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Roger Zelazny



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PIRATE WRITINGS

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction

From the Editor's Desk



I received a rubber dog for my birthday this year. It can be stretched, pulled, twisted, thrown, stepped on, beaten and squeezed; yet it always finds its way back to its original state. A stress dog. You ever feel like a rubber dog? I know I have.

At first I wondered if it was just me, does my personality lend itself to--a stress dog. I suppose it does. The magazine you now hold in your hands represents a giant stress dog facilitator. People have said to me, "What's the big deal? You only do it four times a year." These types of questions I do not even dignify with a response, except when my rubber dog is within reach. However, those questions are not entirely invalid. Some editors don't respond in a timely manner. Some editors don't care about a press schedule. Some editors don't worry about advertising, or getting great art, or saving money, or increasing their publications circulation, or obtaining new distributors, etc., etc., etc.. Hey, where the hell's my rubber dog? I take my job seriously, and I expect others to do so as well. So beat me, stretch me, pull me, twist me, throw me, step on me and squeeze me; but *Pirate Writings* is here to stay and those of you who are having a hard time dealing with it, buy a stress dog.

Also, I must take note here of the death of a legend, Captain James T. Kirk. Easy, easy--I know. *Star Trek* isn't REAL science fiction--at least that's what some people say. However, having grown up with Captain Kirk I must admit I felt sad to see him go. I don't think I'll ever be able to watch *Star Trek* again with the same light heart. I remember when Jackie Gleason died. He was the first real star from my youth that I recall dying--being a *Honeymooners*' fanatic. However, even though Captain Kirk is only a fictional character, I couldn't help but be upset as I watched him die. Great drama, acting and writing? No. Just the death of a piece of history that will be with me for a long time.

PW's new logo can be seen in the Ad on the front inside cover of this issue. The logo which is on this cover dates back to when the magazine was a digest and we feel it doesn't work in the larger format--hence the change. The new logo will appear on the next issue, Summer '95. I hope everyone likes it. Well, I've babbled on long enough--read on and enjoy!

Yours In Haste,
Edward J. McFadden, Editor

pirate writings

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction

ISSN 1073 - 7758

Publisher:

Pirate Writings Publishing
53 Whitman Ave.
Islip, N.Y. 11751

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For advertising rates write:

**Pirate Writings Publishing
53 Whitman Ave.
Islip, N.Y. 11751**

Distributors:

IPD Distribution

Fine Print Distributors

Ubiquity Distributors

and others

(Write for complete list)

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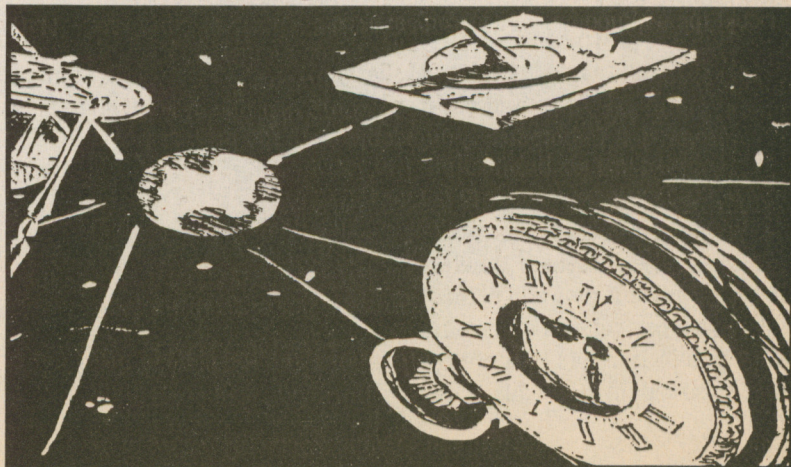
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COVER: This issue's cover was done by LISSANNE LAKE, a talented young artist whose work has appeared in many magazines and on many book covers. The story "Demon Rum" was inspired by Lissanne's cover painting. **BELOW:** "The Bird of Time" was illustrated by Michael Apice. Look for Michael's work on the cover of the next issue of *Pirate Writings*.



Letters

Dear Ed:

I just finished reading PW Fall '94--super job! My faves in this issue are "All Justice Fleed" by Daniel Hatch. This is a beautifully told story of a dysfunctional family with a relationship between the father, who is afraid of losing his son, and the stubbornly independent son. Hatch deserves wide recognition for this tale--it is a textbook example of quality storytelling. Also, this issue has some of the best short-shorts I have read anywhere. Especially love "Fly In Peace" by Warren Lapine. A nice unexpected twist on the ace fighter pilot theme...would love to see more, longer stories from Mr. Lapine. "The Gunner" by Kandy S. Jarvis really transported me to her twisted future-world with the exterminator who has had enough of his bloody career.

Your taste in art is also excellent. Of course, the cover by Lissanne Lake is brilliant. Anyway, great effort, Ed. I'm looking forward to the next issue.

Jeff Dennis

[I'm glad you liked the issue, Jeff. PW has more of the same on the way. Actually, Lissanne Lake did the cover of this issue as well!]

Dear Edward:

I really enjoyed the Fall '95 issue of PW. "Frontier Spirit" by Don D'Amassa and "Bad Beliefs" by Paul Di Filippo were my favorites. "Frontier Spirit" began as a fairly "normal" science fiction story--the kind I usually read--with a terrific, eerie twist at the end. "Bad Beliefs" reminded me of some of Kurt Vonnegut's short works.

I also liked the poetry a lot. It would be interesting to find out if Featured Poet Kat Ricker, in his poem "The Stench of Poetry" was conscious of the influence of the French poet Baudelaire in his work? Either way, he presented timeless ideas in a modern style and point of view--just perfect for a "cutting edge" publication like Pirate Writings. I also caught the double mean-

ing in his poem "I Hope She Doesn't Tell Him I'm Mad." I loved the ironic twist at the end.

Like others, I wondered about the origins of the title PIRATE WRITINGS. Your editorial cleared that up, and I agree with you that the name should stay.

Dawn Schloesser

[Thanks, Dawn. Kat is an extremely accomplished poet. I'm sure we'll have more of his work within the pages of PW.]

Dear Ed:

Just bought a copy of the full-size Pirate Writings at my local News and Smokes newsstand in Medford, Oregon. The cover looked great and looked very impressive compared to the other adjacent prozines. A visual standout. Inside, I like the story illustrations. I'm thinking about buying a subscription! I enjoyed reading your editorial on what PW means, in the sense of what kind of stories you publish. Keep up the good work.

T. Jackson King

[Go for it! Buy a subscription and take advantage of PW's new low rates!]

Dear Ed:

Congratulations on going Quarterly! I picked up two issues of PW at the Little Bookshop of Horrors in Arvada, CO. I'm really enjoying them. I especially liked Paul Di Filippo's story "Bad Beliefs."

Gary Jonas

Dear Ed:

FYI: My poem "The Long Cellar", which appeared in the Summer '95 issue of PW, has been nominated for a Rhysling Award!

Jane Yolen

[Cool! Let us know if you win!]

Your letters and comments are welcome. Send to: Letters to the Editor, Pirate Writings, 53 Whitman Ave., Islip, N.Y. 11751

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Is published bimonthly by the National Poet's Association. For subscription information and submission guidelines, send a SASE to: Poetry in Motion - P.O. Box 173 Dept. PW - Bayport, MN 55003-0173 Sample copies: \$3.00

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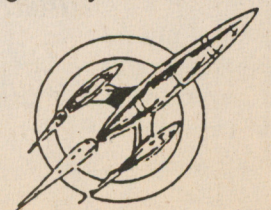
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Charles M. Saplak has written more than 110 short stories over the past six years, mostly in the genres of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. His work has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Tomorrow*, *Expanse*, *Proud Flesh*, and *Science Fiction Age*. "DEMON RUM" was inspired by the eerie cover painting by Lissanne Lake.

DEMON RUM

"There's nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms, as Rum and True Religion." — Byron, *Don Juan*

JOSEPH SPANGLER PRESSED HIS FACE CLOSE TO THE broad pane of glass, which was so dirty as to be almost opaque. He could hear a distant ship's whistle from just beyond the huge stone barrier of the molo, moaning like the lost soul of a drowned man; from somewhere down the street a bar band was twanging country western music for the benefit of a few Sixth Fleet sailors.

The waning moon played at the edges of the towering clouds, as it moved toward the dark bulk of Mount Vesuvius.

BY CHARLES M. SAPLAK

Illustrated by David Grilla

*The doorway to Hell can be found
in many places.*

Across the street a prostitute (whether a true female or a transvestite, Spangler couldn't say) was singing a staccato song of profanity toward some offensive client.

From the grill of a street vendor came the smells of freshly-netted pesce di mare, impaled on metal skewers, mouths agape and eyes popping, roasting over a brazier as the vendor, his dour face lit from below by the glowing coals, painted them with spiced olive oil.





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The pleasures of Naples.

The scene on the other side of the glass resolved itself. Spangler's suspicions were confirmed; he made out men bent over scattered tables, behind a bar at the far wall a man handled bottles.

Spangler felt his way along the stone wall (unsteadily, for his drinking had started hours ago) to a place where an unmarked door stood slightly ajar. From inside came the sounds of glass against wood, and the smells of tobacco smoke and stale sweat.

There were no signs or outside lights. As a bar this place struck Spangler as just what he needed. No frills, no B-girls, no blaring bands or flashing lights, just a place where a seaman could get one last drink before returning aboard.

It was just what Spangler was looking for on this cloudy Mediterranean night. It was just what he had been looking for on most nights of his life, these past ten years.

He pushed his way into the place. It was even dimmer inside than he had expected, so much so that his eyes had trouble adjusting. All of the drinkers sat alone at scattered tables. From a shelf behind the bar a tiny radio bled opera music; a feminine voice slid up and down the scales effortlessly in an uninterrupted cascade of mourning.

Spangler made his way to the bar and held up the tattered 5-lira note he took from his shirt pocket.

"Scotch," he told the man who stood polishing a glass and watching him approach.

The bartender shook his head.

"No lingua Americano?" Spangler asked.

The bartender stared at him with deep, moist eyes.

"No Scotch? Whiskeys? No serve American sailors?" Spangler asked.

The bartender set down the glass. He seemed to be in middle age. His features were classic Italian with the craggy brow and the strong nose, with the slightly downcast, stoic-looking mouth which always made Spangler think of nothing so much as ancient hidden secrets.

From a corner of the bar Spangler heard something—chair legs? —scratching against the stone of the floor.

"No lira," the bartender said, showing Spangler the palm of his hand and shaking his head. "No lira, no Scotch," he said in an unaccented voice.

From the shadows one of the drinkers laughed, a hoarse whistling.

"Are you open?" Spangler asked. He pointed to the bottles stacked behind the bar. "For sale?"

The bartender reached beneath the bar, keeping his eyes on Spangler as he did so. He straightened up with a bottle which he put on the bar before Spangler.

"Rum," the bartender said. "No lira. Trade. Rum for story."

Spangler felt every eye in the place on his back. Some instinct made him turn around. There were four other customers in the place, each sitting alone in a quiet corner. Neapolitan bars and restaurants tended toward the tacky, especially in "the gut," this area closest to the docks, but this place was almost bare, somewhat furtive.

The floor was concrete slab, the walls were block. Scattered around the walls were a few framed pictures, not the typical photos of soccer stars nor the bare-tit glossies of La Ciccolina and Vampira Zora. These pictures were illustrations, that much Spangler could tell, but he couldn't be sure of just what.

Spangler allowed himself a nervous laugh as he turned back to the bartender. "So you want me to tell a story, and then you'll give me some rum?"

From somewhere behind him someone snickered. Spangler didn't bother to turn around.

The bartender graced him with a slight smile.

"Yes...like that. A story for the rum."

Spangler shrugged. Maybe some closing time tradition. Well I can settle for rum, and I can think of a story. Spangler pushed the note back into his shirt pocket.

Spangler drew a wet circle in the grime of the top of the bar, and began: "A sailor finds that his ship has gotten underway early to avoid a storm. He begs a lighthouse keeper to give him a place to stay during the night. The lighthouse keeper says that he'll let him, but tells him that he has to sleep with his daughter...."

"Not a joke, Joe. A true story for the rum." As the bartender said this he gave Spangler the slightest hint of a bitter smile.

"So you know my name," Spangler said.

The bartender shrugged. "You're Joe...and I'm Tony."

A joke: in lieu of learning each other's true names, they could use the generic terms that the locals and the Americans reserved for each other.

Tony tipped the bottle and filled the shot glass. "It's a special drink, Joe. It gives more of what you're really looking for."

"That strong, Tony? One-fifty-one? 'Overrum,' like they call it?"

Joe leaned over to get a whiff of the drink. The alcohol smell was even stronger than he expected, as it had to be to make any sort of impression through the liquor he already had in his system. After his smell of the drink he shot a glance over his shoulder, and definitely caught one of the barflies watching him, and for the barest moment thought he saw something else.

The man was well-dressed, perhaps could even be called dapper, and sat with his face in the shadows.

Some kind of creature, like a small dog, sat on the man's lap, licking at his chin. But as quickly as Joe had seen it, the scene changed. Perhaps the dog had jumped down to cower at the man's feet; perhaps there had never been a dog there at all. A random jumble of shapes and shadows, seen by the human eye, and quickly arranged by the human mind into an incorrect interpretation, namely, that of an animal bothering a man. It could happen to even the clearest mind and eye, in broad daylight. To see such a thing in a dimly lit bar after a night of hard drinking was nothing to worry about.

"What is it I'm looking for, Tony?" Spangler asked. "Smells like this rum is packing it, old shipmate."

"More of the poison we call alcohol? Yes, Joe. Sure. But even more than that."

"And what more is there, Tony?"

The bartender leaned forward to stare into Spangler's eyes.

"There are two reasons to drink, Joe. No matter which one you've chosen, this rum has more of what you're looking for."

Spangler reached out to touch the glass. He made a move to slide it closer to him but Tony lay a cold hand on Spangler's wrist.

"Story first," Tony said. "If you want to taste this drink, want to taste this special blend...."

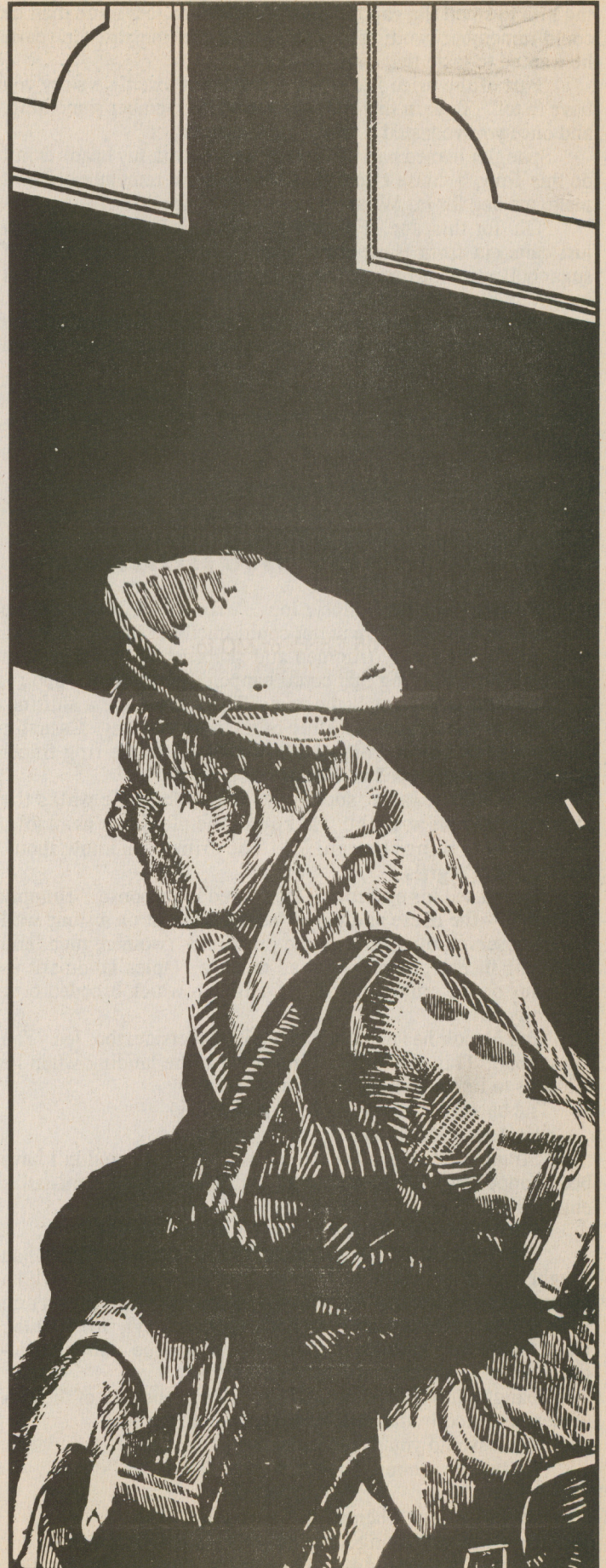
"What kind of story do you want, Tony? Storm in the North Atlantic? Seance in Singapore? Bar fights in Olongopo? I've got some stories, Tony."

Tony picked up Spangler's hand and moved it away from the glass. As he did so, whether by accident or on purpose, he allowed Spangler's ring finger to dip into the liquid, or at least to drag through the hazy area over the glass where the volatile rum was forming a tiny cloud of alcohol.

"You don't exactly have to even tell a story, Joe," Tony said.

"Then how do I get the rum?" As he said this Spangler heard a certain edge to his own voice he hadn't expected. He realized two things. First, he was growing tired of the bartender's game, free rum or not.

Second, as he watched the bartender pull the glass back across the bar, after swirling it a little beneath Spangler's nose, allow-



ing him to smell the vapors, Spangler realized that more than he could remember wanting any single thing in the past ten years, he wanted to taste that rum.

"Part of the price is a story, Joe, but not exactly a story you have to tell. To earn this rum you have to remember something, and once you've tasted it you'll be able to forget."

Spangler leaned back. "You're playing with my head. Don't do this Tony, because I don't have anything to remember. Don't make me beg for it. What do you want for the drink?"

"Oh, for this, Joe. For this blend? This is so special. Not just cane cut from Haiti and Cuba, Joe. Not just the dregs of sugar boilers. This brew is special, and its effects are special. Let me give you an example."

Behind Spangler was the sound of someone fidgeting. From the radio the opera singer seemed to have gathered up enough breath to wail in a new key, as if being tortured.

*He can only smile with
his eyes....*

There is no mouth....

"This is the type of story, Joe...." Tony said, leaning close over the bar so that the Spangler could smell his skin, his breath, the tonic in his neatly-trimmed and shaped hair. "...that talks about the kind of thing that could happen right here in Napoli."

Spangler could smell the rum. The light made a shifting, shimmering dance in the surface of the dark whiskey. Casually, he rubbed his lips and allowed himself to taste the ring finger which Tony had dipped in the rum.

"Now take a sailor such as yourself, Joe. He walks the streets of Napoli at night. He knows the pleasures available. You know the things I mean, Joe. The drinks you know about, and Humpty's girls."

Tony raised his eyebrows. Joe smiled in response. "Humpty Dumpty"—the obese and ugly Madam, who sat on a stone wall as she observed the traffic of the prostitutes (women, men, and children) in her charge—was as much a Naples landmark as Vesuvius or the crumbling Castel dell'Ovo which brooded over the filthy bay.

"But Napoli has an underside to its underside, too, Joe. You know that. This sailor's walking back to the landing when he happens to look down an alley and sees...."

