as soon as he turned twenty-one, having spent an indifferent few semesters at college in order to fulfil the force's minimum educational requirements.

It took only half of his rookie year for him to find out that he didn't have whatever it took to be a policeman in a city like Chicago. Physical violence—against him or initiated by him—made him sick, literally at first. And then, of course, with 20/20 hindsight, he realized that this unacknowledged flaw in his makeup explained why he had been in so few childhood fights, and came away from *those* bloodied and defeated. And why his High School sports choices had been in track and field rather than football or soccer. But his family had turned a blind eye to these and other behaviours which flagged his unsuitability for "the family business", and so had Amos.

By the time he understood his own inadequacy, it was too late. He couldn't face disappointing his father or the rest of the family, nor was he particularly suited or trained to do anything else. He stuck it out on the force for five years, manoeuvring for traffic-duty and desk assignments as often as possible, and learning to successfully mask his abhorrence to aggression and brutality, hoping that no one would notice what he considered to be his cowardice. Finally the strain of maintaining the false front became unbearable. After much soul-searching and investigation, he arrived at what he thought was a solution: to join some small, isolated police force far from home, where he could hand out traffic tickets and lecture punks about breaking windows until the

time for retirement came. Then he could go back home.

But rather than being the key to his salvation, the job in Silver Rock had turned out to be more like a punishment for his inability to live up to the standards of his forefathers. And now, as had happened in Chicago, he knew that he was reaching the end of his tether, that soon he would have to take some sort of action to save himself again, and to save those whom he was too feeble to protect. This time, however, he had no idea what that action might be.

Back at the station, he drank too much bitter coffee, black, while thinking a great deal about justice and bravery, until the first rays of sunrise splashed ephemeral shadow-glyphs on the whitewashed station walls.



On a blisteringly hot summer morning two weeks later, Dixon brought in some sad news with the morning paper.

"Frank Diaz is dead—got knifed in prison," he said with the apologetic compassion he reserved for those ground beneath the heel of the law he was sworn to uphold.

"Anybody know why?" Amos asked.

Dixon shrugged. "State pen's pretty tough. Diaz wasn't, not by a longshot. He shouldn't have been in there in the first place. The jury was all ready to recommend the psych-joint before Barron's testimony about what a cold-blooded whack-job he was." He paused, then picked up his guitar, unconsciously brushing his fingers against the mojo as it swung from the neck. "I'm going out back for a while—play some blues for the dead and forgotten."

Soon Amos heard muted guitar music from the back steps, blues which assured both the living and the dead that they have not been forgotten at all... that somebody, somewhere, gives a damn. He also heard another message in the music, a more personal one: a condemnation; it called Amos Granger "coward" in half-a-dozen keys for the ways he had failed Frank Diaz, and Peggy Tewawini, and Mose Dixon... and himself. He stood and walked to the window.

"Dix?"

Dixon looked up from the bottleneck sliding along the battered guitar. "Yeah?"

"Sorry..."

"What for?" He shook his head as his fingers did something complicated with bent-notes and a tuning-change. "You've done the best you could in the circumstances. We both have."

"But it isn't good enough, is it?"

Dixon shook his head. "No, I guess it isn't," he said, as Amos pulled his head back inside.

Amos remembered this conversation later that day, when he locked up for lunch and stepped outside into the high-noon inferno. He had glanced at his feet for some reason, and received a sharp shock when he saw no shadow preceding him. Vertigo gripped him for a brief moment, and he had to steady himself against a mailbox, then he looked up to see the sun directly overhead. He shook his head and smiled wryly at his own imagination, but then the image of Frank Diaz's shrunken and pathetic shadow forced its way into his head, followed by that same man dying of a knife in his heart.

No, he could not agree with Dixon's generous assessment of his actions—he *hadn't* done the best he could.

Not yet.



Amos seldom sought out the desert, and at times even thought that he might be afraid of it; its vastness and alien beauty were uncomfortable reminders of how far behind him Chicago and his life there really was. He certainly made no claim to comprehending the mysteries of the landscape's deceptive emptiness, nor did he know what had brought him out here today; maybe it was the desert witch-wind, or the wandering ghost of Frank Diaz, or Peggy's purple bruises, or just to get some distance from Roy Barron and his definition of "The Law."

He walked aimlessly, disturbing basking chuckwallas and jack rabbits at their siestas. Then, he decided to have a look at the scene of Diaz's crime; he knew it was in the immediate vicinity although neither he nor Dixon had been included in the original investigation. Barron liked to gather evidence himself – fabricate it, according to the whispers.

He found the small cave easily, with an hour of daylight to spare before he'd have to head back to town. He scrambled up the crumbling

sandstone, following his elongated shadow. At one point it was not his own shadow at all, but that of a giant horned demon, rising up with arms outstretched to gather him in and escort him to Hell. Amos jerked his head around to see its source: an ancient Saguaro cactus, thirty feet of it. He smiled without humour, then resumed his climb, and at last reached the lip of the murder-victim's former home, or hermitage, or whatever it had been. The natural opening had been enlarged into a T-shaped doorway that Amos still had to bend to get through. There wasn't much to see inside: a fire-pit, a few broken clay pots, and smoke-blackened walls decorated with designs chipped into the stone. He had neither the background nor the training to interpret them, but they seemed to tell a story of betrayal and dark magic, of retribution and expulsion; or then again, maybe it was a representation of a game of some sort; for all he knew, it could be an Aboriginal comic-book.

In the heavy silence, broken only by the occasional squeaking of roosting bats from above, Amos puzzled over these etchings. Slowly, without realizing it, he passed into a state somewhere between wakefulness and slumber, perhaps from the heat, or too many double-shifts. Whatever the reason, the next thing he knew, waves of gold and crimson rippled before his eyes, then the cave was glimmering with flame-glow; across from him, sitting placidly cross-legged, was a very old and wrinkled Native American, whom Amos instantly knew must be Diaz's cursed shaman, or rather his spirit. The old man began to chant in a parched and rustling voice, but not in any tongue that Amos ordinarily understood; however, the chanting carried shadows of meaning within itself that transcended language. The vocal rhythms were the tempo of Dixon's delta blues, the curvature of vowels was the curling of Peggy's smiling lips, and the heavy consonants were the gravity of uncompromising redemption.

There were two messages for Amos woven into the shaman's song: first, that Frank Diaz had died without pain; second, that there was another task which needed doing, an adjustment to the balance of justice. The shaman's ghost pointed at Amos's feet, where something protruded from the sand. Amos bent to unearth what Frank Diaz had insisted was the instrument of his downfall: a length of cured snakeskin, about six feet of it, with knots tied every foot or so. So ordinary a thing, Amos thought, to figure in such a complex skein of events...

He curled the snakeskin around his sun-baked forearm like an Aztec bracelet, or like the serpent which had sloughed it off.



Like Frank Diaz before him, Amos Granger had no memory of emerging from the vision, of leaving the cave, of driving back to town through the indigo night, until he found himself abruptly wide-awake and standing outside the Triple-B. It was about an hour before sunrise, and he began to call out Roy Barron's name. After a minute or two, Barron flung the door open and stood there half-naked, the glare from inside prostrating his bloated, evil shadow on the packed red earth at Amos's feet. Peggy peered from a window; she told Amos later that his face had been split by a grin of hideous calm as he unrolled the snakeskin and carefully took the measure of Barron's shadow, while Barron yelled and cursed him out, and fired him as well. Then he turned and slammed the door in Amos's face.

No one but Amos, standing alone in the desert pre-dawn, saw Barron's shadow shrivel and shrink away into a greater darkness an instant before the closing door eclipsed the light. •

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The *On Spec* Staff & Editorial Board

Rehearsals for the rep shows were so brief and scattered that none of them had seen what the others could really do.

Following Darkness Like a Dream

Lesley D. Livingston

“Bloody hell. There’s another one.”

Irene touched a fingertip to the delicate skin at the corner of one green eye and muttered a string of plummy invective, cursing the feet of crows. Dressing-room mirrors made it that much harder to ignore every fresh crease. The bulbs that framed the glass cast their illumination upon her countenance with such violence, even the opening night bouquet was already starting to wilt beneath the glare.

Thank God for *Max Factor*.

Irene heaved a barely perceptible sigh and twisted the base of the makeup stick, striping colour on her forehead, nose and cheekbones like pale war-paint. In barely any time at all she’d achieved the functional equivalent of a blank canvass. Then she opened her eyes wide as windows and began, like an artist, to paint.

Her younger cast-mates, for the most part, eschewed that sort of thing—preferring street makeup and a couple of coats of mascara. Irene would have felt positively naked like that under stage-light. Like riding into battle in a cocktail frock.

Her hand and the brushes moved across the landscape of her face with the swift assurance of long experience until, finally, she touched down a set of 110 falsies along the winged contours of her heavy black liner. From ten feet away, she looked like an aged street walker, peering

at the world from under a frondy canopy of bat wings, but—out *there*? Beyond the moat of the orchestra pit, they would see only a gleaming vision of eternal youth and beauty.

Irene stuck out her tongue at her reflection and contemplated a pre-show smoke.

She was still grimacing when another face suddenly appeared in the mirror beside her own. Irene was neither startled nor surprised. He was nothing if not punctual—*‘girdle round the earth in forty minutes’* and all that...

“You can wipe that grin off your mug, Puck,” she grouched at the gargoyle visage that hovered just over her reflected shoulder. “You’re even uglier than I am.”

“I’m *older*.” A finger, gnarled like the root of an ancient oak, reached in front of her and dipped into an open jar of some pearly-pink confection of a face cream, depositing a Hershey’s Kiss-shaped dollop on Irene’s nose. “And you’re not ugly. Just mad.”

“Mad-angry or mad-lunatic?” Irene smiled, wiping away the frothy stuff and knowing full well that Puck’s answer would be—

“*Both*.” He cackled; a high, thin sound that clawed the air. “But I will purge thy mortal grossness so, that thou shalt like an airy spirit go...”

“Learn your *own* lines, Goodfellow,” Irene sniffed. “That one’s mine! Now—if you please—shut up and do my lacing, you intolerable thing.” She stood and gripped the edge of the make-up table, exhaling every last cubic inch of air from her lungs.

“Half hour to curtain, Ms. Dansereaux,” Kelly Winslow called from the doorway.

“*Miss*, for God’s Sake, Kelly!” Irene barked over her shoulder at her understudy. Puck hauled on the laces like a longshoreman on a hawser. Irene insisted that he do the job—none of the women ever pulled tight enough. “Do you see this contraption into which I squeeze my torso nightly? This tit-masher of a bodice? *Mizzzzz* Dansereaux would do no such thing.”

“Yes, Miss Dansereaux...”

“Try to say the word without looking as though you’re chewing on something inedible next time,” Irene instructed with equanimity as Puck finished his un-tender ministrations and tied a double bow. “And don’t roll your eyes, dear. It’s vulgar.”



“You’d think they would have cast a Puck who hadn’t lived through the last ice-age...”

“Where *did* they dig up those two dinosaurs?”

Sage musings from Snout and Starveling—two of the Mechanicals. Combined ages probably totalling less than the number of summers she’d been doing this part, Irene figured. And not very bright. They hadn’t seen her coming and hadn’t bothered to keep a look out.

“Yeah, well,” another voice chimed in, “I’ll take *him* over Dame Thee-Ah-Tuh, any day.”

“That’s *Miss* Thee-Ah-Tuh to you, Bottom.” Irene rounded the corner majestically, like a ship in full sail. “And speaking of which, you can kiss my antediluvian ass.”

“Aw, shit, Irene.” Patrick winced. “I didn’t mean anything...”

“No, dear, I don’t expect you did. But you might want to work a touch on your diction, or that’s what the critics will write.” Irene allowed herself a satisfied grin—but only *after* she’d swept on past Bully Bottom and the lads. To manage arch and airy at the same time was a talent she’d long ago mastered. In her wake followed Mustardseed and Peaseblossom, giggling behind their hands, which just deepened the crimson of Patrick’s blush—he’d been trying to sleep with either or both of them for weeks.

Still, Irene supposed that she could hardly blame them for what they’d said. Any of them. Rehearsals for the rep shows were so brief and scattered that none of them had seen what the others could really *do*. Not to mention, the company was largely comprised of freshly squeezed theatre-school graduates this season. With the notable exceptions of Oberon (*Thank God, for that!* Irene thought for the thousandth time—she’d rather die than play opposite anyone but ‘Gentleman’ Jack Savage), Duke Theseus and, of course, Puck, she was surrounded by mewling babes.

‘Old’ Egeus was being portrayed by a cherubic little fellow in a pound and a half of age-makeup. And Hyppolita—as far as Irene could tell—hadn’t been out of a training bra anywhere *near* long enough to develop the fulsome bosom necessary to fill the Wagnerian breast-plate the company’s ill-advised costumer had laden her with.

Kiddies in dress-up.

“Don’t be unkind, old doll,” Puck chortled, deeply amused by the

unspoken thought.

“Really.” Irene raised an immaculately pencilled eyebrow at the piskie where he perched on the escape stairs, almost hidden in the shadows cast by the black velvet curtains. “Pot, meet kettle.”

Puck grinned as he swung himself gracefully off the scaffolding and swanned past Irene, singing ‘*Am I blue?...*’ Funny, because he was, head-to-toe, really a pale iridescent shade of green.



At exactly one minute past eight, the curtain rose.

And just a little over half an hour later...

“*How now spirit! Whither wander you?*” Puck’s thrilling, eerie tones shivered like a bell in the glittering air and a sinuous, wily presence uncoiled upon the stage. Ageless. Immortal.

Irene stood watching in the wings, awaiting her own entrance, and stifled another smile at Patrick’s reaction. He stood in the opposite wings and stared, mouth-open, at Puck; riveted, as all the others were, by a performance only glimpsed at—not even—in rehearsal.

Irene knew in her heart that, this night, they would look at her the same way when her time came...

“*But room, faerie! Here comes Oberon.*”

“*And here my mistress. Would that he were gone.*”

And Titania, the Queene of Faerie, swept into the moon-strewn grove in the Athenian woods to meet her lord.



Intermission came almost too soon.

Still, it was a relief to lean against the cool cinderblock wall of the backstage corridor. Her back ached. But at least here was somewhere the stage manager could not see her and chastise her for smoking in costume.

“Did you *see* that?” Patrick’s voice was incredulous. Had been since that first moment on stage—the moment when the world had shifted just a bit and for the Athenians and the audience alike, the night had taken on a otherworldly sheen.

Irene stayed leaning, just around the corner, and listened.

“I mean—did you freaking *see* that?”

“No shit. They never did that shit in rehearsal...” Silver-tongued on stage, gutter-mouth off. That was Andrew. Demetrius.

“Unbe-*freaking*-lievable.”

“That was seriously awesome shit.”

“They’re—like—a hundred and eighty put together. Where did that stuff come from? I couldn’t have done that...”

No, Irene thought. *You couldn’t have.*

They’d been spun gold out there, she and Puck. Even Gentleman Jack’d had to get his garters on to keep up with her. She’d shimmered. So had Puck—somewhat more literally; the props department must have loaded him up with pockets-full of glitter-dust. Irene was coated in the stuff.

“Genius, man... not like I’d ever tell her that...”

The voices of the very young men drifted off as they headed toward the green room for a quick hand of euchre before the second half.

• • •

The applause had been loud and very long.

A standing ovation, of course.

And a thundering chorus of *Bravo!* when she’d stepped forward and curtsyed deeply, the glistening stuff of her costume piling around her in frothy rainbow drifts.

Someone had given her more roses—pale yellow ones. Beautiful.