The bartender shook his head and smiled.

"He sees what, Tony?"

"Strange life, Joe. One minute earlier and it wouldn't have been happening; one minute later and he would have missed it entirely—like you finding this bar."

"What would he have missed?"

"Three ladruncolo, Joe. The dark side of Napoli. They had caught someone walking the streets, probably some sailor with a full wallet and a head full of whiskey. They were working on him with knives. Knives are the choice in the alleys, Joe. Quiet. Good technique—and these sharks had technique—and the victim never gets a chance to scream."

Spangler looked downward, but still saw the face of the bartender, reflected in the still, dark surface of the rum.

"What would you do, Joe?"

"No polizia around, Tony?"

"None."

Joe shrugged. "Then what can you do?"

Tony smiled, looking satisfied. "Exactly. What could he do? To attempt to do anything is to join the victim there in the alley,

to take his place. So onward he walks. He picks up his pace, he turns his head, and on his own two good legs he walks away. What else could he do, Joe?"

Tony stared into Joseph Spangler's eyes, but not exactly as if he wanted an answer. There was an odd timbre to Tony's voice, accusatory and ritualistic. From somewhere behind Spangler came smacking, chewing sounds.

Spangler nodded. "So he walked away. That kind of thing happens, Tony."

The orchestra swelled behind the opera singer, engulfing her voice.

Tony tapped his finger against the glass. "That's the kind of story we look for, Joe."

Spangler pulled his first five-lira note from his shirt pocket, as well as two others. He dropped them on the bar beside the glass.

"I don't have that kind of story, Tony. But I do want my drink."

Tony pushed the notes back across the bar.

"Nothing like that, Joe? No? This rum might help some men remember, and might help some men forget. That's what men are looking for, Joe."

"Not me."

"No?"

"I've walked away from no beatings, Tony. I've minded my own business. I can't remember seeing anything like that."

"Nothing, Joe? Then how about this story. You know what a RoRo is, Joe?"

"Roll-on, roll-off. A ship for carrying cars, like a transoceanic ferry."

Tony nodded. "Imagine a deckhand who signs on with such a shipping line, to take cars from Tokyo to America. But he gets there and soon finds out that they're carrying more than cars. Know what I'm talking about, Joe?"

Spangler smiled. "Could be one of two things, Tony. They're shipping in smack, or else they've arranged to pick up...."

"Chinese," Tony said.

"So this guy stumbles onto it. What could he do?"

"That's right, Joe. What can he do? If he tries to squeal, he's cutting his own throat. So what is he to do?"

Spangler shook his head. "He does the smart thing. He closes his eyes to it. The people who sit in some clean office and make the laws don't know what it's like out in the real world, right? What business is it of his if a few hundred Chinese are willing to live crammed in a cargo hold for a week or so? If you want to get along, you've got to go along. The only problem, Tony, is that the guys who get rich on deals like that are never the people who have to do the work."

"But that's not the only problem, Joe. You know what it can be like in some of those voids and compartments. No ventilation, and fumes from fuels and such. Can you guess what happens next?"

Spangler frowned. "How many, Tony?"

"Seventy-seven, Joe. Seventy-seven Chinese suffocated. Their bodies were weighted and dumped at sea. He killed them because he closed his eyes."

"He didn't kill them, Tony. It wasn't his fault."

"He closed his eyes. The rules are tough. But you don't have anything like that to worry about, do you, Joe?"

"I don't."

"No false witness, or insults from your mouth that need to be forgotten?"

"None, Tony."

"Have you turned your hand toward evil work? Has your handiwork harmed others in any possible way?"

Spangler shook his head. "The drink, Tony. I'm ready for

the drink.”

Tony smiled, and pushed the full glass across the bar toward Spangler.

Spangler lifted the glass.

He felt the dark, full-bodied rum across his lips and into his mouth.

The taste. The burning.

Spangler swallowed his first sip.

Tony smiled. Ancient secrets.

And as the warmth of the rum spread throughout his system, Joseph Spangler remembered.

He remembered!

A girl he had known, although not well. Jeanne was her name. When Jeanne had taken her own life so many people had said, “Oh, what a shame and you never can know, can you?” And Joseph had easily put it from his mind. But as the rum warmed him he remembered how many times she had said, “Sometimes I just don’t know...sometimes I just don’t see any reason to go on...I wish I were dead,” or hundreds of other things which were different shapes of the same thing over and over....

Help me....

Help me....

Spangler looked at Tony’s grinning face.

“But I didn’t know her!”

“But you heard the things she said,” Tony answered, “With your own ears.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Spangler threw the rum to the stone floor, and didn’t hear it hit.

The rules are tough.

The radio went quiet.

Spangler turned around, staggered away from the bar.

From one of the tables a man bent forward to place his lips on the edge of his glass, sipping up a drink. He next straightened up, then used his legs to push his chair back and twist it around so he could face Spangler. There were some sort of animals on him—things like pigs or worms or thick blunt cats, but with segmented bodies and scaly, crimson flesh, and wicked claws and fangs. Finally the man shrugged the coat off his shoulders and perhaps he would have waved, but on the end of each arm one of the little creatures was gnawing and worrying at his flesh and bone.

There was something in that rum, Spangler thought dimly.

Another man leaned forward out of the shadows into the light, his head cocked to one side as he listened to the commotion. In the whirl Spangler thought he saw one of the leathery beasts perched on the back of the man’s head, holding on by reaching around and digging its claws into front of his head, completely covering his eye-sockets, which were empty.

They’ve drugged me, Spangler thought.

He staggered across the floor to the door. He had to get to the street beyond. His head was burning.

From another corner one of the drinkers scrambled, apelike, down onto the concrete floor. He tried to swing along by holding himself upright using his arms. His legs ended at the thighs, and on each stump end one of the red beasts was chewing.

I’m hallucinating, he thought. I’ve got to get away from these...these...things.

Spangler turned in a slow circle.

The stone walls pulsated and bled.

The pictures weren’t illustrations at all, but windows. The tableaux they showed, of scenes in Hell....

The Parade of Hypocrites....

The Flaming Spirits of the Evil Counsellors....

The Violent, Tortured in the Rain of Fire....

Harpies in the Forest of Suicides....

Were as real as the Neapolitan streets had been.

Spangler looked toward a dapper man alone at his table. Before him was a jagged glass containing the viscous dark rum. Crawling on him, plucking at his ears and eyes, hanging from his arms were the segmented creatures.

The man gave Spangler a jaunty little salute with his left hand, while his eyes twinkled like normal eyes pushed into mischievous shapes by a smile.

But not exactly like normal eyes....

He can only smile with his eyes....

There is no mouth....

Spangler pushed his way into the street. Dawn was breaking over the port city, casting the litter-strewn streets in a harsh light.

All was quiet.

Spangler turned to take a last look at the bar. The window was gone, as was the splintered, paint-peeling door. Had it even been there at all? Or was it just a rum-born dream? On this silent street it was all too easy to believe that it had never happened.

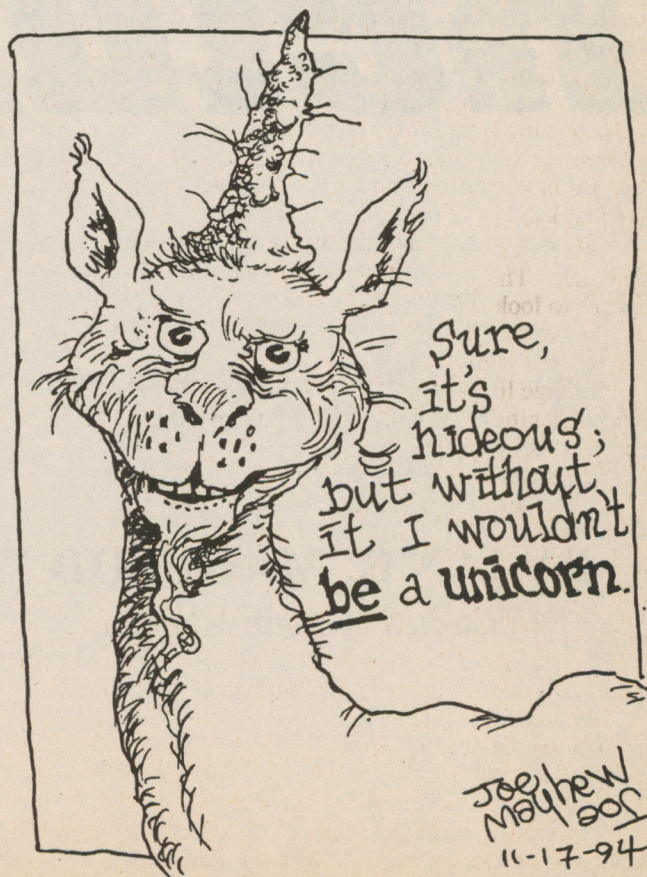
There was a flash of movement in the corner of Spangler’s eye. He turned to face a tired old vecchiaccia who was walking to market under a bundle of embroidery.

Her lips were drawn back in a parody of a circle; her tongue and throat plainly visible. Her eyes threatened to pop from their places within the wrinkled sockets. And yet she was made no noise....

Spangler cursed at the woman, but didn’t hear himself do it. She continued to stretch her mouth in a parody of a scream.

Reflexively, Spangler reached upward to the sides of his head. Frantic now, he cursed again, much louder this time, and much more for his own benefit than that of the terrified old woman. He didn’t hear his own screamed curses, and realized why as his fingers rubbed against the smooth, blank skin where his ears had been.

pw



Ian R. Macleod hails from West Midlands, ENGLAND, and is one of today's most talented and hippest short fiction authors. His fiction has graced the pages of most "Best Of..." anthologies and he has a collection of short stories upcoming from Arkham House. His short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Asmov's, Amazing, and many others. About "Returning" he writes, "I rate "Returning" highly amongst my stories; before I wrote it I used to go around telling people that quantum cosmology was far too abstruse to fit into a story. Subconsciously, that probably got me wondering if that was really true...." We are lucky to have him within the pages of PW.

AN OLD MAN EXERCISING
his dog found me wandering the shore of the lake outside town. It seemed as though nothing had changed. The uneven pier I'd fished off as a kid still stretched out across

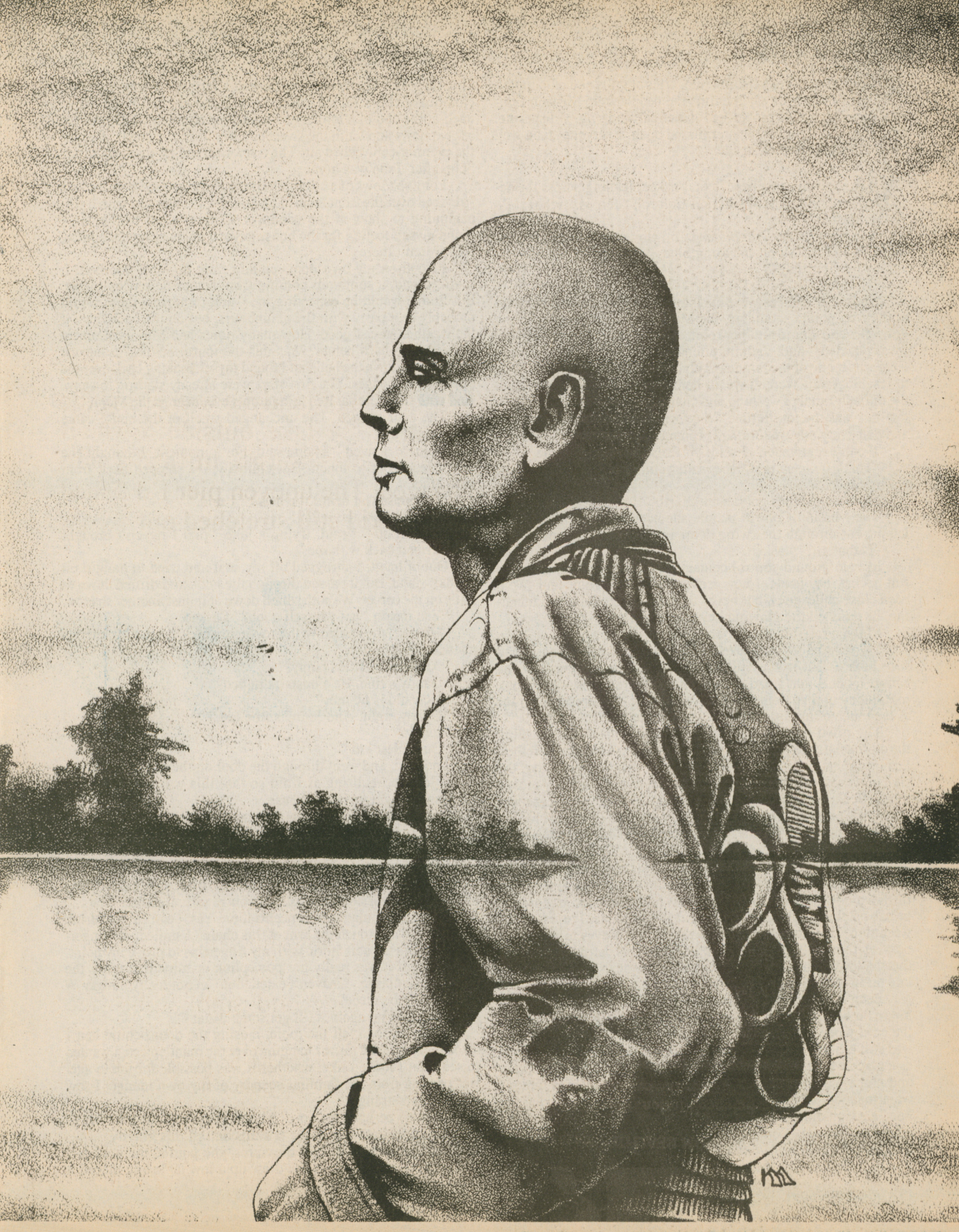
Returning

*Space exploration can be dangerous,
it can be an obsession.*

BY IAN R. MACLEOD
Illustrated by Keith Minnion

the water and the same upturned keels still mouldered on the strand. It must have been the memories of other summers—other Earths—that pulled me here. The salt pickings off grazed knees. Times when every greening rope and smoketube butt was treasure.

Recognising the badge on my spacesuit, the old man rang the local police from the call-box beside the road. On standing instructions, the police in turn contacted Mission Control. I stood waiting on the shingle, remembering the water's



soft odour, the pull of a fishing line, cries of gulls and of laughter, the slap of the waves. By the time the people from Mission Control arrived a small crowd had gathered; nudging, whispering, pointing. The door of a floater hissed open. Everyone stood well back. Alone, I climbed inside.

“Where have you been?” they asked, leaning across the debriefing table at Mission Control, “Tell us, what do you remember?”

“I remember *The Hollander* falling towards Belia. Earth and the stars and the Moon smearing blue. Being afraid and alone.”

“And after that?”

“Nothing.”

Nods and glances were exchanged. With a corporate shrug of their corporate shoulders, the Mission Control people led me down the corridor to another room, leaving me alone to clean up. I was puzzled—and, I admit, offended—by their lack of interest. Here was I, one of the famous twelve astronauts, back from trying to reach beyond. Weren't we all heroes? But when I'd got through the difficult ritual of washing and changing, it was explained to me that this was the fourth time I'd returned to this particular Earth, and that every other return had been much the same.

“I can't remember,” I said. “It feels like the first time.”

“That's quite natural,” they said, smiling. “And we're pleased you're here.”

“And no one has got beyond Earth?” I asked.

The Mission Control people shook their heads. Then they led me out through the swing doors into the sunlit car park.

“Is that all?” I asked.

My old ground-control contact produced a car key from his suit pocket. His name, I now remembered, was Tony Tsui. We'd been close colleagues, but never friends. Careful to avoid touching, he dangled the glowing key towards me.

“Take a rest,” he said. “Go home.”

My car was low and sleek, of a newer design than any I had seen before. But it was still recognisably a development of the earlier models that I had driven before leaving, and it only took me a moment to understand the controls. It whispered into power at the touch of my fingers. I instructed it to take me home.

The drive home was much like the car itself, like meeting the close relative of someone you have known, a twin or a brother. Scanning stations on the radio, I heard distant music like the sigh of waves, the threads of news stories that, for me, lay mostly unravelled at both ends. The only item that made any sense was Mission Control's announcement that another of the twelve astronauts—this time the one from the craft called *The Hollander*—had returned.

The old streets, the old houses. It was past rush hour. The kids were out playing. The men were in shirtsleeves supervising the lawnmower whilst their wives saw to the herbaceous borders, or sat on the porches in shorts and tie-up blouses to catch the warmth of the setting sun. A few shaded their eyes to watch me pass, as though they somehow associated this car passing under the shadowed elms of their street with the news they had heard late on in the tea-time bulletins.

Each turn became more familiar. Elaine and I had chosen a house far out in the suburbs where you could smell the woods and the corn when you opened the windows, where every other plot was still a field. Somehow, a secret part of me had always seen it as a place where, eventually, Elaine would end up living happily and alone—without me. I'd had these thoughts even before we were married, when we first climbed over the gate and dug the For Sale sign out of the ivy, when I was still on a low rung of the ladder at Mission Control, when wandering Belia hadn't been discovered and *The Hollander* wasn't even a dream.

Past the local school, the local shops, the big old bridge span-

ning the river. The car slowed behind a farmward-bound tractor, clod-heavy claws folded on its bonnet, the engine muttering to itself at the end of a long day. I found the command to lower the car windows and let in the sweet country dust, the smell of straw, the evening-cobwebbed air. The tractor turned up the farm drive. Soon after, I too was home.

Long shadows of a climbing frame and scattered outdoor toys stretched over the front lawn. The house was redbrick, with lights beginning to show at the windows. Climbing out of the car, I found myself feeling for the house keys in my pockets. Of course, they weren't there.

I stood on my own doorstep and rang my own doorbell. It sounded odd, a summons coming from somewhere deep inside. But Elaine would be expecting me—and tomorrow there would probably be a party with the neighbours, out on the back lawn if the weather stayed good. How many times had Mission Control said I'd been back before? Was this the fourth or fifth? Someone was coming down the hall, but I found myself looking back over the treetops and hedges. The first stars were already starting to show. And with them, Belia. Red as Sauron's eye, near as the Moon.

The door opened. The unchanged smell of the house came out to greet me.

“You've arrived,” Elaine said. For a moment, I thought she might reach out to touch. But clumsily, we stepped back from each other.

“I suppose you heard the news,” I said.

“I heard it on the radio.”

“I'm afraid,” I said, trying a joke, “that I haven't brought any starmen back with me.”

Out of habit, I shrugged off my coat and tried to hang it on the hall stand. But it passed through the hook and drifted down to settle on the carpet. We both stared down at it; just another shadow.

“You haven't got yourself a job?” I asked.

“Oh no,” she smiled with grey-green eyes. “After all, there's my widow's pension.”

“And how's little Danny?”

“Danny's fine. He's upstairs in bed.”

“How old is he now?”

“Nearly eight. And Jenny's fine too.”

“Jenny?”

“Our eldest kid.”

I nodded, and went through the door on the right to sit down in the lounge, realising as I did so that this was where we had always taken guests in the house.

Elaine turned on a lamp and sat down on the chair across from the fireplace, her hands pressed tightly down on her lap. She asked, “Have you eaten? I suppose you'd like a drink?”

I stared at her.

“I mean,” she said, “you can eat and drink, can't you? They always say at Mission Control that you're virtual matter, that...”