• • •

“Irene?” Gentleman Jack’s voice floated to her from where he stood by the blue-lit table, checking his props for the next evening’s show before calling it a night. Such a professional.

“Yes, Oberon?”

He smiled, having many years long since gotten used to Irene’s habits. Like never addressing anyone by other than their character name whilst in full costume, within the confines of the theatre. Outside it was different matter. The moment Irene stepped out the stage door, he was ‘Jack’ and nothing but.

“You were something out there,” Jack said. And then he kissed her.

“Well, it’s about time I got it absolutely right, don’t you think?”

She laughed. "I've played Titania every summer for over thirty years now, darling."

"Now the hungry lion roars..." Puck whispered in her bejewelled ear—a whirlwind heading for the stage door where the pale, bare bulb of the ghost-light burned, forlorn.

"What—" Irene spun on her heel as he hurried past.

And the wolf howls the moon...

There was a buzzing in her head—like the murmur of voices from another room.

"I said, you're still in full kit, love." Jack fingered the gossamer that floated from Irene's shoulders like starlight. He cocked his head, smiling wryly at her. "Did Olga do something new to your costume? I'm going to have to complain about special treatment! My Oberon looked positively tatty beside you, tonight..."

The voices made it hard for Irene to concentrate.

"Darling?" Jack looked at her.

She shook her head and focused on his blue eyes. "Yes, Oberon?"

"C'mon... Get out of your faerie gear and come to the pub. I'll buy you a drink – you deserve it!" He kissed her again and headed up the darkened aisle toward the front of the theatre, thrusting an arm into the sleeve of his jacket as he went. The lobby doors opened up onto the street, almost directly across from the Queen Mab – the cast's favourite après-show haunt.

"Yes, of course, dear..." Irene answered, but her gaze followed in Puck's glittering wake.

And we faeries, that do run by the triple Hecate's team from the presence of the sun...

"In a moment." The voices were louder now. She felt as though she moved down a corridor toward them. "In a moment..."

Following darkness like a dream,

Irene heard the lobby doors slam, as she walked across the bare, darkened stage.

Now are frolic...

The night was cool on her face. The stars were very bright.

The stage door clicked shut behind her, locking automatically.

"Puck?" she called. "Wait for me..."



“They found her on the couch in her dressing room. She was still in costume...”

“Heart attack.” Patrick barked a laugh. “Funny—I didn’t think the old bitch had one...” Still, he turned away very quickly, blinking.

The others knew enough not to call him on it.

And Andrew, for once, kept his mouth shut.

On a couch in the green room, Gentleman Jack wept, inconsolable, until just before the half-hour call—time enough for the redness to clear from the whites of his fierce, Faerie King’s eyes. Such a professional.

Cobweb felt her own heart break just a little as he strode past her—one last props-check—and developed an instant crush on him. Something about the weighty dignity of his mortal sorrow, worn like a cloak... etcetera, etcetera. And when Kelly Winslow walked by not a moment later, on the way to her new dressing room, the lesser faerie turned a faint shade of Puckian green with jealousy.



The light in the dressing room, reflected by Irene’s yellow roses, shone a buttery gold upon Kelly’s cheeks. She’d been flushed earlier; with grief, with excitement... a little bit with fear. But—and as often as she’d heard it, it bore repeating – ‘thank God for *Max Factor*’. Not the least pearl of wisdom that Irene had managed to bequeath her, either.

“Half-hour, everyone,” Gerry the stage manager called as he swept past the open door. Her door, now. “That’s the half, Ms. Winslow...”

Kelly picked up the fresh pair of 110s, fingering the clear plastic case. After a moment, she slid a fingernail under the sharp edge and flicked it open with the crisp snap.

“Miss Winslow,” Kelly murmured, smiling gently to herself.

And when she looked up, she wasn’t at all surprised to see Puck reflected in the mirror, waiting patiently to lace her into her corset. •

Inquire Within

Jude Dillon

A river frightens in the dark
where does that noise come from
and never goes
stays an instant and never
mind the underfooted stones

Dogs significant with distance
staking out the loneliness
tune me to the rake of stars
pitching carefully the dark earth
the salt rimmed eye
out looking in for me
among the crowds of midnight

Through these dark rooms
rides the silent telephone

Last night I drank love letters
and folded stamps into empty envelopes •

Now I know to never
answer a question
Raven asks you straight.
He's a twister of words.

Metis

Leah Bobet

The Trickster God fell from the sky on an autumn afternoon, and the trick was that he was made of stone. All the reservation winos, the kids sniffing gas, the wild-eyed used-to-be-shamans and the mothers with tired shoulders saw him rocket out of the sky and crush Preacher Donahoe's white-man's school flat—and the preacher-man to boot.

My, it was a sight to see.

So they gathered round and touched and smelled and tasted, and decided that it was a sign: we were to go back to the old ways. Stop living in aluminium sideboard and tumbledown, and go back to the woods, back to the trees. A few of the kids muttered and whined, but the light of pure fervour was in most every eye, and it's a disease that's catching. So the televisions were smashed and the few traditional things gathered, and the new tribe headed north, towards the ever-rising sun.

Me, I'm old. I'm old enough to remember that old ways aren't always good ways, no matter if the new ways are bad ones too. That's the things you learn when the wrinkles fold your face, making new little pockets to hold wisdom.

So I watched them go, singing in a language they only half-understood. Then I sat down on Raven's shoulder, tucked my body under his voluminous carved wing, and leaned my old man's head against his

body, trying to hear his subtle great heart.

“So, Trickster,” I muttered to him. “What’re you up to now?”

• • •

I shouldn’t have stayed on the rez. There was nothing left but a pile of pulled-down and pitted houses, forks burying themselves in the schoolyard, toasters cordless and defeathered. Oh, and Raven, of course, lord of the broken bottles and hand-me-down clothes. This you have to grant them: when the People decide to drink themselves to death they don’t do it by halves, and when they decide to smash their lives and go feral, they don’t do that by halves either. Meticulous, we are.

In the end, I stuck around just to see the looks on those Indian Affairs folks’ faces when they finally got around to visiting—that would be rich! But Raven was playing his tricks again: the wind whistled through my dreams as I slept curled-up beneath his stone belly, and it said go north, old man, go north. You can still catch them on the wing.

In the morning, I looked him in his beady eye and snorted. “I’m smarter than that, y’know.”

Raven cocked his stone head at me, claws sunk deep into his clamshell, and said nothing.

“Two can play at that game,” I said, and settled back against the rock.

• • •

Way back when I was young I was the smartest kid on the rez. I demolished every test Father McReadie—the one two before Donahoe—could give me, and they sent me off to school in Toronto, to study law. I wasn’t really Status, wasn’t supposed to be living on the rez, so I didn’t have nothing to lose by it. My daddy was a town boy, and it was going to get out one of these days; better to lose my Status with a degree—they don’t do that anymore—than be thrown out on my arse by the Ministry of Indian Affairs like the bastard I was. My momma kissed me on the forehead and told me I had a future, and not to throw it away.

Back then, they started you on Classics before you could learn about the law. I wasn’t a cocky kid like the other Native folk in the program; I didn’t refuse to learn it just ‘cause it wasn’t my history. I

wasn't political: just read the books and kept my opinions to myself.

It was the tall professor with earrings like solid rocks and too much blue eyeshadow on who told us about Metis. Metis was the word the Greeks used for guile, adaptability. Cleverness. Now, I didn't go stepping on the Greeks just 'cause they were white folks. I dropped out of school straight after that, and went home to the rez to work the nets in the river. Because I was Metis, and I knew if I had my cleverness about me, I didn't need the Indian Act or the law.



The ministry men showed up three days later. I'd stopped answering the phones when they rang: first relatives in the city asking for money or somesuch, the hydro company complaining, bosses in town livid about missed shifts and employment and screaming I don't care whose land it was, yougottaworkforalivingbum! Someone finally called the ministry.