“...it's just a matter of concentration. Yes, I can eat and drink as easily as I can touch the arm of this chair.” I smiled, my fingertips brushing the soft fabric with my fingertips to prove my point, wondering if it was really her perception or mine that made the waveform collapse. “I haven't eaten, but I'm not really hungry. A drink would be nice.”

She stood up again, “I'll get some water.”

When she had left the room, closing the door behind her, I stood in front of the mirror hanging over the mantelpiece. I wanted to see what I looked like, whether it was possible for me to age. But peering from the familiar scenery of my own lounge, I saw the face of a stranger.

“It must be hard for you,” Elaine said, making me start as she came back into the room, “all this air, all this gravity.”

Remembering the right measures, she poured me a whisky and water. I sat down and she drew up a low table and placed it

near to me. "Thanks..." I said.

"Do you remember the times you came back before?" she asked, sitting down again.

"No. Were they all like this?"

She nodded. "You always try to hang your coat, and you walk in here and choose that chair. And then you say you haven't eaten but you're not hungry. The weather's always the same, too. Sometimes, when I look out in the morning and I see clouds and sunshine, the bluebells in the field opposite, I know you'll be coming even before I hear the news. That's funny, isn't it?"

"And what do I say now?"

"What you just said."

I sipped the whisky without thinking. It tasted of nothing — a good malt, wasted. I forced myself to tighten up, to believe that I was here, knowing that in a worst case, if I really let go, the expensive fluid would simply fall through me onto the chair. I sipped again, concentrating, observing, tasting peat, alcohol, sweet amber darkness.

"It's Laphroaig," Elaine said. "Your favourite. I always keep some in."

I nodded, glancing over at the half-empty bottle on the side.

Then I turned when I heard the front door opening, footsteps outside in the hall.

Elaine shouted, "We're in here, darling. Daddy's come home."

Jenny had long blonde hair and looked a little like Lewis Carroll's Alice, with a face that was too shinningly perfect to survive the change to adult beauty. I stared at her, taking her in, all the changes. My own daughter. I just stared.

"It's good to see you again, Daddy."

"It's good to see you."

"I heard on the news. Daddy, I'm sorry you didn't get beyond."

A ticking silence filled the room.

"I think," I said, "that I'm starting to feel hungry after all."

"I've put something by in the stove," Elaine said, her hands still tight, still smoothing her dress. "Come on into the kitchen."

Elaine and Jenny sat watching me eat. Even in my own kitchen, with glimpses through the dark window of the garden I had spent so many happy hours tending, I felt like some creature in a zoo. I was absurdly conscious of my every swallow and word and gesture. I concentrated hard on the food, on the familiar taste of Elaine's cooking, on asking my daughter Jenny questions that would show the right kind of parental curiosity.

Jenny was a sweet, polite kid. But somehow I had lost any sense of love for her. Still, I was proud of her, proud even of the way she did her best to disguise her confusion at finding her essentially dead Father—her famous Dad—somehow back at home, sitting at the kitchen table eating food that her Mum had kept over in the oven from tea. But then I reminded myself that none of this was new to her, that I'd been back—what was it?—four times before.

"Little Miss, I think you'd better be getting up to bed," Elaine said after I'd finished eating.

Jenny got up quickly from the table. "Goodnight, Mum," she said. She was almost at the door before she remembered and turned. "Goodnight Dad."

"Well," Elaine said after she'd put the dishes in the unit and poured herself a big glass of wine, holding it firmly and with both hands in the hope that I wouldn't notice she was trembling, "...what do you want to do now?"

I shrugged. "What do I usually do?"

She frowned, and covered the frown with the rim of her glass to drink.

"...I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't mean..."

"Oh, no, it's alright. This can't be easy for you, I realise that."

We went outside into the garden, sharing the unspoken knowledge of a ritual repeated. She was standing closer to me now, and I sensed that she was more comfortable in the darkness.

"Up there," she said, looking up at the glittering stars. "It must be wonderful...and lonely."

"Not wonderful," I said, "not lonely," wondering why she had to pretend that my journey had anything to do with this particular Universe, these particular stars. Knowing too that we'd spoken this way many times before. And red Belia shone brighter than most of the stars, anyway. Belia the drifter, Belia the wanderer, captured now in a distant Earth orbit, tamed and encircled by the monitors and satellites.

"It isn't like ordinary spaceflight," I said, wondering why I kept telling Elaine these things. "Man could never cross this Universe. Without Belia, we would never stand any chance of reaching the stars."

"You still dream about that, don't you? The stars, the starmen. Making contact."

"I'll always have that dream."

The lights of the other nearby houses were shining through the trees, gently flickering as the night wind stirred the leaves and branches. On and off. Bright, then dark. Like beacons, drawing the moths, the bats, the insects—weary travellers all. The lights called out to me with the promise of warm, welcoming arms, sweet forgetfulness and the remembrance of all things.

She said, "I'm sorry I didn't come down to meet you at Mission Control."

"There was no need—we're here together now."

"I kept telling myself that I should go when I heard on the news that you'd come back again. But I suppose I get scared. It's always the same."

"Really, I don't mind. It's lovely to come home and find you here, Elaine. Just waiting. You, Danny...Jenny."

Elaine shivered, pulling her arms tight around her waist.

I asked, "Are you cold?"

"Just tired. Shall we go to bed?"

She had put my pajamas out on the pillow, pressed and smelling of the laundry. It was a kind thought, a gesture towards lost normality, and I made the necessary effort of concentration to put them on, and then to use the razor and soap on the shelf by the bedroom sink. She sat on the bed, half-dressed, watching as I shaved. I don't think she realised how difficult the act of shaving was, but even to the strange and critical eyes that stared back at me from the mirror, the effect was convincing. Carefully, I slopped the dark-flecked foam down into the enamel basin where she couldn't see, running the hot tap for effect. And, unobserved, the waveform ceased to collapse. It had all dissolved into transparency long before the vortex descended down the plughole.

Lying together with the lights off, the curtains drawn, the room shimmering, Elaine asked. "Do you want to touch me?"

"If you'll let me...if you're not afraid."

But of course she was afraid—I could feel it even though she had drunk enough wine to stop herself trembling.

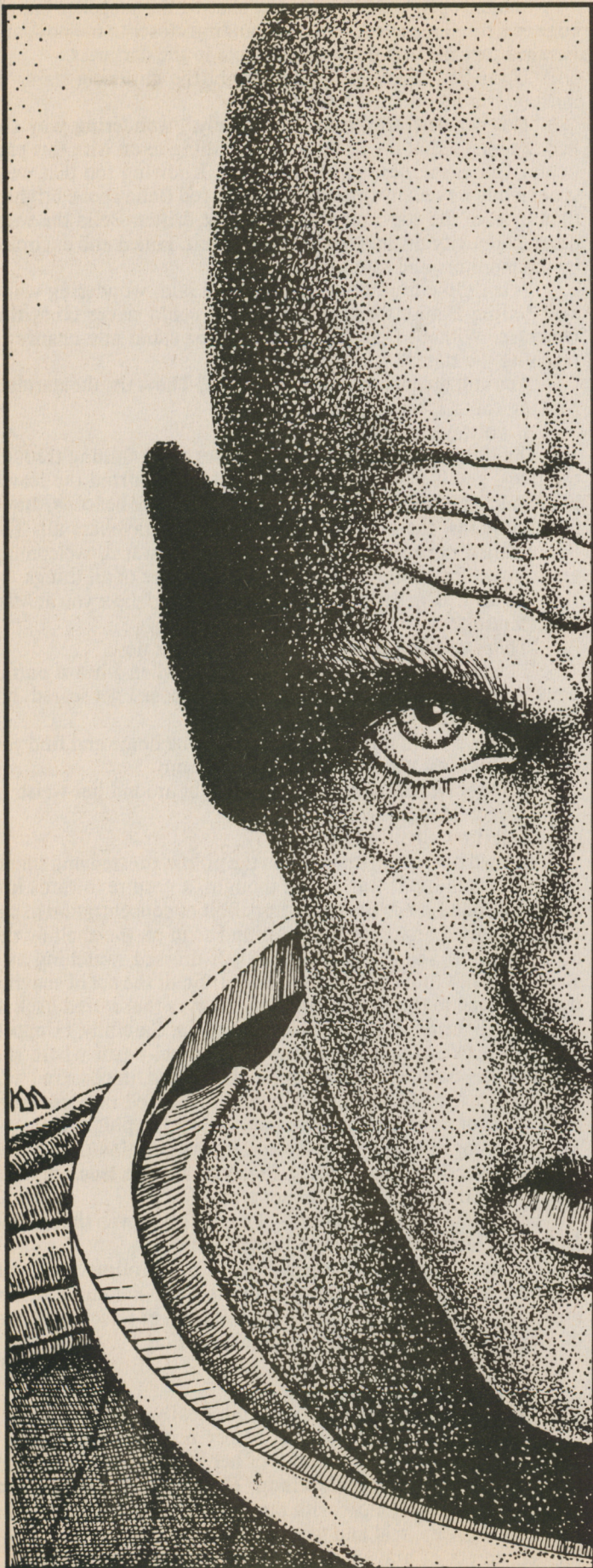
"It's easy with inanimate objects," I said, rolling over onto my side, gently pulling back the sheets from the curve of her breasts. "They have no will, nothing to accept or reject. And part of the problem is me...I feel the same repulsion."

"You don't repulse me."

"Uncertainty, then. Fear."

"Just touch me. I'd like to feel you. Really, I would."

My fingers touched the skin of her neck, tracing down. I could feel her warmth, the tremor of her breath. How long had I dreamed of this moment? How long? Eventually, she let me hold her for a while, lying close with the sheets rucked around us like two eternal lovers, real and true. For me, it was sweet oblivion—for her, an act of bravery or love or some kind of surrender. I



could feel the house around me, my two children sleeping, the occasional car passing along the road, the trees whispering as their branches snagged starlight and streetlight. The moment lasted for longer than was possible, until the forgetfulness of sleep began to come over me, and Elaine pulled back across the pillow with a stifled cry at the sight of my hand lying inside the curve of her belly.

“**W**hat will the starmen be like when you meet them?”

This was Danny, my own little Danny, bigger now with his bright red hair faded to brown and the crescent of freckles wrinkled up around his eyes and nose as he squinted in the bright sun. Morning, and we were walking together along country paths near home. And he was asking the one question that the kid inside me would always want a kid of my own to ask.

“The starmen...” I paused to snatch a seedhead of dandelion from the hedgerow. Showing off, I blew at it. Twice, three times, watching the little parachutes scatter. “...life in another Universe could be a million times older than we are. They might look like us, but most probably they won’t. If you think of the most exotic animal here on Earth, and then try to think of something else...something impossible.”

“What will they say?”

“Everything we can’t imagine.”

“And why haven’t they come here already?”

“Because...because they’re probably afraid. Afraid the way we are.”

“But you’re not afraid, are you Daddy?”

“No,” I said, “not any longer.”

We reached a little park, a kind of play area, with old wooden swings and a rusted slide and the tilted ruins of a roundabout rising out of the long grass. The kids on Earth had better toys to play with these days. They could step right through doorways into amazing games, talk and battle with digitised aliens that were probably far stranger and more convincing than anything I could convey.

Danny sat on a swing. The old wood and the metal chains moaned and creaked, but I pushed him high towards the sky. Now that his back was to me, now that he probably wasn’t listening, I found it even easier to talk. My pet subject. All the dreams of space I’d had when I was a kid. Oh yes, the starmen would be strange and special, and the stars would taste of salt and the emptiness between would be blackcurrant. Of course, it was all quite impossible—as impossible as the dream of travelling faster than light. But I still had that picture in my mind. I knew what the starmen would be like when we finally met them. Silver eyes flecked with the gold of wisdom set in long faces that always smiled. Reaching out many-fingered hands to touch, to hug and hold and laugh at the plight of us poor humans, all the dead and all the living.

And then Belia had been found, drifting though the Solar System. Possessed of a enormously deep gravity well, yet too small to be a star. And bright, too-her light red-shifted to blood and rubies. Shuttles were sent out, and Belia was tamed, analyzed, brought home. Starbright—but no star—Belia was a wanderer from the start of this Universe, from the moment when spacetime began. A small black hole. Oh, how the men of science had struggled to explain that a black hole would actually *glow* with a fizz of quantum matter if it happened to be small enough. At first, the people of Earth were disappointed—they wanted black holes to be pits of darkness, plugholes for dreams—until it was explained that Belia would virtually solve the world’s energy problems. And that somewhere within her ruby brilliance, she hid her ultimate jewel. An event horizon shrouding a singularity. A pathway out of this Universe.

The swing shuddered and the frame sagged in the middle. I

almost found myself reaching out to grab Danny and save him. But he leapt back onto the ground in a moment, landing easily on his own two feet.

Jenny was there at the table for lunch, although earlier on in the house I felt that she'd been avoiding me; as though she sensed that I wanted to talk to her alone.

"Why don't you drive down to the shops?" Elaine asked me. "We need to get stuff to fill up the larder. Everyone's coming this evening."

"You shouldn't have bothered," I said. "I don't need a party."

Elaine shrugged. She was wearing an apron, holding tight to the sink. Briefly, her eyes met mine, and I saw the darkness of a betrayal I could scarcely remember.

"Okay," I said, looking towards Jenny. "Will you come and help me at the shops?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry Daddy. I've arranged to meet some friends."

"And me too," said Danny from across the table, before I had a chance to ask.

So I went to the shops alone, with the list that Elaine had given me, and in the car that Mission Control had provided. I told myself that this was good, part of the necessary acclimatization process. After all, I hadn't had any real time on my own since returning. And in the shops, I found that people recognised me from the news. There were all happy to ask the right questions and act with the right mix of commiseration and admiration due to someone who has undertaken a hazardous journey and returned without reaching their goal. They were even happy to help me control the loader-trolleys and decipher Elaine's spidery handwriting, happy to do anything as long as they could keep their distance. Beyond this respectful glow, I could sense another layer of attitude. Kids sniggering and pointing, adolescents stepping away as they tried to look cool, mothers catching the hands of their children and drawing them back along the bright displays. He's just a dead astronaut, I could hear them whispering. You know, my darling, one of the men and women who wander from universe to universe. They're all the same.

So I took my time. The stares and the nagging thoughts kept me busy. It was nearly evening again—the end of the first full day of my return—when I got back home, slowed down by the same tractor, searching my pockets again for the house keys that I realised Elaine hadn't given me, feeling almost the same sense of isolation and unease as I rang the doorbell and waited for someone to come.

"Where have you been?" Elaine asked.

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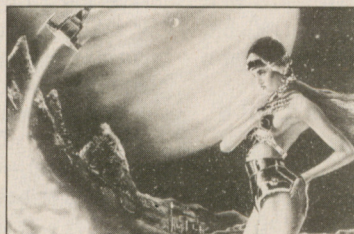
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SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER

Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood,
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"Look, the neighbours have already arrived."

"So what?" I snapped despite myself. "Don't I do this every time anyway?"

"Do you think that makes it any *easier*?"

People had gone out onto the lawn, and there were more arriving. Friends, neighbours, relatives, old colleagues from Mission Control—looking happier and sleeker and more at ease than I remembered. And they all had the advantage over me. They'd been to a party like this one before, with Welcome Home strung up in red and white over the elm tree. They all knew just what to say.

"It's wonderful that you're back."

"You must have a thousand stories. Look, come round soon for dinner. You *can* eat, can't you?"

"I'm proud of you. I never believed you'd do it."

"Do you think you'll try to get beyond Earth again?"

No, I said, and yes, and maybe. Through the drifts of barbecue smoke and smiling faces, I could see that the ivy I'd planted years before along the back wall was now close up to the gables. Soon—by this autumn anyway—someone would need to get up on a ladder and drag it out of the gutters. But I was pleased with the way it softened the lines of the house, pleased with how well the rosebushes were doing, pleased with the smell of charred and sizzling meat and the coloured lights that made the garden hang back in a warm glow from the onset of night.

I saw Tony Tsui, my ground-contact at Mission Control. Hoping that he might be worth more than a quick ready-made phrase, I went over to talk to him.

I asked, "Do they all come back this often?"

"You mean the other astronauts?" He shrugged, gazing over my shoulder to where the children were playing, teasing the tin garden weeder and lawnmower with impossible commands. "Some come more often, some less."

"Doesn't that bother you people?"

Briefly, a sense of anger and disappointment crossed his face. After all, he'd been the one who'd had to face the politicians, the press.

"It isn't what we'd planned," he said, managing to smile again.

"But it can't go on forever, can it?"

"Who knows? You're quite outside the laws of this Universe. You're virtual matter—a kind of ghost." He sipped his wine and swallowed, getting into his publicity spiel. "Sure, you're a lot clearer and sharper than all those headless lords and the white ladies..."

I looked down at the ground, at the impressive way my feet were resting on it without drifting down into the turf. Part of the problem with us twelve astronauts was that we hadn't been chosen with any need to fit the usual mission profiles. Mission Control normally looked for calmness under pressure, a strong will to live. But not for this project. They needed dreamers, dreamers who were prepared to die for their dreams. When the twelve of us were still together in initial training, it had been easier to ignore that fact. We'd laughed and joked, gone along with everything that was suggested, looked forward to fame and the hope of discovery, a special kind of immortality.

I said, "Nothing here has changed—but everything feels different."

"I suppose that's likely anyway, isn't it? Think of Odysseus. Think of all the explorers in history. They never really settled down—they always wanted to get away."

"And we just keep returning. I'm sorry."

"Jesus, don't apologise. You people were the bravest I ever knew...know. We've just got to keep hoping that one of you will finally break into some different kind of universe."

I asked, "Is anyone else back here at the moment?"

Tony hesitated. I could almost see the wheels of corporate policy spinning inside his head. "As a matter of fact, yes. Anne

Harrison returned just two days ago. We found her wandering around her old office at Mission Control. Bumping into things. Walking through them."

"You should have said before. We'd have invited her here tonight, to this party."

"I think she's had enough of parties. I know how it is for you people—meeting all the old faces must be a strain."

"Don't ever," I said, "try to tell me that you know how it is."

I found my daughter Jenny standing a little apart from the other kids, too old to join in their games, too young to want to talk to the adults.

I smiled at her with fellow feeling. "How's it going?"

Her perfect face contorted. She said, "You've forgotten everything, haven't you? *Nothing* has changed. I remember you leaving home, I remember seeing that terrible coffin on TV. Watching you, smiling and waving as you climbed into it. You, falling towards Belia."

I nodded. Did she know that, in this particular universe, I was still falling? But it was all so hard to explain. Nobody but the physicists believed in singularities, waveform collapse and virtual matter; perhaps it was easier for her to think of me as just a ghost.

"And you left me and you left Mum and you left Danny. You went to die because you thought you'd get on better with some creature from beyond. Well, I'm *glad* you haven't found any starmen. I hope you never do."

"I'm sorry," I said, looking around at all these happy people, knowing that—although I would probably come back again—I would never belong.

No one seemed to notice when I left. The car that Mission Control had given me started silently, and somehow managed to back its way out between all the others parked in the drive.

Houses glowed through the clear dark night along the roads into town. I turned on the news, listening to the slow unravelling of words that no longer made any sense.

The car parked outside Harry's Bar. At least that hadn't changed. The same neon sign buzzing and winking, the bottom half of the H dead and dark. We used to come here a lot, us twelve astronauts when we were still in training. Inside, the same music was playing, the same greasy light was shining over the same empty tables. We'd jokingly renamed it the Space Bar, in honorary recognition of all those other bars—the ones in the old films that had never stopped playing in the secret screens of our own minds. Places where five-armed Venusians served bubbling methane cocktails to red Arcturian warriors.

Anne Harrison was sitting alone, sheltered from view behind the last cheap wooden screen. I pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"It's me."

"You've changed. I thought *I* looked bad."

"I've just come from a party at my home," I said.

"Mine was yesterday. But I simply chickened out. I came straight here and got drunk, just the way I'm going to do tonight. It's quite possible, you know—I mean getting drunk. All it takes is some imagination. If I really tried hard, I suppose I could do it without even having to pretend to swallow this muck."

I nodded.

"Still, it's good to see you," she said without smiling, hardly looking up through the greasy drifts of her greying hair.

"I suppose you know I didn't get anywhere."

"I heard it on the news. Soon they'll stop reporting us all together. First you, then me. Coming out of nowhere in a couple of days. No different kind of universe, no starmen, no news. We're just earthbound ghosts, going through the same endless rituals.

We must be boring them—it sure bores me, and I can't even remember."

"But everyone seems so happy here, don't they? This isn't really the place that we left."

"You know what they said. Every universe is unique. Somewhere, something has to be different, otherwise it wouldn't arise out of the meta-universe. When I looked at my music collection at home, I thought I'd found what it was. A cube was missing—a favourite recording. Then I remembered I'd lent it to someone, that I'd never got it back."

It was a joke, but Anne wasn't smiling. The thing that distinguished this Universe from every other would be nothing more than the faintest quiver of one electron in some distant galaxy. This was a different Earth from the one we'd left—a different Universe, a different Harry's Bar—but everything else, including the fact of our departure, was exactly and endlessly the same.

She finished her drink. I found myself watching it sink down into her mouth with much the same curiosity that the living must feel as they watched me.

She said, "I suppose it's possible that we made everything better just by leaving. Does that sound like paranoia?"

"It sounds like the drink."

I watched as she walked over to the bar. What was that song we used to sing? But I'd lost it; it had gone forever.

"So," she said, "what are you going to do?"

I stared at the whisky she'd placed down in front of me, wondering if I had the energy to drink. "Try to go beyond again, I suppose. Like my namesake, *Der fliegende Hollander*, The Flying Dutchman." But at least he'd had a proper ship: my *Hollander* had been little more than a man-carrying bullet. Just like Jenny had said. A coffin.

"You know," Anne said, "I asked them what would happen if we just stayed here. I asked that Tony Tsui guy. He didn't exactly say, but I've worked it out anyway. We'd slowly dissolve, disappear. That's why they have the parties at home and all the rest of the crap. To convince us that we're *here*, to keep the waveform in collapse."

"Is that what you're going to do? Just hang around?"

"I might," she said.

"I'll try to take *The Hollander* out again," I said. "If they'll let me."

"Oh, they'll let you alright. Do you think that they want us here? Mucking up their lives."

"The starmen must be out there somewhere," I said. "And they'll be wise, they'll know the answer. They'll be able to bring us back to life."

"That," Anne Harrison said, "is just a dream. You're falling beyond an event horizon, you can never return."

She reached for her drink, managing at the third try to stop her trembling fingers from passing through the glass.

She asked, "And aren't you afraid?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course I'm afraid."

I got back home deliberately late. The guests had all left. Elaine was in bed and asleep, tossing and muttering. I wanted to touch her, to brush the damp hair from her forehead and soothe away whatever lay inside. But I knew that Anne Harrison was right. I was fading, weakening.

I drifted around the darkened house, blown on currents of memory, passing thoughtlessly through walls and unopened doors. Hovering over Danny's bed, I watched him smiling and half-covered in pillows. I floated through the wardrobe towards my beautiful daughter Jenny, finding the scent of life and sheets and the

white furniture in her room. I finally ascended stairways of dust in the attic and settled on the dewy tiles of the roof. I sat looking up at red Belia and at the stars, waiting for dawn.

Hard to remember now, what weird sense of purpose had made me climb into that tiny snub-nosed craft aboard a satellite orbiting Belia. Me, I was never a true astronaut anyway. Calling my coffin *The Hollander*—giving it any kind of name at all—

I was long-lasting virtual matter--a supra-quantum disturbance in spacetime--but I still couldn't stray far from home.

was just a concession to vanity.

And then the launch, and me the third of the twelve. Nudging *The Hollander* down through space towards Belia. I only had enough oxygen to last a few hours, but Mission Control had explained that that was all I needed. It was, after all, a few hours of my time, not theirs. And if the cameras and the sensors aboard the satellite had been able to penetrate Belia's glow and watch me until the end of time, they would still have seen me falling. From their viewpoint, I would never reach Belia's event horizon. But for me, for all of us astronauts, the falling would be quick and easy. And, crossing the event horizon, looking back, the whole history of this Universe would flash by in one moment. Every fleck of starlight that would ever fall would reach me in that instant, and the flash of energy would crush me beyond matter. I would become a singularity as I crossed out of spacetime. As some wag at Mission Control had put it, us astronauts would disappear up our own assholes.

Of course, our bodies, even our matter, could never survive this push beyond. But then quantum physics determines that matter isn't real, anyway. For an atomic particle to exist as an objective lump rather than an indeterminate fluctuation, an observer is required to bring about the collapse of its waveform. To give it substance, a particle has to be measured; it needs to be stopped and asked the time. Thus a tree, unseen, will never fall in a forest. Thus an astronaut, even one who has fallen through his own singularity, will, unnoticed, cease to exist.

But me, I was never really an astronaut anyway. And what kind of husband? What kind of father? Why had I done it? Sure, before Belia was found, times of my youth when science still rang from the collisions of physics and cosmology, there were a thousand scientists who said they'd merrily give their lives for a chance to fall into a black hole. But somehow it was different when the opportunity actually came.

Belia arrived, a singularity from the start of spacetime, echoing the huge energies of the Big Bang. And she beckoned; not with the promise of death, but a kind of immortality, a place where the cold equations of science finally stopped and this Universe ended, where every other universe began. The joke was that, out of all the infinite and unimaginable possibilities, out of all the universes filled with beckoning starmen, salt ocean space, cetacean suns and cockleshell worlds, us astronauts were consistently drawn to a series of Earths that were quite indistinguishable from those we had left behind. Quantum physics had shown a century before that virtual matter arose quite naturally out of nothing, but that it could exist for bare nanoseconds, and stray only a minute distance from the electromagnetic field that gave it birth. What no one had imagined was that by overcoming this and all the other laws of nature, us astronauts would also manage to confirm them. I was long-lasting virtual matter—a supra-quantum disturbance in spacetime—but I still couldn't stray far from home.

I remembered the last holiday I'd taken with Elaine and Jenny and Danny. Standing on a hill, looking out across lakes scattered in the rolling green like the eyes of heaven. My family beside me. The soft wind and tears in my eyes. My instructions had finally come through from Mission Control. The twelve astronauts had been selected. I hadn't believed it. The psychological profiles, the flashing lights, probing the traumas of the past—all of it had meant nothing. But then they'd told me that I was still a kid at heart, still alone, still dreaming of starmen. The lakes shimmered in the breeze, and I hugged Elaine and kissed the soft down of her cheek. And I wondered how close you had to get before you made contact.

“Where have you been?” Elaine asked as I walked in through the doorway of her bedroom. She was sitting up in bed. Yawning, stretching, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “People missed you at the party.”

I smiled and said nothing. I drew the stool out from beneath the dressing table, and sat watching her as she dressed.

The four of us took breakfast together. The sound of birdsong came in with the scents of the woods and the corn through open window.

“Daddy,” Jenny said, “would you take me down to ballet class?”

She couldn't bring herself to smile or even look at me across the table, but I knew that she was trying to undo a little of what had been said at the party.

“I think,” I said, “that I'll probably go straight into town. Go see the people at Mission Control. I'm sure your Mum will take you.”

“Does that mean,” Danny asked in his sweet and innocent way, “that you'll soon be leaving us again?”

Elaine and Jenny tutted and shushed him, but I could see it in all their faces. The hope that things would soon be back to normal again, that I'd be just a proud and bitter memory.

“Yes,” I said. “I think that's the best way, don't you? And this time Danny I'll do my best to bring back a starman. I promise.”

“That'd be great,” Danny said. Before I had time to change my mind, or he could duck away, I reached out and touched him softly on the shoulder.

“But you will stay a while longer, won't you?” Elaine asked, reaching to clear away the plates, the coffee I hadn't drunk, the food I hadn't eaten.

But already, I was standing up, walking out of the kitchen and down the hall, doing my best to carry the sense of life and the nearness of my family with me as I left the house and closed the door, as I started the car.

“Wait!” Elaine called, running out onto the lawn.

Pretending not to hear, I turned the car quickly down the drive, along the country roads that led towards town.

Everything in town seemed cleaner and neater. I saw tramcars and floaters and open markets, lovers holding hands across the tables of street cafes. But the Mission Control buildings never changed. They had always been graceful, long and low and white. Through the glass doors, I felt the soft bustle and algebraic hum of computers and conditioned air. Yes, it was all coming back to me now, the ambitions, the failures, the secrets and the laughs we had all shared. As Tony Tsui greeted me without surprise and led me along the smooth corridors, I paused to chat and smile and wave at faces I knew. At last, I felt more at ease—there was no need here for me to act the hero. There was old Colbert, looking thin and trim and young again. Stan Redway, his toupee replaced by a head of real hair. Nye the project librarian almost touched me with his delicate hands as he told me proudly how he'd managed to give up smoking at last after years of trying. And there were Bob and Barbara Bolton, back together again and sharing the same office.

Tony took me outside. Mostly, this place was a museum now. The shuttles were launched far outside town, using

Belia's own energy.

Tony asked, “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” I said. “I'm ready.”

Gazing across the weedgrown concrete, I saw the clean tailfins of a rocket. Already, it climbed halfway up to the sky. I began to walk towards it. Glancing back at Tony, I saw his eyes track a flock of gulls as they wheeled low around the gantries, passing though the rocket. Though me. I knew then that I was fading, and that this rocket was too beautiful to be real. But still, I was grateful that it was there.

My rocket—*The Hollander*—was waiting, humming. An arrow, aimed at the sky. My feet clanged the iron rungs. The cockpit was welcoming and new. It smelled like home, the very first time you arrive.

Soon, I was ready for takeoff.

An old man found me wandering the shore twenty miles from town. Recognising the badge on my spacesuit, he rang the local police. On standing instructions, the police in turn contacted my people at Mission Control.

Back at Mission Control, they only asked one question. When I'd answered it, they showed me to a car that was waiting in the afternoon sun. It was new, but still recognisable; like meeting the close relative of someone you have known, a twin or a brother. It took me along the familiar roads towards home, and I felt the tug of familiar memories. If only, I thought, standing at the doorstep of my own house with evening shadows settling across the lawn, if only... And how many times, I wondered, how many times have I done this before...?

The door opened. The scents of the house greeted me.

“You've arrived,” Elaine said. For a moment, I thought she might reach out to touch.

“I suppose you heard the news,” I said.

“Yes, the news.”

“I'm afraid,” I said, trying a joke, “That I haven't brought any starmen with me.”

She paused, and looked up at me strangely.

Out of habit, I shrugged off my coat and tried to hang it on the stand. It passed through the hook and drifted down to the carpet.

“So you haven't got yourself a job?” I asked.

“Oh no,” she smiled. “After all, I don't need to. There's my widow's pension.”

“You look really well.”

“Danny's upstairs in bed.”

“How old is Danny now?”

“Nearly nine. Jenny's fine too.”

“Jenny?”

“Our eldest kid. Our daughter.”

I nodded, and went through the door on the right to sit down in the lounge.

Elaine turned on a lamp and sat down on the chair across from the fireplace, her hands pressed tightly in her lap. She asked, “Have you eaten? I suppose you'd like a drink?”

I stared at her.

She stood up again, “I'll get some water.”

When she had left the room, I went over to the mirror hanging above the mantelpiece. I wanted to see how the stranger who stood alone in this room had changed.

What I saw brought a different kind of understanding. The face that stared back at me from the mirror was long and narrow, with golden eyes flecked silver. The face of a starman, an alien.

When I reached out towards the reflection in the glass, my fingers passed straight through.

ptw

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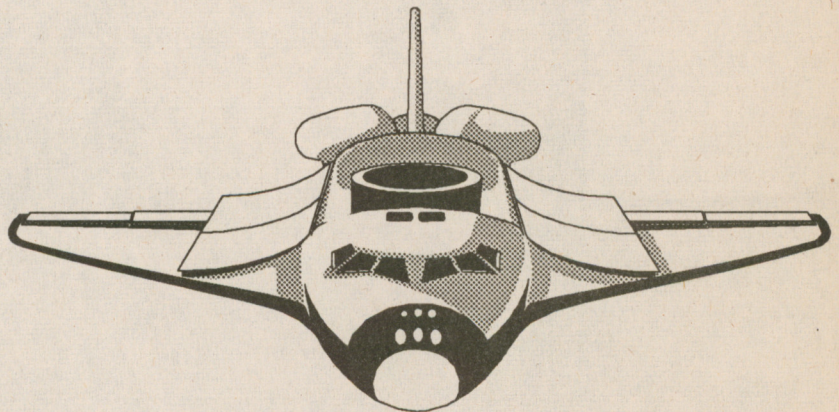
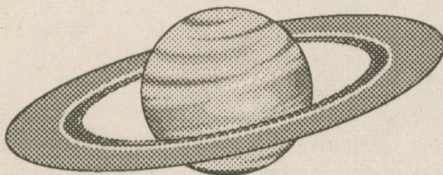
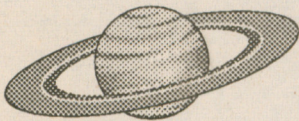
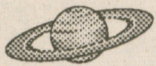
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"Leakage" marks Paul Di Filippo's second appearance in PW. His first, "Bad Beliefs", was published in the Fall '94 issue. Paul's stories appear regularly in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Eye*, *Amazing*, *Pulphouse*, *New Worlds*, *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, and many others. He has been nominated twice for the Nebula Award. We look forward to more of this talented writer's work in the future.

There is always a clear line between reality and fantasy. Right?

LEAKAGE

BY PAUL DI FILIPPO

Illustrated by David Grilla

I WAS IN THE KITCHEN, FIXING SUPPER. The TV was on in the other room, but I wasn't really paying attention to it. You know how that is. But then I heard the unmistakable voice of Lucille Ball saying, in a tone of mixed hysteria and anger, "Ricky, I want an abortion."

Putting down the potato peeler very carefully, I went into the other room.

There on the set was the familiar Ricardo living room, in perfect, immutable, timeless black and white. The sofa, the fireplace, the mantelpiece, the doors to the bedroom, kitchen and hall, the populuxe fifties decor...it was all as I had seen it a hundred times--a thousand times--before, since that very first episode glimpsed on the verge of being sent late to bed, when I was a kid. Everything about the set stamped it as the original, no recreation, of that I was sure.

And Lucy and Ricky were--well, Lucy and Ricky. These were no second-rate impostors, no off-Broadway mimics or *Saturday Night Live* comedians. They were the original two actors, forever youthful in their celluloid stasis.

Everything, in short, was as it should have been.

Except for the script.

Now Lucy was crying in that famous way of hers, only it wasn't funny. She was blubbing something about having cheated on Ricky, to get back at him for not letting her perform her stripper's act at the club. The baby she was carrying--Little Ricky, of course--wasn't his, and she wanted it destroyed.

Big Ricky did not react well to this news. He began to pace around the couch, letting loose with a flood of that inimitable goofy Cuban invective.

"*Putá! Bitch!* I wish I had died fighting Castro than ever live to see *esta día!*"

Now Ricky took out several vials of crack and a pipe and began to smoke his brains out, while Lucy downed shot after shot out of a Chivas bottle.

My wife had entered the room.

"How's supper coming?"

I couldn't speak. All I could do was gesture dumbly at the television. Quickly grasping the improbable scene, my wife sat down beside me, transfixed.

The next fifteen minutes of the show were excruciating, like all the worst arguments you ever had with your spouse rolled up into one ugly package. Lucy and Ricky got drunker and more stoned and abused each other horribly. It was only words at first, but then Ricky began to cuff Lucy around.

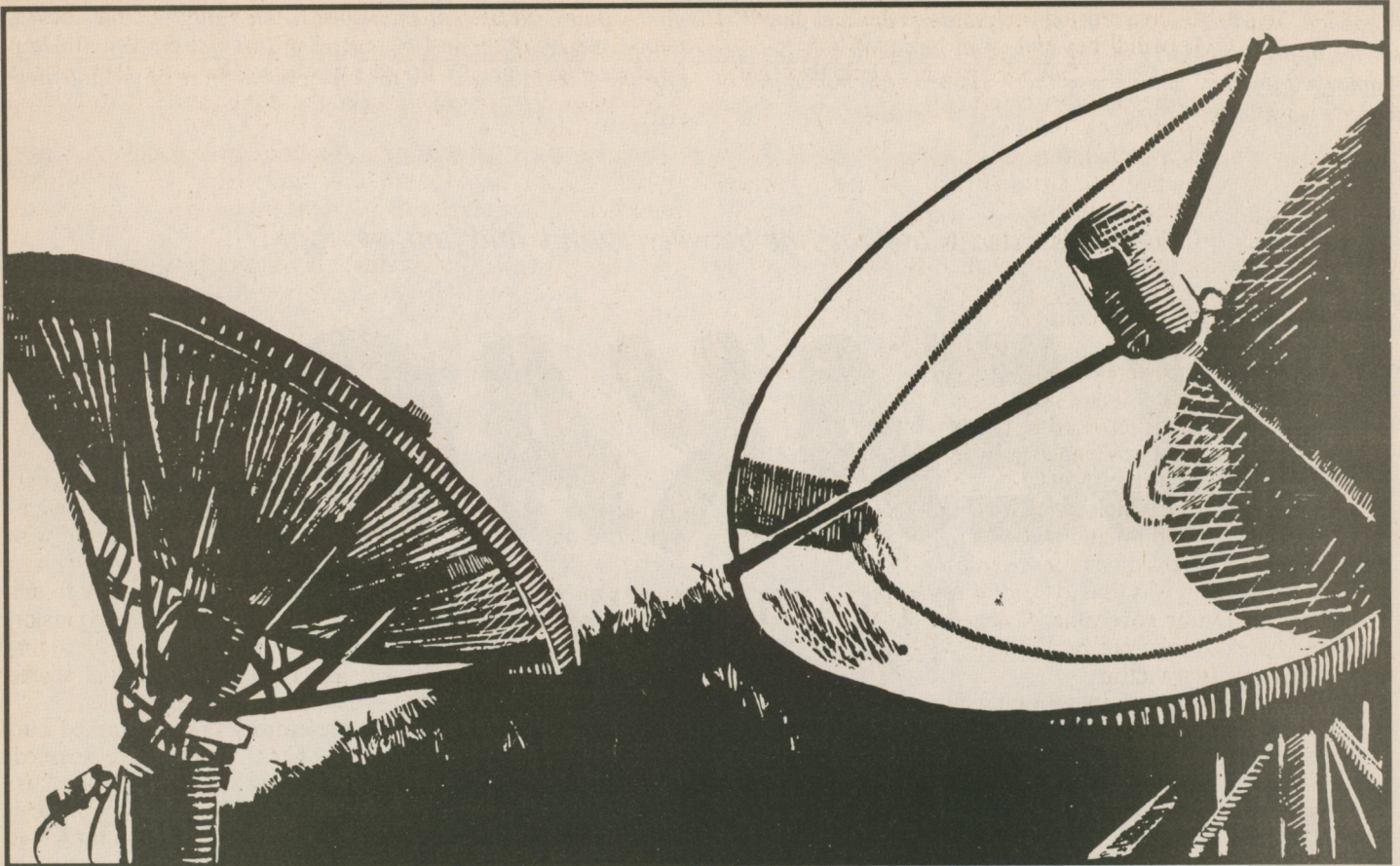
"Tell me, who is the *maricon* who did this to you! Tell me so I can *keel* him!"