In that time I'd put together all the cans of food in a little pile, all the boxes in another. I was eating from Betty Shawnahee's preserves—canned mechanically, and so not good enough to be taken with—when they showed up. Me, I thought the preserves were nice enough. Gods do funny things to people.

The two boys drove up in a government car, a middle-aged one and a young one, wild-eyed and confused behind dark glasses and matching uniforms the colour of a six-point-nine beer. They flashed their badges when they saw me lounging on Raven's right thigh with a jam jar in my hand. "What's going on here?"

I shrugged.

"Well, what's that you're sitting on?" asked the younger one.

"Raven," I said.

"Was there a tornado or something?" said the older.

"Nope. Just Raven."

The younger one sighed. "We'll have to bring you in for questioning, sir."

I shrugged again and took a spoonful of Betty Shawnahee's preserves. "Can't. I'm not Status."

"Shit," said the older one, and they went back to the car. "We'll be back," they called before they drove away.

I offered them a jar of preserves, but they didn't seem interested.



That night, in my dreams, Raven stretched out of his shell of stone and clucked at me. You're not all bad at this.

Seemed I had his attention. I grinned, showing off the spaces where the teeth were missing, and said nothing.

What do you want from me, then, old man with something to prove?

Now, I know to never answer a question Raven asks you straight. He's a twister of words. So I asked: "What do you want with the folks hereabouts, Trickster God?"

Raven grinned. The old ways aren't always good ways, you know. The new ways aren't always bad ways either.

I puzzled over that for a little while, but not too long, 'cause I knew he'd enjoy it. "You mean to be teaching a lesson, I take it."

Raven grinned, and said nothing.



I'd run out of preserves the next morning, and over the next few days, I worked through the cans and the boxes too, until my stomach started eating itself up. After a few weeks I started fishing again, working the nets all by myself on the quiet autumn river. It wasn't easy, but I'm Metis, and I can be crafty when I've a mind to be.

Raven watched me the whole time, as leaves fell from the trees and slid off his cold stone back. I brought more and more blankets out with me every night, and slept shivering under his wing.

I spent a lot of time thinking while I was on the river, thinking quiet moving-water thoughts. For the first time in my life I regretted a little that I didn't know the law after all. It might have helped me with Raven, even if I'd have starved without knowing the nets.

I offered him one of my fish on the thirtieth night. Raven always was one to be buttered up. Could have proven a point, besides: there was still some good in the old ways. There was still some good in paying homage to older things.

By the time I was ready to sleep and the fire had gone down, the

fish was gone, and there was blood on the stone clamshell where he perched. I looked at that, then I climbed into the blanket my neighbour Jimmy's grandson—the dead boy, not the other one—had dragged around when he was a kid, and went to sleep.



That night I dreamed again, and it was Raven perched on his clamshell, watching me close-like, like I was prey. Figured it out yet, old man with something to prove?

I thought a little more, and then I said: "Way I see it, you're the greedy type. Found us folks in a clamshell at the beginning of the world, and you're just waiting to eat us up."

He inclined his head.

"And," I said, looking around at the smashed houses and the broken bottles on the ground, "you're not the type to abide us eating ourselves up first."

A flicker crossed Raven's face.

"Is that the lesson?" I asked.

You're cleverer than you look, old man.

I grinned back at him. "I'm Metis. And I know what that means."



They straggled back in the morning when I woke up, dirty and dishevelled, and every single one of them with eyes wide as nightmares, swearing off the bottle and the gas and the loneliness for good.



In the third week after the tribe came back, the Indian Affairs men showed up in their shiny cars. This time, they brought a woman from the Museum of Civilization, way out in Ottawa, and a big flatbed truck. She poked and prodded Raven beak to claws, and pronounced him a one-ton mystery. When she asked where it came from, the tribe looked confused.

Raven winked at me, and I stepped forward. "Came from the sky, ma'am."

The two Indian Affairs men looked at me strangely, but the museum woman looked at me, and looked at Raven, and then looked back at me strangest of all. "Listen, sir—" she said, and yes, she did call me sir. "Would you be willing to come back with us to give a statement? There are some people in Ottawa who'd be interested in all this."

I looked at the frames of new houses coming up, at the donated clothes that had poured in from town, the shiny new dishwashers they'd promised and the places that were marked up for high-grade roads, and patted Raven on the shoulder, just under the carved wing: the space that was polished by where I'd slept. There was no light in his beady little eyes now; the stain of fish's blood on his clamshell was all old and battered, like it'd been there since the beginning of the world.

"I'll stay here, I think," I said. I'd stayed this long, and there were no fish to pull or houses to rebuild in Ottawa. I was born on this rez.

Because me, I'm old, but I'm Metis too. I'm old enough to remember that no matter if the old ways are bad ones, it's easy for new ways to go bad too if you aren't careful. So I'll be watching as close as a bird; I'll learn the new ways and keep an eye on things, and I know I can be cleverer than any Trickster. 'Cause I'm Metis.

That's the thing you learn when the wrinkles fold your face, making new little pockets to hold wisdom. •



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"It takes your memories," he said, "and then your body. I remember I used to eat at a table. I used to have a wife and daughter. Thank you for the cheese. It was very good."

Ticker Hounds

Shawn Peters

Missy plunged into London's grey darkness. The street ahead hid its obstacles in a haze of smog and falling ash. She hopped over a fallen rail that suddenly appeared in her path, and ran another two steps before she heard a clang and a curse as Hews collided with it behind her. She halted and spun, to find Oliver already hauling Hews upright.

"I'm fine! Bloody – let me find my feet." Hewey threw off Oliver's grip and stabilized himself, tightly clutching the long tin box under his arm. Oliver's eyes shot to the moving clouds behind them.

"Footsteps!" he hissed.

They took off running.

Between her own laboured breaths and the beating of her heart, those footsteps pounded in Missy's ears—the heavy, rapid thundering of feet sheathed in iron, swift and tireless.

Ash from the towering factories above choked the air. The hot winds stung her eyes. Each breath came harder, shorter, until her lungs ached and her limbs felt impossibly heavy.

Hews and Oliver outpaced her at the next wide alley, sweat streaming down their faces. They reached a descending stair and bounded down it. Missy followed. Her feet skidded on the slick stone, pitching her backwards. She managed to break her fall with her hands and slide the

few stairs to the bottom on her rump.

“Hold up!” Oliver ordered.

Missy’s stomach gnarled up, and her skin lit with a flash of fever.

Christ. She twisted away from the other two and vomited up a gout of black oil.

Oliver’s arms hooked under her shoulders and hauled her upright.

“You all right, love?”

She wiped her mouth off with the back of her hand. *He didn’t see that it was oil, did he?* “Just lost it on the stairs. I’m fine. I can run.”

“You can make eyes at each other later, birds,” Hews called.

Footsteps rang above them and their escape began anew. The stairs had led to a narrow brick walkway with a high wall on the left and the sickly black waters of the Thames on the right. They’d gone only a few strides when they almost collided with Hews, who had stopped short.

“What’s wrong, man?” Oliver asked. Missy craned her neck over Hews’ squat shoulder and peered into the smog ahead.

There was a shadow there, tall as a man, hunched and lopsided.

“We’re trapped!” Hews wailed.

“You there, stop!”

They spun to see their pursuers charge out of the grey: Boiler Men, their black iron armour dusted with ashes, their faces hidden behind grill masks and tinted glass goggles. The first two ground to a halt and planted their repeating rifles flush to their shoulders. A third ran through them and halted not three strides from Missy, weapon aimed from the hip.

“Lay the property on the ground,” he ordered, voice a tinny rumbling from behind the mask.

“Easy, there, easy,” Oliver said. His hand twitched toward the pocket of his greatcoat.

Ollie, don’t do it. “Hews, give them the box,” Missy hissed.

Hews hugged it to his chest, eyes blank with terror.

“It’s over, Hewey. Give them the damned box!”

Hews nodded slowly. He stretched the box out in shaking hands.