Lucy held out as long as she could. But after a particularly savage blow, she blurted out, "Fred! It was Fred Mertz!"

Of course, Fred and Ethel chose that exact moment to barge in unannounced.

Some things about Hollywood plotting were inevitable.

Dropping Lucy to the couch, Ricky jumped up and, drawing



a stubby pistol from his waistband, shot Fred dead, spraying a screaming Ethel in blood and gore.

Then the credits rolled up, jaunty theme music and all.

My wife and I sat stunned for a moment. Then she spoke.

"That was sick. Sick, sick, sick! Who would ever show such a thing?"

"Good question. But what I want to know is how. How could they possibly have made a new episode, with all the actors old or dead?"

"Well, find out which channel we're watching first. Then we'll call them."

I looked at the red digits on the cable box, then consulted the cable guide.

It was the Zeiterion Channel. They specialized in the broadcasting of old sitcoms. Their spokesman was a loveable greying actor from one of the very same old shows which they featured.

I picked up the phone and called my local cable company. When I got the customer service rep on the line, I didn't try to explain the exact nature of my complaint, but simply said that I'd like to register one, and that it was specifically about the content of some of the programming.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we only deliver your cable service. Unless you have a complaint about the quality of the reception, I suggest you call or write the headquarters of the appropriate company."

"Do you have an address or an eight-hundred number?"

"Yes, sir," she said, and gave me both.

I was mildly surprised to hear that the Zeiterion Channel's corporate headquarters was just over the state line, in Jersey. Then my wife called me back to the set.

"Look at this one before you call."

It was Leave It To Beaver.

The Beve was entering his school through the arch of a metal-detector. The kid behind him set it off. Frisking revealed that he

was carrying only a beeper, but the authorities confiscated it anyway.

The inside of the Beve's school was utterly decrepit; leaking roofs, missing tiles, broken desks, cardboard-patched windows. At one point I thought I saw a rat run across a corridor. There were about fifty incorrigible kids in the class, and the teacher was not the sweet elderly woman I remembered, but a harassed harri-dan plainly unable to manage even half of her charges. The kids blared hip-hop from a boombox and ignored her.

Suddenly there came a squeal of tires from outside the school, along with the fluid popping of Uzi fire.

"Drive-by!" squealed one of the kids, and they all dropped to the floor.

Beaver was the first one up and at the windows. The camera POV switched to his eyes, and we the audience saw what Beaver saw:

Wally, pulling his head and gun back into the getaway car as it sped away from the bodies arrayed in front of the school.

Of course, the rest of the episode would be about whether the Beve would fink on Wally to their Dad.

Or, I supposed now, to a rival gang.

I stood up. "This has gone too far. I can't imagine what kind of marketing strategy they think they've hit on here, but I don't like it one bit. This is my past--our past--they're messing with! I'm going to give them a piece of my mind."

Naturally, the eight-hundred number was busy, busy, busy. But finally, I got through.

The man on the other end of the line sounded incredibly sad and weary. I felt sorry for him, but let him have it nonetheless.

"Yes, sir," he said when I was done, "we're aware of the problem. But I want to assure you that it's strictly unintentional on our part. The technical staff is working on fixing it even as we speak. They suspect a simple mixup in the tape library, but they're investigating every possible trouble-spot in the system."

"But who could have created such tapes in the first place?" I demanded. "And how did they end up in your studios?"

"That I couldn't say, sir. But once again, I apologize. Now, if you don't mind, there are other calls..."

I hung up and went back to the set.

We never ate supper that night.

Instead, we watched one show after another, our disbelief mounting to a bone-deep numbness.

The copies for Car 54, Where are You? precipitated a race riot with the savage beating of a suspect.

FBI agents burst in on The Addams Family and discovered a Dahmeresque cellarful of human bones.

The entire Clampett family was arrested for welfare fraud. They had been collecting state checks while living in their mansion. As I recall, Mister Drysdale's bank went under, once auditors came in to assess penalties and discovered he had been embezzling.

Father Knows Best was hauled away for molesting his daughter.

Rob and Laura, in the throes of a divorce, had a bitter custody fight over Richie, which ended up with Rob kidnapping him.

That Girl was laid off and started a phone-sex service.

Maynard G. Krebs died of an overdose.

The Flying Nun was sent to Central America, where she was raped and tortured by government-backed rightists.

Cannibalism broke out on Gilligan's Island. The Skipper was the obvious first victim.

Endora turned Darren into a mouse, and a cat ate him! But it was okay, because Samantha revealed that all witches were actually lesbians anyway.

And Hogan's Heroes--well, to this day, I still have nightmares about that episode. That look on the face of Sergeant Schultz....

It was well after midnight when we finally dragged ourselves to bed.

When we woke it felt as if we had never slept. All thoughts of leading a normal day had vanished. Instead of getting ready for work, I went straight to the television.

It was still going on. Show after show had been perverted, undermined, reconfigured to emphasize the worst aspects of modern life. I could sense my heritage slipping away from me, my past being chewed up and spit out. It felt as if I were standing on a pile of shifting sand.

In the middle of watching Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton blackball and humiliate a Jewish applicant to the Order of Raccoons, I boiled over.

"That's it! We're going straight to Zeiterion, right now!"

Without any objection, my wife got into the car with me.

As we approached the headquarters of the cable network, the traffic became unbelievable. It seemed as if the whole metropolitan area was converging on the offending studio.

Eventually, we slowed to five miles an hour. Then we ground to a complete halt.

After half an hour of no advance, my wife and I got out of the car and began to walk along the road's grassy marge.

Within minutes, we were part of an enormous mob. I had half expected that all the people would be the same age as my wife and I, but they weren't. Oh, most of them were of that particular generation that had imprinted on all those old shows, but there were young kids and older folks too. Anyone, I guessed, who had ever enjoyed a laugh from one of these great sitcoms.

As we walked, silent and determined, helicopters chuffed over us, the news ones filming and the police ones broadcasting warnings to stay calm.

At last we stood in the parking lot outside the Zeiterion building, part of a vast crowd more melancholy than angry. In an effort to see what was going on, I climbed atop a parked car. Those already on top helped me, and then I pulled my wife up.

A stage had been erected outside the building, and workers were assembling the last of several of those huge monitors that sports stadiums use. When the workers were done, they left the stage empty. The crowd began to murmur and shift, but soon fell silent and still.

Out on the stage walked the spokesman for Zeiterion, a man whose every burlesque pratfall we had memorized, the beloved comedian of our youth, every wrinkle on his face visible thanks to projections on the enormous screens.

"Thank you all for coming," he said in his familiar amplified voice. "I just wish it could have been a happier occasion that brought you all here."

He paused, then drew a deep breath before continuing.

"We have discovered the cause of the altered shows which you have all found so repugnant. In a word, it's simply what the professionals call crosstalk, or leakage.

"Our technicians, in consultation with several noted physicists, believe that modern broadcasts have recently reached a certain critical mass sufficient to swamp different signals in whatever medium. To put it simply, the airwaves are saturated with bad vibes. The sleeze, the killings, the gratuitous sex--well, you all know what I'm talking about. As it stands now, any show from a simpler era is being warped into line with the overwhelming majority of current programming. And since we all seem to agree that modern television is acceptable and representative of our shared everyday life, there appears to be no solution to our problem."

A stunned silence draped the crowd, as we all asked ourselves if it had really come to this. Then the spokesman resumed, a tear in his eye looking like a big crystal pillow on the screens.

"I will miss the old shows as much as you, if not more. But we must reconcile ourselves to the inevitable. There is no refuge anymore, for any of us. The Zeiterion Channel thanks you in advance for your continued patronage and understanding."

Then the comedian turned and left, and the screens filled with the scheduled Zeiterion Channel offering.

But I don't imagine you want to hear how Hoss came to burn down the ranch with his family inside.

pw

TAG THE MOON

gonna stick ads there any day

anyway

why not be the first

do yr worst

get that spray can cranking

just one more concrete target

caught in free-fire night

ex-terrestrial law's got no

clause for alarm

self-expression still spella

hydrant

in a two dog town

ain't that right

Mr. Armstrong?

- Ann K. Schwader

The Highest Adventure

An Interview With

LOREN ACTON

A S T R O N A U T

by Catherine Asaro

"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN adventure," Loren Acton says. "And I think like an engineer. I like gadgets. Going into space combined those two interests for me. In terms of adventure, it's just about the highest one I can think of."

And what an adventure. In 1985, Dr. Acton soared into space as an astronaut on NASA's Spacelab-2 mission. Loren, now a physics professor at Montana State University, went up on the eighth flight of the space shuttle Challenger. He served as a payload specialist—an expert in a scientific experiment carried out on that flight.

How did Loren come to be involved with the space program? The adventure started at the University of Colorado, where he earned his PhD in Astrophysics in 1965. He then went to work at the Lockheed Research Laboratory in Palo Alto, California. While there, he studied solar x-rays and the heating of the sun's corona. His interests included high resolution imaging of the sun. "The idea," Loren says, "was to trace the movements and properties of the sun's magnetic fields."

However, the earth's atmosphere creates problems for solar observers. It absorbs x-rays and causes distortions which make it difficult to do solar imaging. "The solution," Loren says, "is to get above the atmosphere to take the data."

Early on, he flew a number of unmanned rocket and satellite missions to take data. He also served as chairman of a committee which looked into

the use of space flight for small payload experiments. "Out of that," he says, "came a report that solar physics needed telescopes in space like the type we used in our experiments. Out of this work came the idea for a proposal called SOUP, which stands for Solar Optical Universal Polarimeter." Loren was the co-investigator on the proposal, with Dr. Allen Title as the principle investigator. They put it all together when NASA issued an Announcement of Opportunity asking scientists to suggest experiments for Spacelab.

NASA liked their ideas.

Once they had a go ahead on the project, a crucial question had to be answered: who would oversee the solar experiment during the flight? "Mission specialists are pretty remarkable people," Loren says. "But at that time, no one in the astronaut corps had the necessary depth of experience in solar physics." Although normally five people crew a shuttle mission, some flights carry extra astronauts—payload specialists—because experiments on that mission require their expertise. Spacelab-2 needed two payload experts. As a founder of the solar project and an author of the proposal, Loren was well positioned to qualify as one of those specialists.

But there was no guarantee he would get to fly.

"Ten astronaut candidates were chosen for the payload specialist positions," he says. "Two dropped out. Of the remaining eight, four of us were chosen to train for the flight: two prime crew and two backup crew. That meant two went up and two did not fly." Loren was selected for the prime crew, along with Dr. John Bartoe. Modestly, Loren adds, "I was lucky. I was in the right place at the right time." Although all four trained for the mission, the prime crew was designated from the start. "It made for a better work environment to have the jobs assigned at the outset. That

way, we worked together as a team rather than competing against each other to see who would get to fly."

Since Loren was already an expert in the experiment itself, much of his training concerned learning the operations and procedures for space flight. "For payload specialists," he explains, "our previous preparation was mostly scientific. So our training for flight was more about what to do in space."

That training included their becoming knowledgeable with the space craft and its operations. "Spacelab is essentially a warehouse full of equipment," Loren says. "You can draw from the available equipment depending on what you need for the mission you're flying. NASA and the European Space Agency worked together to make it happen. Europe agreed to provide several sets of equipment. A pressurized module was carried in the cargo bay, a lab for scientific investigations. They also supplied the palettes, which provide the interface between the shuttle and the scientific instruments on board. In addition, they provided the pointing systems that told us how to direct the telescopes to make our observations. One purpose of Spacelab-2 was to test those palettes and pointing systems."

Loren was chosen for the mission in 1978. Although the flight was initially scheduled for 1980, technical and budgetary problems delayed it until 1985. How did it feel when he finally went into space? "I had a complex reaction," he recalls. "A mixture of excitement—at last we were on the way, after so long and so much preparation. That was a real neat experience. But very soon the mission expanded to fill my field of view. All of my attention was on my job. I felt extremely responsible for doing a perfect job, as perfect as I could make it. It was several days before I was able to look around and really take in where I was. The experience was quite different

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than I expected. But I did my dead level best to experience it all. I think if I went up again, I might be a little more relaxed."

During the flight, the backup crew on the ground served as the experiment communicators. They provided the interface between the shuttle crew and the scientific investigators. "Many decisions must be made while you do the work in space, because it always changes," Loren notes. "People who are in flight have a demanding schedule that doesn't leave them a lot of time to puzzle through problems. When a problem came up, we told the people on the ground. They figured out how to deal with it and told us what to do. In a few cases, we worked out the problem ourselves, but generally trouble shooting is done by the ground based personnel."

Trouble shooting?

"Our flight was very successful scientifically. In fact, it won the 1985 Space Flight Achievement Award." Loren laughs gently. "But practically nothing went right. We were originally scheduled to go up on July 12, 1985. But at three seconds before lift-off, a computer shut down." What happened? "A computer on the shuttle takes over at twenty seconds before launch. It tests thousands of parameters to make sure you're ready to fly. One of those parameters failed the test. The computer shut down our engines because a sensor said that a fuel valve was not opening fast enough. It's an automated safety shutdown."

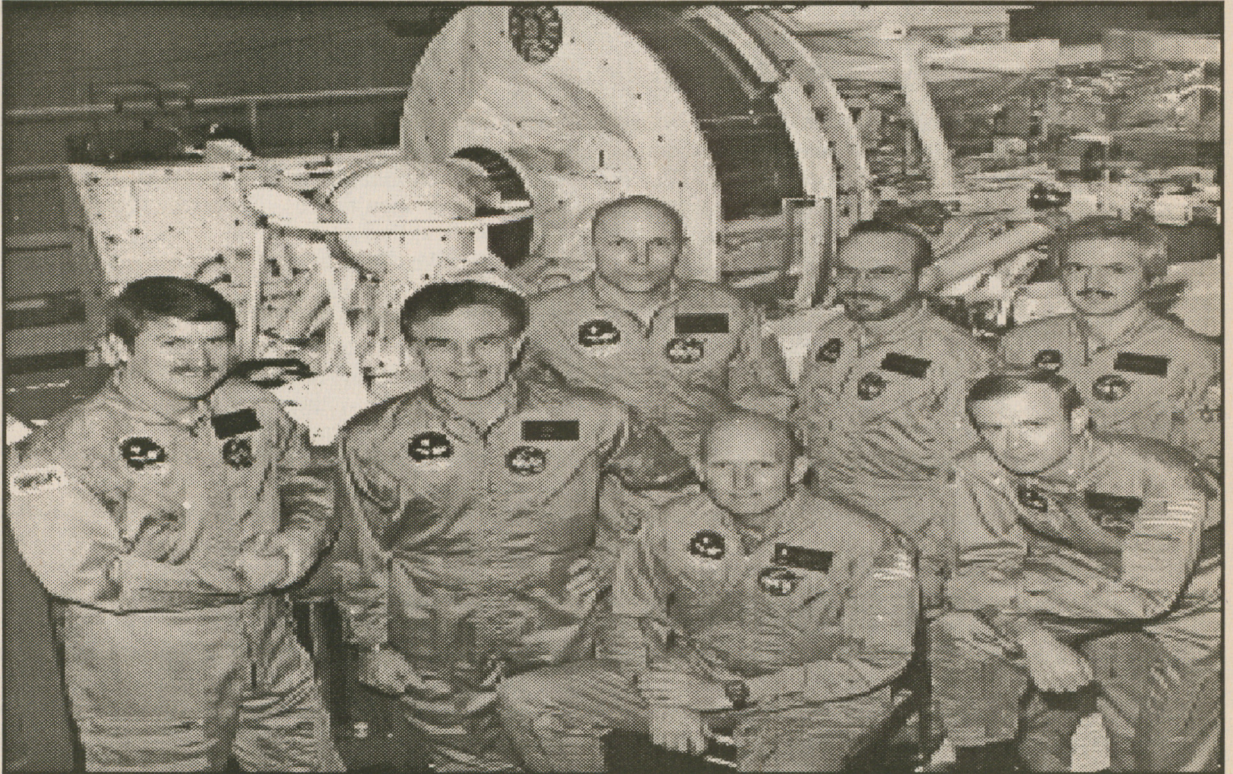
Finally, seventeen days later, on 29 July 1985, the mission went up. "The take-off was fine," Loren recalls. "But on our way to orbit we lost one of our three main engines. We had to go into an orbit fifty miles lower than planned. So the entire timeline for our tasks was different. The ground crew had to replan all of it. We also had to dump one thousand pounds of maneuvering fuel. That meant we had to be a little more careful

about orientation maneuvers, so we didn't use too much fuel."

Problems also came up with the experiments. "At one point I was trying to grow some protein crystals," he recalls. "It was hard to do in space because the equipment wasn't properly designed. The early experiment didn't have a user friendly-assembly for the crew person. There was no

ing a pressure suit is similar to wearing a space suit. But it's not the same. About the only other way to prepare is to talk to people who have flown before." He chuckles. "Really, you do a lot of on the job learning."

However, much of the preparation takes place before a prospective candidate even applies to the program. How does a



Astronauts C. Gordon Fullerton (kneeling center), Roy D. Bridges (kneeling right). Standing (left to right) are astronauts Anthony W. England, Karl J. Henize, Story Musgrave, Loren Acton and John-David Bartoe.

hold-down provision to fix the apparatus so you could work on it without it floating away. Now that's been corrected. But then, I had trouble manipulating it in the weightless environment."

What was it like being weightless? "It's a little hard to describe." Loren pauses. "It's sort of like you would imagine, except that the instincts you've built up on how to maneuver don't work. Most people try to swim, which doesn't work at all. Too much force sends you out of control. It makes you feel clumsy. You end up moving in directions, or introducing rotations, that you don't want. So you learn to use a light touch, to move more gently. It's a convenient work environment, though. You can maneuver much more easily once you learn how."

Preparing to work in such an environment while you're on earth isn't simple. "For the mission to repair the Hubble Space Telescope, they worked in a water tank," Loren explains. "Its neutral buoyancy has similarities to working in space. Also, wear-

person gain the right qualifications? "It's like any other line of work," Loren says. "Learn about what's being done in space. Find out what kind of people are needed. They're looking for intelligent, hard-working, healthy people. Pilots need test pilot experience. For mission specialists they're hiring all kinds of scientists. You stand a better chance with an experimental background rather than a theoretical background because space flight requires more hands on work."

Shuttle crews normally consist of a commander, a pilot, and three mission specialists. Pilot astronauts serve as both commanders and pilots, and must have at least 1000 hours of pilot-in-command time on a jet aircraft to qualify. They usually have a Masters degree in engineering, science or mathematics. "Pilots don't really need a PhD," Loren says. "They need to learn how to fly."

The commander is responsible for the vehicle, crew, mission success, and safety during the flight. "He's really the pilot of

the mission," Loren says. "The pilot actually serves more as a co-pilot, assisting the commander." Pilots may also assist in the deployment and retrieval of satellite, in extravehicular activity (EVA) outside the shuttle in space, and in other payload operations.

Mission specialist astronauts are responsible for the scientific experiments and other payloads. Most have a PhD in an engineering, math, or science field. Loren notes, "Or they may be chosen if they're a key person associated with a particular project, the best technician available for the job." Mission specialists must have a detailed knowledge about how the shuttle works, as well as about the specific requirements and objectives of the mission, including the supporting systems and equipment. They also perform EVA and other activities such as handling payloads using remote manipulator systems or performing experiments. "Although a pilot's license isn't absolutely necessary," Loren adds, "it doesn't hurt. It's a plus, a hand's on skill."