Then Missy heard a scraping, and a deep-throated metallic growl echoed from above. A subtle vibration began inside Missy’s ribcage as glinting claws hooked over the wall’s top edge, and inhuman heads

snaked out of the gloom. The creatures were black as iron, brass rivets in their joints, strips of dull steel marking ribs, fingers and jaw.

The Boiler Men swung their weapons to the new targets and fired. Sparking from the impacts, the creatures leapt down onto them. In seconds, the walkway for thirty paces was a mess of fists, gunfire and metal teeth.

Missy, Oliver and Hews scrambled away.

They turned to find a blackened face materializing from the smog. The figure became a hunched old man. A repetitive ticking sounded in Missy's chest, and she stepped self-consciously away from Oliver, hoping he hadn't heard.

Black oil trickled out from the corners of the man's mouth as he spoke.

"Please come with me," he croaked. "I'll help you."

"Good enough for me," Hews proclaimed. They fled after the man along the water's edge, chafing at his halting shuffle. The smog muted the sounds of combat as they ran farther up the riverside.

Eventually, Hews, panting and wheezing, slowed their pace and broke the silence.

"Bless you, friend," he said. "That would have been the end of it back there. What'll you take to show us all the way to the docks?"

Missy shuddered at the man's yellowed eyes as he glanced over his shoulder at her. The ticking in Missy's chest got louder, faster. She coughed to cover it, but did not break eye contact. *He can't possibly think...*

Then the man turned away.

"I wish for food," he said. "And conversation."



An hour later Hews was living up to that agreement.

"Couldn't have asked for better timing, mate. Never seen anything like that, you and your doggies, there."

The old man was staring at a piece of cheese Hews had given him, as if unsure what to do with it. He shifted himself on the rusty door he and Hewey shared as a bench.

Missy and Oliver sat apart from them on a bent piece of steampipe. The wreck of several downed raised-rail cars boxed in their

hiding place on three sides, though they appeared little more than grey smudges in the struggling light. Missy nestled herself in the crook of Oliver's arm and leaned into his shoulder.

"I'm Herbert Lewis, Jr. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Hews held out a hand, which the man was slow in accepting. When he finally grasped it, Hews shook vigorously. "Call me Hews. These here are Oliver Summers and Michelle Planterette."

"Plantaget," Missy corrected.

"Hounds," the man said.

"Sorry?" said Hews.

"The dogs. They've forgotten their real names, but city-people call them Ticker Hounds."

Missy felt Oliver stiffen.

"Good. Good to know," said Hews. "And your name, sir?"

The man hesitated a long time.

"I don't remember."

"Been down here a while, then, have you?"

"A long time."

"Well, if you want, we can..."

Missy stomped her foot to draw Hews' eye. She gave him a subtle shake of the head. *He is not coming with us.* After a moment, Hews nodded.

"Right, well... try out that cheese, mate. I can't get enough of it. Never go anywhere without a lump or two wrapped up in my pocket."

The man's gaze had wandered to Missy, and she felt that ticking start again in her chest. She faked a fit of coughing to cover it.

"You all right, love?" Oliver rubbed her back as she hacked. Eventually the old man's eyes returned to his cheese, and the ticking subsided to a dull vibration.

"Fine," she said, sitting back up. "Must be the air down here."

Oliver wrinkled his nose. "It *is* foul."

"And hot," she said. "These trousers are a lot warmer than a skirt."

The old man bit into his cheese. Oil dribbled from his mouth, staining the cheese to a dark red-brown and then trickling into his beard.

"Hewey," Oliver said. "Can we talk to you a minute?"

Hews obediently shuffled over. He placed the tin box on his knees as he squatted down.

"We should go," Oliver said. "Let's thank the man properly and be

on our way.”

“Why?” said Hews. “He obviously lives down here. He can take us to the docks, and those Hounds of his can protect us.”

“Hewey, he has the Clacks.”

Hews’ fuzzy eyebrows shot up.

“Get out.”

“His spit’s turned to oil, and you can hear ticking sometimes when he’s close.”

Missy swallowed hard.

Hews rubbed his fingers through his mutton chops. “That’s a problem, then?”

Oliver’s eyes darkened. “It’s a problem.”

“Right.” Hews licked his teeth and tapped absently on the tin box for a moment. “Look, I hate to bring this up, mate, but do you know where we are?”

Oliver scowled.

“So with the Ironboys chasing us, you think we can make it on our own? We’ve no street signs, remember, nor cable-cars or rail.”

Missy gave Oliver a gentle shake. “It’s the best way, Ollie. It’s not like we’re swapping food with him. I’ve even heard that people recover from it.”

“Oh? Who said that?”

Missy couldn’t meet his eyes. “I... you know. You hear things.”

After a moment, Oliver let loose a long sigh.

“Fine. Just don’t expect me to talk to him.”

Hews smiled and gave him a quick slap on the shoulder.

“Knew you’d come ’round, mate. I’ll do the talking.”

With an effort, Hewey lifted himself up. He handed the box to Oliver and used both hands to haul his belt up over the first roll of his belly, then returned to the old man.

“Let’s take a look,” Missy said, desperate to shift Oliver’s attention onto another subject. She pulled the box over to her own lap and popped the two brass catches that held it closed. Within, in two neat rows, sat hundreds of punch cards of some shining paper-like material.

“They’re probably the only clean thing down here,” Oliver said, removing one and flipping it over his fingers like a playing card. “Toughest safe I’ve ever cracked, I think. I wonder what’s so important about them.”

Missy snatched the card and slipped it back into its place.

“Does it really matter, love?”

Oliver shrugged. He sucked in a ragged breath.

“This air’s like breathing iron filings, and the bloody heat’s like a boiler room all the time.”

She watched him wince with the next inhalation, and realized she no longer felt the burning in her lungs of just an hour ago. She watched the sweat score lines in the grime on his face as it ran down from the brim of his hat. She probed her own face and found no sweat at all, just grit mixed into her skin’s own oils.

God, is this how it happens? I can barely feel my heart anymore. Please, Good Lord, just a little longer.

She squeezed Oliver tighter. He responded immediately by wrapping her up in both arms. He lifted her hat, shook some ash from it, and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“What’s got you scared, Lovely?”

“It’s this place,” she lied. “I’ve never been below fourth level before.”

“With good reason. I don’t know how that old man survives down here.”

“Ollie, let’s not live in Paris,” Missy said, trying not to let her eyes tear. “Let’s live in the country, away from the machines and the smoke.”

He stroked one hand through her hair. With the other, he closed the tin box.

“A million Francs and we can live wherever you want, love.”

Hewey whistled at them.

“On your feet, birds. Mr. Hermit, here, says we ought to be getting on.”

“The Hounds have driven them off,” the old man said. “But they will not stop looking for you.”

• • •

A few more days, she prayed, and then fresh air, fresh water, sunlight...

The ticks inside her chest suddenly jumped in frequency, and she glanced over to see Oliver run a few strides away and thrust his revolver behind a chunk of fallen masonry. In the shadows beyond, a hound retreated into the haze. The hound stayed close, something

Missy felt in the clicks and vibrations of her ribcage.

The hermit shuffled on some five paces ahead, nearly invisible through the clouds of ash that blew in from the Thames. The noises inside her echoed his every step.

Just a few more days...

"In God's name..." Hews muttered.

Missy followed his gaze out over the water, where something metallic and angular raised its head from the river. It turned its sightless eyes on Missy, and for the duration of that stare, the pattern of ticks in Missy's chest altered slightly. After a moment, it lazily dunked beneath the waves.

Hews exhaled a shaky breath. He flicked his hat brim to remove the ash. "What do you suppose that monstrosity was?"

"It's forgotten its name."

Hews stared at her quizzically for a moment. "Like the hounds—right-o."

Yes, like the hounds. But she hadn't guessed that, she'd known it with certainty.

The clicking pattern changed again and Missy swung her eyes forward to find the old man looking back at her.

"He likes you," Hews said, with only a waffling hint of humour.

"Excuse me a moment."

Missy quickened her pace.

As she came up alongside the old man, she heard noise coming from him as well, a confused riot of sounds: ticks, clacks, scrapes and thumps. He slowed his palsied shuffle a bit to allow her to catch up.

"A moment, if you would, sir," she said.

His eyes hung dull and inanimate in their sockets.

She hesitated a moment, then plucked up her courage and came out with it.

"Sir, do... do you have the Clacks?"

His face retained its lifeless expression.

"I was told I did."

"How long have you had it?"

"I don't remember. A doctor told me."

"What," she asked, lowering her voice, "does it do to you?"

"It takes your memories," he said, "and then your body. I remember I used to eat at a table. I used to have a wife and a daughter. Thank you

for the cheese. It was very good.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I think I used to like cheese.” He lapsed into silence.

They walked that way for a bit. Missy’s mind raced with a million questions. To her surprise, he spoke before she did.

“I miss my daughter,” he said. “She was very young when I got sick, and I had to go away. She had green eyes, like yours.”

The old man trembled a bit, and the ticks in Missy’s chest turned to scrapes. She winced as little sparks of pain jolted along her ribs.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and meant it. The man’s sudden sorrow was palpable.

“One of the hounds saw you when you climbed down,” he said. “I had them follow you... because, I wanted to know...”

“I’m not your daughter,” she said.

Her abdomen clenched as things scraped together inside. The hermit shuddered, knocking oil droplets loose from his eyes. He dropped his head and turned away.

“I didn’t think so. I’d hoped... I just miss her.”

He hobbled ahead. Missy let him go and dropped back beside Hews. Oliver was still ranging to the left, poking his revolver at every alley and every pile of rubble.

Hews nodded in his direction. “That kind of worry’s worse for the health than even this air, I’d wager.”

“They’re protecting us.”

“Aye, but he doesn’t appear to believe that.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

She left Hews and approached Oliver from behind. As she got closer to the streets, the clicks got faster, their pattern clearer.

No, she realized, they’re protecting me.

• • •

“Freedom and wealth, a hundred yards away,” Hews moaned. “Fate’s a cruel mistress.”

Their route along the river’s edge had brought them to the feet of a vast iron wall. The glare of the dock’s electric lights leaked over the wall’s top, between jagged bits of metal welded there. After so many hours of grey semi-darkness, the light stung Missy’s eyes.

Above them hung the Docks Tower, perched on a dozen stilt-like legs of steel which plunged into the river at the far right and into the streets at the far left. The tower's cavernous underbelly was a mess of cranes, cables and elevators. Beyond the wall the sounds of machinery and human voices echoed in that enormous space.

Missy felt queasy. The dull, consistent throb of her heart had become more of a churning sensation, and the sight of this place made her internal ticking louder and angrier. Or maybe that was the proximity of the hermit. She moved to join Oliver and Hews at the wall.

"Dear God," Oliver was saying. "I guess I expected some perimeter, but nothing like this."

"We can't very well climb over it," Hews said, scanning the wall's surface. "You brought some dynamite, right, Ollie?"

Oliver smirked at him. Missy stepped up beside them, slipping her arm into Oliver's.

"Any ideas, love?" Oliver asked.

Missy stared at the wall, listening to the ticking inside her.

"Maybe..."

"I can't believe it," Hews said. "It was such a beautiful plan."

"The beautiful plan's been a wreck for some time now, Hewey," Oliver said.

The ticks formed up an image in Missy's ear. Her hand shot out, pointing left.

"Down there," she said. "There's a door."

Hews spun and stared into the shadow. Oliver turned and looked at her, eyes searching. She felt him tense up.

"Where's this, lass?" Hews asked.

"About forty feet down," Missy replied. Oliver wanted to ask how she knew that. It was in his eyes, in his expectant stance. *He'll understand*, she told herself. *He's not that afraid.*

But he didn't ask. He dropped his gaze, slipped away from her, and followed Hews down the length of the wall. In two steps they both vanished into the sharp shadows.

The hermit appeared at her side, his quiet clicking synchronizing with her own.

"I remember," he said, "when they found out I was sick. My wife—she was the one that sent for the Boiler Men. And my little girl cried

when they took me away. The Boiler Men forced me down a rope ladder at gunpoint. I waved to my girl and told her to be strong. She didn't wave back."

Missy shuddered. A sudden cold shot through her bones.

"Why didn't she wave back?"

"I don't know," Missy said, harsher than she'd intended. "I didn't know your family, sir."

She fled from him, trying to keep her steps unhurried. As she put distance between them, the cold subsided.

She found Oliver and Hews at the door, which was little more than a rectangular section of wall with a small hole in the centre and nearly invisible hinges on the right. Oliver was kneeling, peering into the hole. Hews stood back, shifting weight from foot to foot, tin box cradled in his arms.

"It's a steam lock," Hews said.

"Nothing my man can't handle, right, love?" Missy said, forcing a smile.

Oliver looked at her askance a moment, then smiled back.

"Not when you come prepared." He withdrew from a pocket an odd length of copper pipe. It split into six pipes at one end, each tipped with a rubber cup. He began bending and adjusting each end, slipping the instrument in and out of the keyhole to test its fit.

"Give us a minute, would you Hews?" Missy said.

Hews' face split in a toothy grin. "Never too dire a situation for a little solitary time, eh, birds? I'll be back that way a few steps."

He wandered up the wall, whistling pointedly to himself.

Oliver spoke first.

"I don't like that man getting too close to you," he said, focussing on the key and the hole.

"He's harmless," Missy began.

"He's not. He's infected, love. It's bad enough that we're down here with all this thick air and rubbish and his dogs running all over the place. You don't have to go about talking to the man."

"He's just lonely."

Oliver yanked the key out of the hole, made a few adjustments, thrust it back in.

"So you feel sorry for him? So do I—I guess—but I saw half my neighbours hauled off by the Boiler Men for this disease. I couldn't

bear it if you got it.”

Missy knelt beside him. She held back tears only because she was afraid they might come out black and slick.

“We’ll be all right,” she said, rubbing his shoulder. “Once we get out of this city we’ll be right as rain.”

He nodded stiffly.

“Stand back, love.”

She rose and retreated a few steps.

Oliver made some final adjustments to his tool and slipped it into the hole. He took a deep breath, then planted his lips around the single end of the pipe and blew. His face turned red. In a few seconds, the door hissed and Missy heard bolts slide clear on the opposite side.

“Done and done,” Oliver announced, stowing the tool back in his pocket.

Missy cleared her throat and called for Hewey. In seconds he appeared out of the grey, the hermit shuffling along behind.

“Man says he’s keeping his dogs ready in case we get into trouble,” said Hews. Seeing Oliver’s reaction, he added, “Don’t worry, mate, he says they’ll keep their distance.” He nodded towards the door. “Let’s have a look-see, then.”

All three set their shoulders on the door and shoved it open just a sliver. Light spilled through. Oliver motioned them to stop and set his eye to the crack.

He swore. “I thought you said the Boiler Men didn’t guard the docks, Hewey.”

“They don’t.”

Missy pushed Oliver aside and took his place, pressing her face to the slit of light. The glare obscured much of what she saw, but the bulbous silhouettes atop the steep incline beyond were unmistakable.

“There’s nowhere to hide. It’s just an open hillside.”

“We’re buggered,” said Oliver, as Hews took his turn at the door. “We can’t sneak up under those lights, and we can’t bloody well fight them with one revolver.”

“We don’t have to,” said Hews, smiling. He turned to the hermit. “What do you say, chap? Your hounds up for a tussle?”

Missy scowled. “We can’t ask him to...”

“Rifle shots are like hail on them, lass. We saw that earlier.” He turned back to the old man. “For all the cheese in my pockets, man,

what do you say?"