Other pluses? "Right now mission specialists are needed most in the areas of the life sciences and material sciences. These are types of experiments where humans are more important in the loop. Automation is difficult for such experiments because they require more on the spot decisions as they progress." Referring back to his Spacelab mission, "The Shuttle turned out to be an expensive platform for the type of observing work I did. Now, with remote sensing, telescopes can be controlled from the ground."

It's different for experiments investigating, say, the effects of micro-gravity on a biological system, or how certain materials respond to various conditions. "Suppose you're interested in the effects of weightlessness on cellular development in mammals," Loren says. "You take along some mammals and study them in the weightless environment. This type of work is not at the stage where it is a very automatable process. Physicians and scientists need to do it. Typically, interactions with living things requires a skilled person to be present in the lab in space."

"On the Spacelab-2 mission," he adds, "we did a vitamin D metabolite experiment. We were studying why humans and animals suffer bone loss in weightlessness. Vitamin D is a regulator for bone calcium. We took blood samples on ourselves while we were in orbit as part of the experiment." He laughs. "That would have been hard to do without us there!"

Physical requirements for astronauts are straightforward. Pilots must have 20/50 vision or better in each eye, uncorrected, and mission specialists need 20/150. In either case, vision must be correctable to 20/

20. Blood pressure must be 140/90 or better. For missions specialists, height must be between 64 and 76 inches; for pilots it can be between 58.5 and 76 inches (readers interested in more details can write NASA at the address given at the end of this interview).

For Loren's position as payload specialist, "There was an informal, one page set of physical requirements specified in the proposal we wrote. The requirements were determined by the specific needs of the experiment." He recalls, "The rules were a little different for payload specialists. Basically, they're just concerned that you don't die."

Payload specialists are chosen for their expertise in one area, so they aren't necessarily career astronauts. But they participate fully in the mission. "We were trained and involved in every experiment on board," Loren says. "When I went up, it was policy for non-career astronauts to fly on science missions. The idea was to have the scientists work in space. Now there can be payload specialists only if it can be demonstrated that no career astronaut can do the job." Have the changes come about because of the Challenger accident? "That's part of it. But really that's a simplification. There has been a realignment of the space program in recent years."

What sort of person becomes an astronaut? The answer to that question is as diverse as are the potential candidates. Loren grew up in Montana, the son of a cattle rancher and the last of six children. He went to a one room country school that "one year, had eight students in eight grades. Some years there were more, some less. After eighth grade, I went into town for school." What activities did he enjoy? "I was pretty much of a book worm, and also active in church sort of things. And I was always interested in how things work. I took things apart a lot." He chuckles. "I couldn't always put them back together."

Like many astronauts, he is often asked to speak about the space program. "My impression is that the person on the street thinks fairly highly of space exploration. In the talks I've given at schools, I've found that there is no subject that provides the educational opportunities and grabs the interest of students as much as the space program does. It has a tremendous variety of educational hooks, everything from space food to the study of Indian myths about the stars."

Given that interest, he sees the space program continuing in the future. How about commercial ventures? "A lot of people would like to go into space," he notes. "Tourism could be a big draw. The problem is that people are risk averse. To ensure they come back alive is technically

demanding, which means it's expensive. The Russians will give you a ride into space, assuming you're healthy, but it costs ten million dollars."

He also talks about the advantages he sees in the space program beyond the scientific knowledge we obtain. "This is a worthy activity that has had benefits to our society and our world that haven't been fully appreciated. The values we have reaped in terms of international cooperation and the human spirit are immense. It is truly an adventure of the people of the earth in a unique sense. There has never been anything else like it in human history. For me, one of the most awesome aspects of the whole endeavor is people working together to pull it off. It's humans at our best. I hope we have the wisdom to continue with it."

Readers interested in obtaining more information about the astronaut selection and application process can write or call:

NASA, Johnson Space Flight Center
Attn: AHX/Astronaut Selection Office
Houston, TX 77058
(713) 483-5907

The Artemis Project, a privately financed commercial venture to establish a permanent lunar base, is also being developed with the intent of using crewed flights. Readers interested in more information can send a stamped self-addressed envelope to:

The Artemis Project
P.O. Box 590213
Houston, TX, 77259-0213
Email: Artemis@LunaCity.com.

About the Author: Catherine Asaro earned her PhD in Chemical Physics from Harvard, studying Atomic and Molecular Physics. She currently edits and publishes the science magazine *Mindsparks*, and works as a scientist at Molecudyne Research. She also writes science fiction. Her novel *Primary Inversion* is coming out from Tor books in March 1995.

Featured Poet

HUBRIS

They say
don't ask too much.
They say
this world is such a mess
only a hopeless fool
would remember the names of angels.
They say JFK
traded his life for an angel's kiss
they say in his dream Martin Luther King
looked up and saw an angel with a broken wing
they say Van Gogh
went mad from the touch of an angel's lips
they say Rimbaud
once heard an angel sing
they say
watch what you wish for.
they say
if on the sidewalk lies a shining feather
walk by, let it lie
or be burned.

I say this:
Let others fear the angel's kiss.
I have dared the probe of the angel's tongue.
I want more, all, I want everything,
the cygine embrace, the flight, the fall,
the hot caress of the angel's wings,
the feathered loins
the fiery coitus
Hubris.

THE SNOW HORSE

Snow shuts down
the streets and lights
lets the stardark in.
I hear the snow horse
shrilling in the wind.
White in the nightout
the snow stallion calls.
I feel his wings beating,
I see his feathers fall,
I see the winter lightning
in his stardark eyes,
I hear the winter wonder,
the thunder of his hooves.
I can't sleep.
The snow horse is running.



CROWN

A proud prince
was given by a friend
a crown
with seven jewels:
white, blue, black, brown,
yellow, gray, red--
"not fine enough," he said,
and tossed it on the ground.
Up sprang seven steeds:
white could tread the clouds,
blue could leap the sea,
black could fight the night,
brown could turn the earth,
yellow shone sun-bright,
gray flew like a dove,
red glowed warm like love--
horses
fine enough for
an emperor to ride.
The bowed, then wheeled away.
"Wait!" the prince cried.
But they ran with tossing heads
and vanished in the sky.
"Never mind," the friend said.
"You got to keep your pride."

THE SUN-KING'S COMRADES

Westward through the wilderness
they follow the huge new-moon marks
of his feet.

Ponies plod, heads nodding low,
leg-weary, manes heavy and full
like their hearts.

Battlehorses gallop to the sunset
facing the glare where a trumpet blare
will sound.

Arabs float at the airy trot,
nostrils flared, to the sundown shore
men fear.

All of them stand on that margin of sand
gazing over the water that has
no end.

Westward leaping into the waves
they will follow the crescent hoof-marks
into darkness.

All they desire is to be once again
with him, their king whose mane is a crown
of flame.

THE OGRE

The ogre roars, thinking *That'll teach it
to keep its distance.* The ogre
grows long fangs against fright,
long claws, scaly skin against pain,
pain, pain. Brows frown. Never say

Oh, no, scared. Or scarred. Thick skin. Hard claws.
Cold armor of steel can be taken off, but
these can't, not even in sleep. The ogre
sleeps--uneasily, all muscles tensed,
then wakes from the dream and quakes and roars
to drive it away, far away, *Oh no, hateful!*
That horrible, horrible, hurtful sad-eyed thing.



Nancy Springer has written over fifteen books including, Metal Angel, Larque On The Wing, and Apocalypse. Her short fiction and poems have appeared in numerous magazines including The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and Weird Tales. Look for her short fiction within the pages of PW later this year.

Nancy Springer



Good Help Is Hard To Find

"**D**EAR DIARY," FRANK LAMB WROTE WITH a careful hand. The heat was stifling in the tiny bathroom. He wiggled his toes in the cool water of the old claw foot tub and splashed a handful over his face, holding the pocket-sized journal at arm's length to keep it from getting wet.

*The most innocent of souls often
feel the wrath of those bereaved.*

BY S.M. MULLER

Illustrated by Friedrich Haas

"Sorry I haven't wrote in a couple of days, I been walking mostly. Life on the road sure ain't like I pictured it. Guess Pa was right after all. There ain't many strangers that'll help you out in this big old world." Frank sighed and shook the blue Bic he'd been writing with. Lousy cheap pen, he thought. Always threatening to run out of ink.

"I shoulda never quit on High School," he continued, "but they was always callin me a dummy and all. I know I ain't got much upstairs but Ma says I got a good heart and that's what counts." Frank sighed, turning the page of the threadbare journal. "Diary, it ain't entirely true what Pa says. There are some good folk out there. I found two when I was hitching this morning," he continued, sounding the words out as he wrote. "Henry Dodd and his missus Marla. He's a regular prince and she's an alright gal too. All I was after was a ride to town, but I coulda spit when they offered the hospitality of their home to me. Kindly folk. Offered me a job too. God bless 'em, Lord. More later."

Frank carefully blew on the page that was spotted with water droplets to be sure the ink would not run. "I

ain't no dummy," he smiled smugly, "else I wouldn't be able to write this good."

Frank shut the pocked-sized journal and, laying it carefully on the toilet tank, hauled his substantial bulk out of the tub. He gazed shamefacedly at the ring he'd left in the immaculate porcelain as the water slowly whirled down the drain.

Dried off and dressed in Mr. Dodd's plaid shirt and loose-fitting bib overalls, Frank grinned, patting his growling stomach. "Hold on. Betcha that Mizz Dodd's a fine cook."

He turned the paint-chipped door knob and swung the door open. If he'd known what the other visitors of the Dodd house had found out, he'd have broken the tiny bathroom window and crawled out over the jagged glass rather than go through that door.

Frank loped sheepishly into the kitchen. It was quaint. A large picture window allowed sunshine to bathe the room. Blue checkered curtains hung in freshly ironed folds and the deep green fronds of hanging ferns adorned the sides. The smell of freshly baked bread permeated the fragrant late summer air.

Mrs. Marla Dodd turned, the picture of homey bliss. Frank blushed abashedly. He regarded her sweet smooth face, unlined except for a few crow's feet that were beginning to show up as creases around her pale blue eyes. The first signs of fading youth. Blonde hair, flecked with white, fell loosely at her shoulders, framing her pleasant face. A paisley apron was tied in a loose bow around her slender waist.

She smiled at him. "Come in, honey. Supper's ready."

Frank regarded her curiously. No one but Ma Lamb had ever called him honey.

He was ready to settle down at the butcher block table when two huge, mangy mongrels, obviously sensing a stranger, sprang from the pantry to their mistress' feet. Frank leapt back startled, almost tripping over the crocheted rug in the kitchen doorway.

"S'okay," Marla murmured soothingly. "It's only old Mutt and Jeff. We had 'em since they were pups. They wouldn't hurt a fly, would ya boys?" she cooed, kneading the dogs behind their ears. They calmed considerably and settled at Marla's feet.

Frank stepped forward tentatively, maneuvering his angular frame into the large oak Captain's chair closest to the window. "If you say so ma'am," he conceded, eyeing the dogs dubiously.

A gust of a cool, early September breeze wafted in through the screen, ruffling his damp black hair. Frank took the checkered napkin from beside his plate and began cramming it haphazardly down the front of the overalls. "I do certainly appreciate your kindness, Mizz Dodd," he mumbled, smoothing the creases out of the napkin that hung comically under his chin. Marla stifled a laugh. Sweet boy, she mused. Got a little dust in the attic, but he'll do.

"I know I ain't much in the brains department," he explained with more than a little difficulty, "but I'm strong as an ox. Betcha I can do the work of two men." Frank shoveled heartily into the plate of steaming chili Mrs. Dodd had laid out before him.

"Don't you worry, boy. Hank's a hard man, but he's fair and you'll be paid a decent wage," the woman smiled, setting out the fresh bread and butter and retrieving her hand just in time to save it from the sharp tines of Frank's fork as he speared two steaming slices.

As he was buttering the bread, Frank looked up at her quizzically, and for just a moment he noticed a glimmer of intelligence in those wide childlike brown eyes. "If you don't mind me asking, Mizz Dodd, how've you all been managing this place fore I came along? Did you have another hired hand?"

Mrs. Dodd paused a moment, the lines of her forehead deepening in a scowl. "He didn't work out," she sighed dreamily, "Too bad. We had hopes for him, but it just didn't work." She rubbed her right temple in a circular fashion as if a headache was threatening to come on. "Yep. Pa had to give him the axe."

Marla seemed lost in thought a moment as she gazed out the large bowed window toward the cornfield, her lip curling slightly at the edge, "More chili, dear?"

Sheriff Jeff Boscio was a man with a purpose. There would be no coddling of criminals on his turf. He took the hard line and was damn proud of it. Excuses meant squat to him. You do the crime, and baby, you do the time. He was a fifth generation lawman and about as tough as they came. There was no mistaking that face even on first glance. Standing an oppressive six-three without his usual tattered cowboy boots, his looks mirrored his attitude. Close-set piercing eyes buried below thick black brows were positioned on a leathery faced that tapered smoothly into a pointy dimpled chin. Ingrained furrows stood out on his forehead, etched deeply in the tanned complexion he'd no doubt acquired from the relentless Arizona desert he'd called home before moving here two years ago. Although he'd seen quite a few summers after fifty, he still had a substantial mop of sandy, sun-bleached hair, greying only slightly at the temples. The mere sight of this imposing figure of a man, his .45 forever at the ready and proudly displayed in his hip holster were enough to make even a seasoned criminal cringe. His rules were crystal-line. Any messing around in his town got him pissed.

On that late Autumn day, Sheriff Boscio was extremely pissed. Messing around. That was exactly what was happening in Little Falls for the past couple of months. The sleepy little town was becoming notorious for the unsolved disappearances of three local boys.

Boscio waved the morning paper under his Deputy's nose before slamming it on the desk. He took a long drag off his Camel and promptly launched into a guttural coughing fit.

"Damn pollution," Boscio muttered. "Air ain't fit to breathe." Deputy Alan Griffith, tempted to bring up the source of the pollution as being the cancer sticks Boscio was forever puffing, stifled his comment. He liked his job and wanted to keep it. No sense ruffling the head honcho's feathers.

"Yes, sir, it's the freaking smog. And the ozone layer is supposed to be shot full of holes--"

Boscio waved Alan off impatiently. "Look at that headline, Griff! 'Young mens' disappearances plague Little Falls! Months go by and police still have no leads!' Makes us sound like a lousy bunch of incompetents!"

"Well, sir," Griffith began, but thought better of pointing out the veracity of the headline. "It's very puzzling. I know the boys that vanished. They all came from good homes. I doubt they're runaways. The only link I can figure is that they were all looking for work. And that isn't much to go on."

Boscio grimaced, "This is humiliating! If they're not runaways, then there's some sicko running around my town getting away with murder." The veins on the Sheriff's neck were standing out in thick purple cords, a startling sight to even Griffith, who had seen his moods before, none quite as beleaguered as this. He'd only been in Little Falls for a month longer than Boscio, and his visions of settling in a quiet crimeless town after battling it out in the streets of New York for ten years were starting to fizzle as fast as the suds on a warm beer.

Alan's thoughts were drifting back to the city. The drug dealers, those filthy dirtbags he'd had to befriend for a lousy tid-bit of information. The hookers, so burnt out from drugs and AIDS they resembled walking corpses. The pathetic homeless pushing their rusty carts up and down the streets, pilfering from dumpsters for empty cans. My God, Little Falls was so much purer than the shithole he'd abandoned with his wife and seven-year-old in tow. They shouldn't even be discussing possible kidnappings and maniacs in this sleepy burg. It was supposed to be about locking up drunks and getting cats out of trees, not Class

A felonies. He shook his head, popped a few Excedrins and prayed the boys were runaways.

"We've interviewed the locals over and over since the first kid vanished. Nobody knows anything."

Boscio clenched his teeth. "Then do it again and again until you come up with something concrete!"

The Sheriff took a long draft on his unfiltered weed. He cursed the pollution again as a cloud of grey cigarette smoke enveloped Griffith's head. The two lawmen coughed in unison. Boscio chuckled. "Smog's getting to you too, huh, Griff?"

"Dear Diary," Frank Lamb continued on the same page as he had written on earlier. He was stretched out on the large bed that Mrs. Dodd had fixed up for him, his gangly legs overhanging the edge. Apparently it had been a little boy's room. X-Men figures and model cars adorned the simple pine shelves. A baseball bat, well-worn glove, and ball sat gathering dust in the corner.

"Diary, I never felt more at home in all my life. They put me up in a nice room. I asked Mizz Dodd who's it had been but she wouldn't say. She kinda glazed over. Sad or mad. I can't figure which. Then she just up and walked away. She's sweet but she worries me some. Like she got secrets that no one else in the world can know. Mr. Dodd, too, though he is one fine man and a genius with his hands. He tol' me about his hobby. He called it taxidermy. It's about stuffing things. He showed me a buck he got huntin and a rabbit. He gutted them, stuffed 'em with straw and sewed 'em up. I never seen nothin like it. He put marble eyes in them, but they still look sad. Made me feel kinda bad." Frank paused, remembering Bugs, the rabbit he had kept as a pet, and how he'd cried for days when it got under the wheels of Old Man Rensler's Buick.

"Mr. Dodd told me he mostly stuffs the crows that are after the crops. He called it 'just-fiable homicide' and then he laughed. I laughed too. They're just gal-darn pesky birds anyway, right? He promised to show me how to stuff me one of my own come tomorrow. Guess I wouldn't mind staying here forever."

Frank Lamb slept like a log that night. The axe grinding out back in the shed didn't stir him at all.

Mrs. Irene Castle was not amused when Deputy Griffith came knocking at her door the next morning. With five children, two in diapers, she was at her wits' end.

Alan apologized for the inconvenience, and promised to be brief.

"Tommy! No!" Irene shrieked as she grabbed the toddler's hand from the fish bowl just in time to save Halo the Angelfish from an untimely death.

"Now, go wash your grubby little hands!" she yelled in utter exasperation before collapsing on the couch.

"Anything would help, Irene. You didn't see any of those young men around? Maybe asking for some work?"

Irene brushed her hair out of her eyes, and began to search the couch cushions. She seemed much more interested in the mysterious disappearance of her remote control than of those three lost boys.

"Hmm. Boys looking for work. Did you check the Dodd's place?" she asked, her hand wedged down between one grape juice stained cushion. She pulled up a Mutant Ninja Turtle doll, a stale oatmeal cookie and the TV Guide, but no remote.

Alan looked puzzled, "You mean that young couple down on Kings Road? I never even bothered them. I heard the woman's a fragile thing. Something about losing a child recently. Why would you bring them up?"

"Well, I don't like telling tales out of school," Irene said, her brow crinkling and her voice dropping an octave, "but I do be-

lieve somethin's not right over there."

Alan grew more intrigued, settling down in an easy chair and promptly getting goosed by a Barbie doll.

"Sorry," Irene continued. "Kids. Well, y'know."

"Anyhow, it was a tragedy alright, her losing little Jimmy that way. A harvester accident. Just a year ago."

Alan's eyes widened. "What were the circumstances of the accident?"

Irene sighed, trying to recall the details. "Well, they had a young hired hand back then. A little slow in the head if I remember. He was a local boy, name of Robert Briggs. Anyway, Hank-I mean Mr. Dodd was teaching him to use the harvester. Dear Lord--"

"Go on," Alan pressed impatiently.

"The boy was slow, like I told you. Seems he got the pedals mixed up, and when little Jimmy came running out on the field, he accelerated the thing instead of putting on the brake."

A tear welled in Irene's eye as she watched her own little boy playing with a hunk of petrified Play-Doh on the kitchen floor. "Chopped little Jimmy to pieces. Doc told me he looked like raw meat."

"Well, they went off after that. Y'know--mental." Irene tapped her head and rolled her eyes. "Specially Mrs. Dodd. The hired hand disappeared. Everyone thought he ran away scared, even though it was an accident. Marla Dodd said if she ever caught him she'd let Mutt & Jeff have a go at him. I can't rightly blame her. Poor gal." Irene tried valiantly to relight the Kool that had been snuffed out in the ashtray beside her hours ago.

"Again, have you seen any boys around looking for work since the-uh-unfortunate accident?" Alan pressed, studying the woman's pained expression.

Irene shrugged, craning her neck to see what Junior was doing on the floor in the kitchen. "Thomas Jr.!" she shrieked, bolting from her perch on the edge of the divan, "Do not put that in your mouth after it's been on the floor!" Little Tommy, looked up startled, dropping the cupcake he had carefully dusted off and was preparing to zestfully demolish, and began to bawl. Irene wheeled around, a curler flying from her carefully set and dippity-dood hair. "Deputy, I'm a busy woman. I do not snoop in other people's affairs." She paused, bending to retrieve the roller from under the couch, "However, I do imagine they must have someone helping them out there. It is a big farm. Now, if you'll excuse me--"

Alan rose to go, Thomas Jr.'s howling had attenuated into hitching sobs by the time he reached the screened porch. "Thanks for your help, Irene," he shouted over the din, tipping his Stetson politely. He walked slowly to the old Nova. It was way past time he paid the Dodds a visit.

As he climbed into his patrol car, the police band radio crackled to life, Sheriff Boscio's exasperated voice permeating the air waves "Griff, are you there?"

Alan punched the button on the side of the mike, "Roger. What's up?"

"Two of our missing boys just turned up home. They were runaways after all, the little sons-of-bitches! Thumbed to California, found out they weren't movie star material after all, and got back here an hour ago. Little bastards, wasting my time."

Griffith exhaled a sigh of relief. "What about the Evans kid?"

Boscio sounded indifferent, "Probably the same. Why don't you get back in here. Mrs. Pine called. Her husband's drunk again, threatening to kill her for the fifth time this month. So shake it, man."

Alan ten-foured and was headed back to the station when the feeling washed over him. It was hard to explain, a queasy sensation that something just wasn't right. He'd been having them since he was a kid and his hunches were usually right on the



money. Now, driving on that strip of dirt road, the feeling was back. As gooseflesh broke out on his forearms, Alan swerved the wheel of the old Nova cruiser, the tires squealing and kicking up dust on the old country road. He gunned the engine and went careening back toward Kings Road.

When Alan reached the Dodd house, he found Marla Dodd rocking on the screened porch. He cleared his throat to announce his arrival, apparently startling the frail woman. She jumped, dropping her knitting in her lap as he climbed the rickety stairs and opened the door. It screeched on its rusted hinges.

"May I help you?" she asked warily, smoothing the creases from the front of her dress as she stood.

"Mrs. Dodd, I'm investigating the disappearance of a local kid."

Marla Dodd rolled her eyes. "Lord help me! The law's comin' to harass me! A helpless woman!" she wailed, her tone turning uncharacteristically surly.

"No, ma'am. I'm Deputy Griffith. I just thought you may have seen him. Young man, brown hair, slight build. Name of Bill Evans. Did he happen by looking for work or anything?"

Marla stepped towards him hesitantly. He thought her an attractive woman, aside from the pronounced wrinkles around her eyes and the grey hairs peeking through her natural blonde tresses. Alan would have pegged her at about forty if he hadn't known her true age to be thirty-two. The loss of her only son must have been responsible for that, he thought ruefully.

"Well, there ain't nobody here but me and Mr. Dodd," she replied, her tone softening. "Hasn't been for 'bout a year now. Look, I'm sorry for my tone. Why don't you come in and have a glass of lemonade? Bet you're thirsty in this heat."

Once inside the house, Alan felt a twinge of remorse. Boscio would have his badge if he knew what he was up to, but the gooseflesh hadn't abated, and now his stomach was doing flip-flops. All instinct aside, he could hardly picture this frail young woman involved in murder.

She was setting two places mechanically when the door swung open. A strapping bear of a man towered in the doorway, around forty with weather-beaten skin. He looked startled as the Deputy rose to greet him.

"Mr. Henry Dodd?" Alan half asked as he held out his hand. Dodd wiped his hands on his overalls, a mixture of congealed grease and straw rubbed off.

Mrs. Dodd pulled another plate from the cupboard. "This is Deputy Griffith, Hank. Wants to know about some missing boy. You seen any out there in the barn?" Alan was put off by the woman's unmistakable sarcasm.

"This is quite serious, ma'am," he replied, trying to keep his cool. His hand gently patted the .45 tucked into his waistband. Mrs. Dodd might be fragile, but her husband looked like someone to be reckoned with.

Dodd shook his head. "Ain't seen nothin' lately but cows and a PIG," he replied, staring at the Deputy with steel emotionless eyes. Alan bristled. He did not appreciate being toyed with. Still he had no reason to accuse these people.

"I don't mean to harass you, sir, but I'd like to ask you a few questions," Alan said in the most officious tone he could muster.

Dodd snorted something inaudible and stormed out. As the door slammed behind the strapping man, Alan spoke up, "I will have to question you both, Mrs. Dodd, but first, may I use your washroom?"

She answered without looking up from her place at the oven. "Sure can. First door on your left. And don't let the mister rattle you. He never had much use for cops. Didn't do a damn thing when that punk killed our little boy."

Alan walked silently down the corridor to the small bathroom. If he left now, any evidence could be destroyed. He feigned urination by running the water, peering around for something,

anything. He gingerly opened the medicine cabinet. Aspirins. BenGay. Band-aids. The usual.

He checked the floor under the claw-foot tub. A small balled-up piece of paper lay among the dust bunnies under the porcelain fixture.

Alan retrieved it carefully, opening it and trying his best to press out the creases. It was spotted with water and the ink had run in some places but it was legible enough to read.

THEY'RE COMIN FOR ME. I CAN HEAR THE KEY TURNING IN THE LOCK. OH GOD, I DIDN'T KILL THEIR KID. WHY DO THEY KEEP CALLING ME ROBERT? I'M FRANK LAMB. I WANT TO LIVE--

That was when the loyal Bic finally ran out of ink. Too late for the poor boy.

Alan's body was tense and his mind reeling as he stuffed the paper gingerly in his coat pocket. He flushed the toilet and splashed some cold water on his face.

Frank Lamb. He hadn't even been reported missing. Maybe no one would ever have known.

When Alan returned to the kitchen most of the color had come back to his cheeks. He looked over at Marla Dodd and shuddered. She was retrieving a large roasting pan from the oven.

"Ah, just in time, Deputy Griffith. Supper's ready! Sit! I got some leftover lamb stew!"

"Gotta hand it to you, Griff," Boscio admitted, staring at the glassy-eyed woman in the holding cell. "I still can't get over it, though. They killed three innocent boys. Briggs, Evans, Lamb."

"Maybe more. How's Dodd coming along?"

"He's still in recovery at St. Agnes. I almost wish you'd have finished him off. He's loony as they come. Even crazier than her," Boscio remarked, waving his hand in the direction of Marla Dodd, who sat motionless in the cell. "He keeps mumbling about how he never did anything. Just fired them when they screwed up their job."

"Fired them? Is that the words he used?"

"No. In fact he said he gave them the axe. But that's what the expression means, isn't it?"

Alan turned to Boscio, "No Sheriff. I think he meant it literally."

"Guess so," the Sheriff chuckled, "Crazy bastard's got a sense of humor."

Alan nodded, puffing feverishly on one of Boscio's smokes. He'd barely noticed he'd taken the habit up again in the last twenty-four hours. "Do you think we'll ever re-

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cover the bodies?"

"We've been all over that place. Nothing. Thank God Mrs. Dodd cracked. A full confession will stand up in court. Bodies or no bodies. Those two loonies will hang."

Irene Castle was rocking on her porch, her oldest girl Katie propped on her lap.

"Those people was crazy, huh, mama?" the little girl said matter-of-factly as she gazed out toward the Dodd farm, her crystal-blue eyes sparkling with morbid fascination.

Irene began mechanically braiding the child's hair. The whole incident had unnerved her more than she cared to admit.

"Yes, Katie. They were sick. Now I don't want to hear you talkin' anymore about the Dodds, you hear? It's grown-up business."

Katie nodded her head despondently. "Yes, mama."

The two rocked for a moment in silence. "Just one thing I don't understand," Katie mused, leaning her small head against her mother's chin. "That new scarecrow Mr. Dodd put up just the other day. I mean they already had two, why'd they need another..."

Irene thought for a moment. Questions, always questions.

"To scare away more crows, I reckon," Irene replied, tying the last braid with a bright yellow ribbon, "Now go on out back, honey an' play. And no more talk about you know what."

Alan opened the beat-up Amana in the backroom of the Sheriff station, retrieved a tall can of Budweiser and slammed the door shut with his foot. Boscio refused a cold one in favor of a cup of coffee and snapped on the small Sony he had propped on his desk. "Damn news," he muttered, switching the channel. "We got them loonies and now they're harping about the missing bodies."

Alan leaned wearily on the bars of the empty holding cell, swallowing half the can of beer in one gulp. "We'll try draggin' the river tomorrow."

Boscio fingered one of the stuffed black crows he had retrieved as evidence, straw spilling on his desk blotter as he picked at the seams.

"You don't suppose you could do this to a human?" he asked morosely, staring into the black marble eyes of the lifeless bird.

Alan shrugged, "With Dodd anything's possible. I suppose he could have. Did you see the size of that deer? He did quite a respectable job on that poor animal."

Boscio tossed the bird aside disgustedly. "I suppose those two big hounds could of done quite a job disposing of the insides."

Alan polished off his beer, crushing the can and flipping it into the wastebasket near Boscio's desk.

"We still got the problem of finding the bodies...or what's left of them. Do you think Dodd's really stupid enough to just leave them hanging around for us to find?"

Boscio carefully rolled a shaft of straw between his fingers and smiled, "Yes son, I think that's exactly what he did."

The Dodd place was quiet that night, the yellow police tape marking off the crime scene billowed and whipped in the fierce wind. The three scarecrows, stuffing spilling from the crudely sewn seams that joined their lifeless flesh hung motionless, their marble eyes, staring through the eyeholes in their burlap hoods, kept a silent vigil over the farm.

ptw

THE THUG

See this scar?

Yeah. Between the eyes.

That was '82. Maloney. Portland.

Didn't see him. The next day,

Made him wish he'd stayed home.

Like a stuck pig. Took him almost two hours.

Bought the farm like a hero. Sure.

You don't like it? This face? So?

Who's asking you to?

Don't get paid for looks.

Get paid for protection.

What I do best. What I know. What I like.

Hate the blood. Just want them gone.

Out of the way.

Don't care who they are.

Don't have to.

Like this. Like you.

About to give it up.

Now. Aren't you?

Hey! Not so fast.

See? Not much good, that knife.

Is it?

Guess not. Sorry.

Sure. Real sorry.

- Lawrence Greenberg

IN THE MAZE

The game becomes more complex

Each moment it is allowed to proceed

Simple truths are neither

Each step into the labyrinth

Takes a man farther and further

From the freedom he so fervently pursues

Whether he turns to the left

Or to the right

Does not change the fact

That a direction is merely an exercise

Of his Will

A folly he believes

Can really affect the outcome

Of our pathetic situation

-Stan Gillespie

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Barbara Malenky is a veteran small press author. Her short fiction has appeared in The And, Fresh Blood, Terminal Fright, Cyber-Psycho's AOD, Samsara, Magic Realism, and many others. About "Finding Lottie" she writes, "The story seemed to take on a life of its own as I wrote it. Maybe Lottie made me write it?"

FINDING LOTTIE

BY BARBARA MALENKY

Illustrated by David Bond

*Eyes are windows
into a person's soul.*

SHE SAT AT HOWARD'S EVERY night, bending her elbow back and forth like a crane doing a job. Her name was Lottie something-or-other, we never did find out. She filled the barstool and space around her with a masculine figure in too-tight jeans, or sometimes, in the summer, too-tight small shorts. She was a bull of a woman and, with the aroma of the streets about her, didn't often have a taker for the bar stool next to her.

Lottie had been frequenting the bar for eight months. She always showed at 7 P.M. and she always sat on the same barstool. Besides telling me what her poison was, usually whiskey sours, heavy on the sour, she spoke little. Lottie was just one of those

regular private drinkers that can fade into the woodwork of any joint in America.

Then one night she didn't show, and another night she wasn't around, and another night the talk started up. By the fourth night rumor had it the poor old thing was lying on a concrete slab in Citywide Morgue waiting for somebody to lay claim to her remains by identifying her person.

A few bar regulars discussed it and Jack Mays jerked some straws out of the broom and we each drew one, and I got one of the short ones and Boris Thomkins drew the other one.

Boris emptied my tip jar and solicited donations all evening from Howard's patrons. He collected near a hundred dollars. Not much, but enough to get old Lottie a cremation if we would forego the urn.

Boris and I went down together to Citywide, and a grim-faced gofer in a dirty uniform rolled a sheet-covered lump in front of us, and jerked back the cover that caused a "whip" sound in the air.

Boris and I stared at the body, and looked at each other, then stared at the body some more before Boris gave this loud belch and threw up his supper on the attendant's pants.

It was Lottie, from the size of the body, but maybe that could have been contested if a lawyer was present. There was a frightful mess lying on that slab. The face had been pounded into a clumpy sausage. Like a cherry atop a malted, there was an ulcerated eyeball on top a lump that might have been a nose. The hair was matted together in three bloody spikes that framed the thing. It looked like the product of a very vivid and sick imagination.

"My Gaw-d-d," Boris moaned, still hunched near the floor. "I can't say *who* the hell that is."

"Naw," I said. "Now that poor thing got to have somebody caring enough to see she gets a proper send off. We drew the job fair and square. She was obviously all alone in this world and far as I could see, never harmed another thing." Then I got an idea. "Let's ID her another way. Do you remember any birthmarks or...."

"A tattoo!" Boris propped his head back in view. Little flecks of vomit dotted his upper lip and one corner of his mouth. I felt my stomach churn, and looked away. He was right. I walked

to the other side of the slab and leaned down, and there it was almost covered by the frozen spread of her upper arm flab; a small dandelion.

"Yeah," I said to the attendant. "That's Lottie something-or-other. That's about the best we can do."

The attendant left us alone for a few minutes. Boris grabbed my arm and pulled me to one side as if he thought Lottie might not like what he had to say.

"J.T.," he whispered. "Look man, I've got something on my mind. I just don't want you to think I'm crazy or anything...but I want to do something...rather, I want both of us to do it. Okay?"

"Okay?" I laughed at the look on his face. It was total terror. "Not okay until I know what it is."

"Listen," he said and let his eyes roll to the side where Lottie lay. "All my life I've heard a superstition. My granny and my mother and my auntie and even my uncle Jack told me about it when I was a kid...and I've never been this close to a murdered person before and, well, I wanna check it out. It might be the only chance I ever have."

"Where is this leading, Boris?" I grinned, thinking he was one kinky son-of-a-bitch.

"I wanna look in that eyeball," he whispered and his voice shook.

I stared at him. "You want to look in that eyeball," I repeated. "For what?"

"They say a murdered person's eyeball holds the image of the last person seen...the killer. I know you heard that saying before, J.T. Don't act like I'm nuts." Boris had me on that one.

"Sure," I admitted. "I've heard it. That's the oldest superstition in the world, but you're the only son-of-a-bitch I know who would *believe* it." I moved to stand closer to Lottie. "Go ahead, be my guest." I waved a hand over her.

"I...can't do it by myself, J.T.," Boris said, his back still turned from the body. "I want you to back me up. I want you to look, too. I want you to look *first*. You've been in the service, you've seen stuff I haven't. You can stomach this shit better than me. I wanna look but only if there's a reason to...you know?"



"Jesus," I groaned, and bent over the body, fixing my gaze on the messy orb. I had served my country, all right, slinging hash on a Navy ship and admittedly, some of the stuff I'd fixed for those suckers to eat didn't look any better than the hash spread on the slab before me, except maybe looked a little better.

Lottie had been brown-eyed and in death the color remained, but a flatter shade without the soul behind to light it up. It was intact and surprisingly unharmed, as though having been protected somehow during the onslaught. It had been free-swung away from the rest of the facial mess and lay, still attached by the nerve sheath an optic nerve, in a little nest of skin and dried blood and mucus, lending itself up for my scrutiny. I examined it first with mere curiosity like a child an ant farm, thinking unreasonable things like how much such a perfect specimen would bring from the local college lab, or how would the mortician put it back together with the face...or would he even try...before Boris broke through my concentration.

"What is it, J.T.? Is there anything there? Should I take a look?"

I settled my gaze on the cornea, and when I did I wished I hadn't. The shape of a head was frozen there, clear and clean as though caught with the flash of a camera bulb. I motioned to Boris. "Well, I'll be damned if there isn't something here."

Boris came to my side and bent low before sucking in his breath. He took hold of my arm to steady himself. "It looks funny, don't it? Like a...a..." he whispered.

"It looks like a squash," I finished. I bent closer for a better look. The features were those of a photographic negative, dark and sinister, with the mouth split in a silver-white grimace, looking like it had been caught as the blow landed that finished the game of murder. There was a bluish haze shining through where the eyes would have been. Around the outline stood a jerky bush of dark hair.

"Everything dark is light...everything light is dark..." I whispered, trying to get a grasp on the picture Lottie would be taking along with her into eternity.

"Okay, boys." The attendant threw open the door and marched in waving a wad of forms. "You gotta sign some things taking responsibility for the corpse, case anybody else shows later. I guess you got some money for the bar-be-cuing, am I right?"

I scribbled my name across the bottom of the forms, while Boris stared fixedly at the eyeball, knowing our job wasn't done yet...trying hard to listen to what Lottie was telling us.

Two days later, Boris stopped by Citywide and picked up Lottie's ashes. They were in a big white container that looked something like a Chinese carry-out meal. It gave me the spooks I tell you, to realize how inconsequential a human body is.

"Well," he said, placing the container on the bar and pushing it across to me. "What now, J.T.? Where should we put them?"

I couldn't figure a better place than where she had spent many hours of her last months of life.

"Let's take them up to the roof and throw them in the wind," I said. Boris nodded, and that's what we did after the bar closed. Neither of us wanted to keep the container so we sat it on the edge of the roof, and a stout breeze came and picked it up. Boris and I watched the container float and jerk about down the sidewalk below. We watched it until it blew out of sight. Then we went home, both of us thinking the blues.

We had agreed that night not to discuss what we had seen with anyone...especially the police. There was no way we would be believed, and the possibility of our become suspects was very likely. We kept our eyes and ears open. There was a small investigation made by the local authorities and they cheerfully shared with us the bit of information gathered on Lottie something-or-other, before writing up their report and filing it away. She had been one of the city's lost souls that, being homeless, slept anywhere she could, with anyone she could, for anything she could

get. The theory was she had known the person who'd juiced her, and the motive was probably robbery. Time of death coincided with the time Lottie always left the bar...closing time at 2 A.M. In truth, after the first week, she was forgotten. She became, as the saying goes, yesterday's news.