"I like cheese," the man said. Despite the noise of the shipyards, Missy heard the ticks sound from him, and the answers echo from the smog all around them. The old man's gaze drifted towards the dark. "Please stand back."

They scrambled out of the way as the first hound burst through the smog and crashed against the door. The door's hinges screeched in protest, but gave. The hound bolted through the opening. A second followed, careening from the shadows into the light of the docks. Then a third, a fourth, then a half-dozen more. Beyond the wall, rifle shots and snarls filled the air.

"I know you don't like them, Ollie, but you have to admit, they're handy, eh?" Hews said.

"Let's go," was the reply.

They headed for the door. Missy turned briefly to the hermit.

"Thanks for all your help."

"I'm coming with you," he said. "I... have to make sure you're safe."

"I'm *not* your daughter."

"Lass," Hews hissed, "we have to move!"

Things grated against one another inside her as she turned away. She hesitated. "Come on if you want," she said, then ran to join the others.

Inside, the top of the incline was a riot of sparks, as bullets bounced off the hounds and claws scraped over the Boiler Men's armour. Oliver led them along the wall to the right, revolver in hand. Missy found herself clutching her abdomen. The whole area spoke to her: the cranes, the boats, the dock equipment, the hounds. Hundreds of little clicking patterns came together in one nauseating mass in her stomach.

"It's loud," she muttered. No one heard her.

Oliver glanced back. Missy saw his eyes narrow. She checked over her shoulder to find the old man hobbling after them.

They continued on until they reached the edge of the dockyards, where the sloping hill became a deck of concrete. Beyond, the docks stretched for half a mile, a maze of walkways, cranes, and warehouses sculpted around cavernous berths holding steamships and ocean liners. The dockhands around the nearest ship stood still, watching the fight

on the slope.

After a brief sprint, they found a nook in a pile of crates and hunkered down. Missy did not have to look back to know that the old man was still following them.

Oliver peeked over the top of the crates. "Which boat's your friend on?"

"Called it the *Jours Meilleurs*." Hews said, puffing. "Dock fourteen."

"Which dock are we at, then, Hewey?"

"Damned if I know."

A scuffing of feet announced the hermit's arrival.

Missy spun on him. "Get down. Someone will see you."

The hermit moved to join them.

"No."

Oliver moved Missy aside with a gentle shove and planted himself squarely between her and the hermit. He raised his revolver. The man clicked his hurt and confusion.

"Love, don't..." she began.

Oliver held up his free hand to silence her.

"No, that's enough. We appreciate what you've done for us, sir, but we'll be fine on our own from here."

"But..." the hermit began, "there are Boiler Men. She might get hurt."

"I'll protect her."

Missy grabbed Oliver's arm and shoved it down.

"What's wrong with you?" she hissed. "This man probably saved our lives."

"He can't go with us," Oliver whispered back. "Besides the fact that he's going to make a bloody spectacle in here—he's got the Clacks! We've already been too badly exposed to it, what with him and his dogs. Do you know what happens to you once you've got it?"

God, do I. "I'm not saying we're taking him with us, but show enough civility not to point a pistol in his face."

Oliver grumbled something under his breath, and shoved his revolver back into his pocket. "Hewey, give the man his cheese."

Hews jumped up from his squat and presented three wrapped blocks.

"As promised, sir," he said, managing joviality. "I'll miss it on the crossing, but you've more than earned it."

The hermit absently accepted the gifts in one hand, staring at Oliver's back.

Missy stared earnestly into the man's unfocused yellow eyes. Her insides clicked in rhythm with her speech.

"You have to go back to the streets, with your dogs. You can't follow us or we'll get caught, and they can't fight with the Boiler Men forever."

One of the man's eyes rolled to focus on her, black oil squirted out of its edge.

"You can't go," he said. "The Hounds will follow you. You're part of the pack, now."

Missy froze, her mouth suddenly dry. She heard, felt, Oliver go still, then swivel on his heel. Suddenly he was beside her, pistol out.

"Love, what does he mean by that?"

Missy stared up into his eyes, so wide, helpless. *Lie to him*, she told herself. *He'll believe you, whatever you say*. A silence fell and stretched for moment after moment, broken only by the random report of rifles. She drew in a shuddering breath, and reached out a hand to him.

"He just thinks I'm his daughter," she said, shakily. "He won't let up on it."

Oliver jolted back from her touch. "You... You're ticking!"

"Ollie, it's not..."

"I thought it was him! All this time I thought it was him, or his dogs, or... Jesus!"

Hews stared at her, slack-jawed. "God, lass..."

Missy clasped her fingers and took a step forward. Oliver retreated again, revolver coming up in a quaking hand.

"Ollie, I never wanted to tell you," she pleaded. "It wasn't bad. And I thought once we got to France and we got clean air and water, and got away from the city and all the machines, I'd get better."

"You don't get better!" Oliver said. He rubbed at his face as the first tears started to roll down. "You can't cure it. You can't heal from it. You go mad. And then..."

Hews stepped in front of Oliver's gun.

"Put it away, lad," he said. "You and I both know you're not going to shoot her."

"How could you not tell me?" Oliver said.

With a tiny electric crackle, tears finally escaped Missy's eyes. Her vision became a greasy blur.

"I wanted to," she said. "Please believe me. You were just so afraid of it."

Hews disarmed Oliver, who put up no resistance.

"Ollie," he said, "my granddad told me the Clacks didn't exist before the Boiler Men came. So if we get her away from them we've a shot at it, man. We've hope."

Missy blinked away the tears to find Oliver staring at her, mouth agape, face frozen in a tense visage of hurt.

Suddenly the hermit barrelled past them, keening like a banshee. Missy whirled to find a dozen Boiler Men charging down the concrete, already sighting down the length of their weapons.

"Down!" Hews ordered, shoving Oliver back towards the crates with a well placed shoulder. Missy made to follow.

A barrage of rifles discharged. Missy watched the old man even as she scrambled for cover. *They couldn't have missed, not at that range.* And yet the hermit merely stumbled and slowed for an instant. The Boiler Men halted, squared off and fired again. Sparks flew from the old man's body, along with bits of blackened skin and clothing. The holes revealed metal bones and joints, slick with grease and blood. After that the barrage was constant.

A hand closed on her arm.

"We have to go, birds!" Hews shouted over the noise.

But Missy couldn't pull her gaze away. With each impact, some spark or spasm jolted her. Her muscles twitched, her joints cracked. She couldn't move.

"Help me, damn it!" Hews growled.

Another set of hands gripped her at the shoulders.

"Michelle, for the love of God, come on! I'm sorry."

New tears welled up to hear him say it. A wash of relief, a loosening of every tension. Her legs began to move.

Then the two Boiler Men in the centre of the line stowed their rifles and stepped back. In their place appeared two more, one with a whirring, steam-gouting machine strapped to his back, the other carrying a ten foot steel pole topped with a copper globe. Lengths of rubber wire connected the two instruments.

The Boiler Man armed with the pole took one purposeful step forward and jabbed it into the hermit's chest. A deafening crack sounded, accompanied by a white flash, and the hermit dropped like

a sack of grain.

Missy gasped as every muscle and mechanism in her seized and she toppled back into Oliver's waiting arms.

"Got you. I've got you," he whispered to her.

He hauled her away. She couldn't stand, couldn't move. The lights of the tower far above glazed luminescent streaks over her eyes. She felt, more than saw, the hounds bounding past them on all sides, then felt the shocks anew, as one by one they were taken down by the copper rod.

"Hurry up, man!" Hews cried.

"She's heavy."

Seconds went by, Missy's heels dragging in the dirt. The shock subsided, and she found she could blink.

"I'm all right," she croaked. Foul-tasting oil swelled into her mouth as she spoke.

Oliver devoured her in a tight hug. "I'd feared the worst," he said, in a shaking whisper.

She threw her arms around him, pressing through the wool coat to the warm man beneath. The noises in her chest faded away, and all she heard was the sound of his breathing and the rhythm of his heart. She stretched the moment as long as she could, before a terrified thought crept into her mind: *Why've we stopped running?*

She turned her head, and saw it was because there was no more use.

They had dragged her to the edge of the earthen slope leading to the dock's walls. Towards the slope's base lay a dozen or more sparking hounds, painfully trying to flee through the open door and into the streets. Boiler Men, their black armour marred all over with deep scratches and gouges, lined the whole hilltop. She counted three dozen, and four of the deadly copper-tipped rods. Guns were already trained their way.

Hews threw down the revolver, cursing loudly.

Oliver's fingers enwrapped Michelle's.

"I love you," was all he said.

She replied by drawing his face down and kissing him. Oil from her lips smeared and spurted across their chins, but he did not shy away.

"On your faces, all of you!" the closest Boiler Man ordered.

With one final squeeze of hands, Missy and Oliver parted. Missy cringed at how much her joints creaked as she knelt, then stretched out face down in the muddy, stinking earth. She heard one of the men collecting the tin box.

"They're the same ones we lost in the streets this morning," one of the Boiler Men said.

A gun barrel prodded at her back.

"You. On your feet."

Obediently she stood. Oliver lay on the ground next to her, head craned to try to catch her eye.

The Boiler Man facing her kept his rifle levelled at her face. Cold, reflective glass stared into her, appraised her.

"This one has the Clacks," he announced.

In an instant, four others surrounded her, and another stepped into the circle, brandishing a copper-tipped rod. Its faint hum chilled her ears, and the memory of the hermit's fall replayed in her mind.

The first Boiler Man gestured with his rifle towards the gate leading to the streets.

"Back to the streets with you," he said.

"No!" Oliver cried, rising. One of the Ironboys planted a boot on the back of Oliver's head and drove him into the mud. Oliver began to thrash violently.

"Let him go!" Missy screamed.

A Boiler Man prodded her in the chest with his rifle, forcing her back a step. Oliver squirmed and sputtered.

"Let him up! You're drowning him!"

"Out the door!" the man bellowed.

With a rattling snarl, she lunged at the man pinning Oliver. The copper rod took her in the ribs. As if her legs and arms had suddenly vanished, she hammered shoulder-first into the earth. Her vision rapidly faded to a swimming grey, her hearing to a wash of quivering noise. All that remained were the clicks, and those, too, were failing.

She concentrated on them, on the voices of all the damaged and dying hounds and the mindless buzz of the dock equipment. She took hold of them, altered their pattern, and cried out.

Ollie! Please be all right.

Before the ticking faded, and everything else with it, she heard a response.

A single, faint click.



The hound clambered up the side of the fallen locomotive. Her pack clicked out their concern for her, but let her be. Even she didn't always understand these lonely moods she fell into sometimes, when she would go out into the streets, head low, looking for something she couldn't identify. The searches always brought her to this one spot, where she would whine into the darkness until some half-forgotten memory soothed her.

Only this time she wasn't alone.

In the street below, in a small area flanked by a locomotive and two rail cars, a man sat hunched on a bent piece of steampipe. Ash coated the man's hat and shoulders. She descended the rail car slowly, ticking out to him after every step, a signal he answered with rhythmless noise.

He looked up when she drew near, and smiled.

"They kept me in jail until they were sure," he said. "Then they tossed me off a walkway in Kingston. It took me forever to find this place. I... can't walk very well anymore."

She padded up to him, silent but for the scuffing of her steel nails on the flagstones. He gazed down at her with yellowed eyes, oil running from them down into a stringy beard.

"Michelle," he said. "I remembered your name. I don't even remember mine anymore."

A mash of joy and sadness welled in her. She approached closer, emitting a high whirring sound, and laid her head on his knee. She ticked a response, not knowing or questioning where it came from.

It's Oliver. •

about our contributors

ALAN R. BARCLAY lives in Seattle with his wife Anne. Alan moved to Seattle in 1998 to work for Amazon.com, and later became co-founder of the Amazon employees union movement. His first short story was published in *On Spec* in 1991. Another story won the 1993 grand prize in L. Ron's *Writers of the Future* contest. His novel *Tithonium Rising* is currently being considered for publication by TOR Books.

BRUCE BARBER is the co-author (as "Bevan Amberhill") of two mystery novels published by The Mercury Press, *The Bloody Man* and *The Running Girl*. Other short fiction has appeared in various publications, including *On Spec*, *Descant*, *StoryTeller*, and *The New Quarterly*. His first collection of poetry, *The Liquid Hour*, was released in 2005 by The Padeloup Press. He is also a freelance editor, has worked as an interviewer for the Shakespearean Festival in his home town of Stratford, Ontario, and as a publishing assistant with several small literary presses. This is his third appearance in *On Spec*.

ELIZABETH BEAR shares a birthday with Frodo and Bilbo Baggins. She is the author of several novels, including *Hammered* and *Blood & Iron*. In addition to *On Spec*, her short fiction has been published in markets such as *Sci-Fiction* and *Interzone*. She was the recipient of the 2005 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. She runs with scissors.

LEAH BOBET lives in Toronto, where she studies Linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her work has appeared recently in *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy for Teens*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. Anything else she's not plausibly denying can be found at www.leahbobet.com.

JUDE DILLON was born in Kingston, Ontario, and graduated English from Queen's. He was a news-photographer for the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and the *Calgary Albertan*. Jude studied painting at the Alberta College of Art and Design, and also plays guitar and harmonica. His favourite painter is Cézanne, and his favourite poet is Theodore Roetke. Jude writes full time.

SUSAN FOREST is a teacher in Calgary, and a mother of four. Her first novel for young adults, *The Dragon Prince* (Gage Educational Publishers), was awarded the Children's Circle Book Choice Award, and was chosen by Gage as one of two young adult novels to represent the company at a book fair in Berlin. Her short story *Immunity* placed second in the 2005 Robyn Herrington Memorial Short Story Contest.

KAZU KIBUISHI is the editor and creator of the *Flight* comics anthology. He also created *Daisy Cutter*, *Copper*, *Clive and Cabbage*, and is currently working on his new graphic novel series, *Amulet*. His freelance clients include Walt Disney Feature Animation, Vanguard Films, Mattel, Wizkids Games, Ogilvy Beijing, Nickelodeon Magazine, Disney Adventures Magazine, and Sony Computer Entertainment of America. Visit his website at www.boltcity.com.

LESLEY D. LIVINGSTON is a writer and actor living in Toronto. Lesley has a Master's degree in English from U of T, where she specialized in Arthurian Literature and Shakespeare. For fifteen years, she has appeared in lead roles on Toronto stages, chiefly as a principal member of Tempest Theatre Group. Fans of *SPACE: the Imagination Station* may remember her as SpaceBar's Waitron-9000, the holographic barmaid with an encyclopaedic knowledge of obscure B-movie trivia. Lesley is currently shopping for a home for her first novel and working on a second. *Following Darkness Like a Dream* is her first published short fiction.

SHAWN PETERS lives and writes in Brentwood Bay, B.C.

JOAN L. SAVAGE is a professional musician who lives in Saskatoon with a profusion of rescued dogs and cats. When not writing or performing, she is riding horses. She is finishing a fantasy novel, *Legacy*, set in the same world as *The Smell of the Earth*.

DOUGLAS SMITH is a Toronto writer whose stories have appeared in over sixty professional markets in twenty-four countries and twenty

languages, including *InterZone*, *The Third Alternative*, *Amazing Stories*, *Cicada*, *Oceans of the Mind*, and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, as well as anthologies from Penguin, DAW, and others. This is Doug's second appearance in *On Spec* (*The Red Bird*, Summer 2001). Doug was a John W. Campbell Award finalist for best new writer in 2001. He has twice won the Canadian Aurora Award for best speculative short fiction and has been a finalist another nine times. He is currently working on his first novel based on his award-winning short story, *Spirit Dance*. His web site is www.smithwriter.com and he may be reached at doug@smithwriter.com.

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