To everybody except Boris and me.

To us she became a job we had been chosen, somehow, to finish.

Boris showed up one night with a Polaroid and proceeded to aggravate the customers with picture taking. Every time he'd snap a face, he'd hand me the negative part and I'd study it, then put it in a drawer for a second look later. In truth, I didn't put much stock in his notion we would match the head shot on Lottie's eyeball with a photo negative. There was something wrong with the vision I had seen, but I didn't know what and it was driving me nuts. I took a trip to the local farmers market and stood around the vegetable aisle checking out the different types of squash. A local photographer was only too happy to share his knowledge with me, and in the three hours I bribed him with free bourbon, I should have become an expert on the business, yet only understood finally that overexposure meant too much light and underexposure the opposite. Not much help.

By the end of summer I stopped looking. It was no use to go on with our detective work. Boris and I were amateurs of the worst kind...unknowledgeable. I was a bartender and a good one, and Boris was a successful furniture salesman at Room City, but we were failures at coming up with sleuth ideas. Besides that, the image we had seen could have been anything...a piece of lint saturated into the eye moisture, or our own reflection as we took turns examining her eyeball. Either way, there was nothing more we could do and I was tired of losing sleep over it and tired of Boris running customers off in his incessant pursuit of the truth. I told Boris to lay off, and I began to block out all thoughts of the murder.

Lottie something-or-other had other ideas.

It was tradition at Howard's to host a costume party on Halloween. There was a live band that played top 40 music, and a few Elvis tunes when the customers got full of liquid happiness. Howard himself made a rare appearance to present free drinks to the winning costume. I even got in the spirit and dressed up like an executioner, which in real life is what I would have wanted to be. There was a big crowd that night and Boris came in about 10:30. He had half of a costume on and was fiddling with his mask.

"Damn thing," he muttered. "I left it in the car trunk and the heat made it stick together." He handed it to me. "See if you can pour some whiskey or something on it...loosen it up while I take a leak."

I unglued the mask and took it across to the men's room and watched from behind as he pulled it on.

"How you like it, J.T.?" Am I gonna win free drinks tonight or what?" We stared at each other through the mirror, his back still turned toward me. My stomach did a flip-flop.

"You son-of-a-bitch," I whispered. "You had me thinking all the wrong things."

Boris turned and stared at me out of a squash-shaped white mask with two dark rubbery lips and a fringe of orange hair framing it.

"Didn't take a rocket scientist to do that, boy," he said and laughed low. "Besides, what the hell was I supposed to do when I drew that short straw but play along?"

"I should have thought of a mask."

"You just figuring that one out, J.T.?" Boris said.

"Why the hell...why that poor old soul? It couldn't have been for money."

Boris laughed a mean little sound. "She was nothing and thought she was something. She was a whore for money but she was too good for me...led me along, then wouldn't deliver the

goods. I always did have a temper, you know." He turned back to the mirror. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm on my way to winning some drinks tonight." He started out the door, then stopped and eyed me again. "Don't look so stupid, J.T. It wasn't no great loss on the world. Actually, when you think about it, I did her a favor."

There was a line of folks waiting for service when I got back to the bar, and I was able to clear my mind of its shock for a while. I never felt so helpless. The police would never believe the story, might even turn it back on me. There had been no witnesses, except the eyeball and it was buried six feet under. Boris had gotten away with it.

"Can you fix this doll up, J.T.?" Boris stood at the counter, an arm wrapped around a woman. He leaned across at me with a nasty sneer. "She wants a drink before we go trick or treating."

"Give me a whiskey sour, heavy on the sour."

She was a tall figure, dressed as a Twenties Flapper with strings of pearls and a fringed dress and a headband that twinkled in the bar lights. Her face was covered by a half-mask of fluffy feathers and sparkle, leaving only her mouth and chin exposed. Her costume was pretty elaborate for the crowd at Howard's who came mostly as Dracula or Elvira or a bum. The flapper dress slid off on pale shoulder, and when she turned a little, what I got a glimpse of made my spit dry up; a small dandelion tattooed on her arm. Keeping my thoughts to myself, I mixed her drink. She laid a crumpled twenty on the counter.

"Keep the change, honey," she said and winked, her dark eyes twinkling behind the mask. "It's just paper to me." She

killed her drink, then turned and wrapped her arms around Boris. "You want your trick or your treat first, honey?" She turned and winked at me again, and together, they went out the door.

The same dirty uniformed gofer rolled the body in. This time I had come alone.

"You're getting to be a familiar face around here," he said. He whipped off the sheet. "Must be a psycho running loose, if you want my opinion. This one's almost as bad as the other one."

Boris didn't look "almost" as bad as Lottie something-or-other had looked...except for one difference. The face had melted into a sagging ruin and pieces of tissue and bone peeked through the mess in comic relief. The nose was gone, the mouth a gaping hole of blackness. His hair was missing, having been ripped from his scalp. Still intact were both his eyeballs.

I bent over and peered into them.

The image was not frozen but moving along like an old-time film clip. The woman Boris had left with did a slow strip-tease for her audience of one, leaving the mask on until the last. She came to mount Boris and began rocking back and forth. When the moment of supreme pleasure arrived, she ripped off her mask and looked down into his eyes. Her skin began a melt-down as she raised an arm through the air. Her hand clutched a knife and she brought it down hard into him, over and over and over.

She turned her one-eyed stare on me and winked.

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By Appointment Only

Short - Short Section

TIME IS CHEAP. THE TINSEL OF NEON and hologram shadows play across the faces of people playing Virtual Reality Celebrity Games. Pale smiles grinning from Sexual Kaleidoscope Sensation Tattoos. Breathless. Layers of the city's glass like the

thing else a busy city street can dream up and spit out. It's pure electric. Not a bad place to spend eternity.

Yet sometimes the reality hurts; my smiles are half-pixeled and abstract and my laughter is always cut by the wind and moans of pass-

world whenever she passes by and puts me into a fast-forward haze of pure bliss. She's always there and she's always alone.

If I only had time for her; time to give her.

Newbury Street

by Jon Lyndon

background to a well oiled cinema screen. Sharp angles invariably imperceptible with dreams of luminous plastic and static after-taste. Everybody looking like comedians on cyberdisc-LSD or drugstore cowboys lost in simulated stimulations of future rodeos. And time just keeps on melting.

There's a girl in the mist of all this magazine hunger. She's hot. Like a sunset on a gold-paved sidewalk. Absolutely radioactive.

I want her....

Each ghost has its own playroom, and I have Newbury Street. Boston in Eastern America. It's like illegal mirrored Tek-glasses with a sixty thousand meg-drive movie-star capacity. A highway of scorpion shops, occult bookstores, Yamasaki Neon-Strobed Personality-Transfer Glam Shops, CD-ROM/RAM Nerve-implant Music Studios, coffee cafes, smart-candy video stores, *Japanese Ninsei Bike and Food Stands*, Sweet and Sour Porn Booths, *Techno-Simulated Sensory Glasses* and any-

ing cars and screaming fool.s. But I don't mind too much, the music is good. Smooth-polished bleeding:

*I hold u in my hands, now...
I die w/ the image of u, now--
My suicide your solution, now!*

It sometimes describes who I was, when I lived among the meat. It sometimes makes me feel sad, remembering when I used to sink the cold steel of jack/heads into my nerve implants and dance with the terminal whirlwind of the space matrix. It reminds me of the one I would do anything for; the one I died for, and now I really don't remember who this was. My memory has become white noise; shattering in places and reassembling in others.

But I don't need my memory; there's someone I follow though the mazes of people, cars, and shops of my street. And she's always there; a blue dance like dream pools of beautiful brightness. She stops my

At the point of forever my street can become a slipstream of madness. Rain is like pillow feathers. The heat of the sun for me is just cool damp air like steam from an old refrigerator. Cars pass right through me. I can touch things but with no true feelings. I can make things move which is the closest I can get to an orgasm. I wish I could feel the rain's wetness.

I'm living in a storm like Dante's *Inferno*. The mystery keeps me here like the circles of hell, and reality is a bad edit. Grainy footage. Spliced film.

Each breath a shift and flicker in the projector reels of some God's Movie Theater.

I reach out to touch the girl I gaze upon with my translucent eyes, but my hand fades into her yellow dress. I've fallen in love with her just the same. I wish I could follow her into her apartment on Boylston and Commonwealth but I can never leave the area of Newbury Street. Not without feeling the burning of every pain I've ever felt in my life. Newbury Street is my prison, my Hell and my Heaven.

I watch her walk into the doorway of her gothic apartment block knowing I will see her again tomorrow. Knowing I will wander my street alone tonight, and knowing she will sleep alone tonight.

Everyday she walks the sidewalks of my street and brings me Love/It's a tight and Lonely Love but it's all I've got...

She reads books, drinks coffee at the cafes, buys Indian jewelry and smiles a lot. Sometimes she cries, and she is always alone.

Maybe if I pay less attention to her someone real will take her soft hand and she'll leave my street, which has through me become her prison as well. She is tied spiritu-

ally to my paranormal self. But I'm selfish and I watch her grow old.

Alone...on Newbury Street.

Time is cheap.

pw

"YOU CAN KEEP THAT STUPID RESTAURANT," Hannah said with a sneer. "It has to fail anyway, just like everything else you touch."

Hannah laughed, a bitter bark that turned into body wracking gasps. "Get it?" she wheezed. "Everything you touch fails, even your wife! Too bad you can't be charged for killing me, but cancer just isn't illegal yet."

Andrew sighed. "Why don't we just drop this tragic, dying wife act and get on with the reason you called this meeting. I've got important things to do. You know, people to meet, places to go—"

"Bimbos to screw!" Hannah finished for him.

Andrew ground his teeth together. "Look Hannah, unlike you, I still have a long life to live, so what do you want from me?"

"Revenge," Hannah said. "Just in case I

chef we're bound to catch on!"

Three days later Andrew was looking over the kitchen with Sylvester. He stared at the slight, sallow, young man and wondered again for the hundredth time how he had managed to find a cook who could work such magic with meat. In the two weeks since he hired him, Sylvester had created the most indescribably wonderful test dishes for Andrew. With five days until the restaurant's grand opening, only Hannah's death-sleep would make his life perfect.

The ringing phone broke into his thoughts. Picking up the receiver, he heard the words he'd been waiting for. Hannah had quietly slipped into a coma during the night. Feigning grief, he turned to Sylvester and told him to take the day off. "I can't think about the business right now," he said. "At least until it's over. We may have had our troubles, but she needs me now. No one should die alone."

"I understand, boss," Sylvester said. "Look, I'll be working on a few new recipes here, so if you get hungry or just need the company, come back, okay?"

Touched, Andrew grabbed the younger

then hid the dog and himself behind a tall hedge that fronted the street further down the block. He peeked between the branches, and when he saw a large car speeding up to them, he shoved the animal's carcass through the shrubs and into the road directly in front of the oncoming vehicle. He heard the screech of brakes, a car door slam, and a voice yell, "Oh my God!"

Satisfied, Andrew crept away from his hiding place, cut

across some yards, and went to his car. He drove to the hospital to sit with Hannah for a while. Staring at her with both loathing and triumph, he spoke in a soft but cruel voice. "I hope you can hear me. I just killed Pooshie and it's all because of you. I poisoned her and threw her in front of a car. Made it look like she got loose and ran out into the street."

He stopped talking as his voice broke. Wiping at his eyes with his sleeve, he took her hand and whispered, "I hate you and I plan to waste all your glorious money. I'm going to enjoy every second I outlive you."

Leaving her, he went over to Chez Andre' and found Sylvester true to his word. He was there finishing a sauteed dish covered with a rich cream sauce. "Care to try it boss?" Sylvester asked.

"You'd think I'd have no appetite, but strange as this sounds, I'm hungry enough to eat a horse," Andrew replied sitting down.

Sylvester shuddered, "Uh, don't mention horse meat. Tough stringy stuff. Never use it." Then he smiled and placed a plate in front of Andrew. Bringing a bottle of Scotch to the table he pulled up a chair and sat across from his employer. "I think we both need this, today," he said as he filled two water glasses with the amber liquid and took a long drink.

Andrew followed, savoring the taste of good liquor. "No more cheap stuff for me," he toasted, raising the glass high in a mock salute. "Only the best for Chez Andre'."

"I'll drink to that!" Sylvester saluted back, then took another long hit. He refilled the glasses and the two men sat quietly drinking for a while until Sylvester noticed Andrew's cold, untouched dinner. "Hey, can't let a new recipe go to waste! I'll just whip up another serving and we can drink ourselves blind."

As the chef prepared another plate, Andrew drank. "I think it's too late for me to get drunk. I'm there," he said.

Returning with dinner, Sylvester said, "So am I, boss. So am I. Terrible thing happened to me this afternoon," he added as he topped off their glasses. "Hit a dog, big sonofabitchen poodle. Thing just flew out of some bushes and bam! Felt awful, so awful I can't even eat."

Andrew swallowed a mouthful of dinner, savoring the distinctive flavor when what Sylvester said sunk in. He took a long sip of his drink, trying to fight the sudden guilt. "That's too bad," he finally managed to say, wishing he'd picked a different car to throw Pooshie in front of. *Poor Sylvester!*

BITCHIN' DEATH

by Diane Arrelle

die before this stinking divorce becomes legal, I've had my will rewritten and left everything except Chez Andre' to Pooshie."

Andrew watched her labored breathing as he tried to hide the sick feeling in his stomach. He'd really hoped that she'd go before she remembered the will. "Well Hannah, I guess you win," he said getting up and walking to the door. "Just remember that no matter what happens, I'll still be alive and kicking long after you and that stupid poodle are six feet under."

Andrew fumed all the way to the car. The doctors had told him she only had a very short time to live and could slip into a coma any day. After that, it was only a matter of her giving up the fight and dying.

Suddenly, he had the start of an idea. *What if that neurotic little bitch were to meet with a fatal accident before Hannah died, but after it was too late to alter the will again?* Andrew nodded to himself as he got into his green Jaguar and drove off. "Why, as the only surviving relation, I'd inherit everything and Chez Andre' would be a guaranteed success!" He laughed and felt his tensed muscles relax. "With Sylvester as my new

man's shoulder and squeezed. "Thanks," he said and left.

Rushing home to his apartment, he grabbed the bag waiting on the end table and drove out to the house. He crept into the back yard and found Pooshie in her favorite spot, sleeping on the lounge next to the pool. He picked up the large overweight poodle and quickly carried her out to his car. Pooshie looked at her ex-master, wagged her tail a few times, and licked his face.

"Stop that," he snapped, feeling queasy. "You are nothing but the stupid animal that will ruin my life. If you really love me, you'll make this easier!" He put her on the front seat, gave her a gentle pat on the head, and muttered, "I'm really sorry old girl."

He pulled the prepared syringe from the bag and injected the dog with poison. Greg, his chemist friend, promised him that it was extremely fast and extremely lethal. Pooshie blinked three times, whimpered once, laid her head on her paws, and stopped breathing.

Andrew wiped tears from his eyes, surprised to find he was crying. He started the car and drove slowly down the street where he used to live. Turning the corner, he parked,

Not knowing what else to say, he finished his meal. Chewing slowly, he bit down on something hard and felt his tooth break. "What the hell," he muttered, spitting the piece of tooth and the hard object into his napkin. This can't be, he thought as he looked at a small piece of leather embedded with a diamond. If he didn't know better he'd swear it looked just like it came from Pooshie's green diamond-studded collar. "What's this?" he barked at the suddenly pale chef. "What did you do!"

"Well...uh...Boss, I cooked the poodle."

"You what!" Andrew shrieked, horrified that he'd eaten Pooshie, and even more horrified as he realized he'd eaten meat saturated with a potent, lethal poison. Trying to draw in a deep breath, he found his chest muscles constricting painfully. His heart pounded faster and faster, and his vision blurred.

Sylvester's voice swirled in and out of focus as the room slowly spun. "...discovered...didn't have enough fresh meat...dog in the trunk...like to use domestic animals...good flavor and consistency...always well cared for and clean...."

"And poisoned!" Andrew gasped as he slid off his seat onto the rich, thick, carpet of his restaurant. Diluted, but poison just the same, he thought, as regret overcame his fear.

Digging his fingers into the expensive rug that would be meaningless to him in a few seconds, Andrew vaguely noticed the ringing of the phone in the distance like waves rushing in and receding. Sylvester's voice joined the tide as he shouted, "Send an ambulance, quick!"

Andrew felt the chef kneeling beside him. "Hang on Boss, that was the hospital and they are sending help. Hang on, because it's a miracle. Hannah woke up! She'll be there to greet you in just a few minutes!"

But Andrew knew it was too late for help. As he sighed his last breath, and death closed his eyes to the world, his last thoughts were on Hannah. The bitch was going to outlive him.

pw

I WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN THE house spider came to live with us. Back then, our doors were always open, and living near the woods, there was always the opportunity for uninvited guests.

No one noticed it at first. It found a comfortable niche underneath the stairway leading to the basement. Only when I was sent down to fetch a jar of pickles one day was it discovered, but by then it had already "moved in".

Its "nest"—which is what I called it, it seemed too involved to be called a web—inhabited the underside of the top tread of the stairway, not quite as thick as cotton candy,

but unnavigable by any other insect standards. In fact, a few of those unfortunate insects were already imbedded in the nest and wrapped up tight like tiny corpses. Where the house spider was at the time, I could only guess. The dim light of the basement was of little help. And it was only when I got the idea that the house spider perhaps didn't live in the nest at all, and in fact most likely lived outside of it, that the hairs on the back of my neck began to tingle, for it could have been right overhead.

I nearly dropped the jar of pickles I was holding and quickly scrambled up the stairs to my mother, who wondered where I'd been.

I didn't tell anyone of the house spider's presence. It seemed a shame that all the work that went into building such a nest would have to be destroyed. That and the fact that the only harm the house spider did was capturing other uninvited guests. Which didn't seem to be much harm at all. In fact, it seemed quite useful.

But as the summer months came and

the refrigerator, his breakfast gone cold; and the two weeks he stayed upstairs in bed, not once getting out, except to go to the bathroom. First, "Your father's taking a vacation," our mother explained to us. Then, "Your father's got a flu bug." But after a while she stopped trying to explain and told us just to hurry up and do our chores or hurry up and eat our dinner or just plain hurry up, as if there was something after us and if we weren't careful it would soon catch up to us.

As a result, by the start of the new school year, our home became both brooding and quiet.

Eventually, Dad moved out of the bedroom and came downstairs to live in the living room. He sat in his favorite chair and watched TV most of the day, while Mom vacuumed under his feet. A doctor came to visit him once a week. My two sisters were seldom seen. They took to spending more and more time in their rooms and over their friends' houses. Mom didn't bother with the canning that year and left the vegetables to

The House Spider

by Kurt Newton

went, the house spider's nest grew.

My two sisters seldom entered the basement, if at all. For them it was too slippery and icky down there to begin with, let alone think of what might be living in all those damp, lightless corners. My father spent a lot of time out of the house, and when his footsteps were finally heard, it was usually in his study, away from us children. So that left only my mother and I. She canned tomatoes in the fall and made jellies and jams. Her canning jars and pans sat to one side beneath the one bulb which spread light in progressively dimmer degrees to the farther reaches of the basement. The light that made it to the stairway was enough to see what the house spider had been up to.

The nest now included the top three stair treads. A series of near-invisible wires helped to keep the nest suspended. The densely spun bodies imbedded in the mass were now the size of mice. At any other time this would have worried me, but there were other, more pressing, concerns on my mind. Because it was also the summer my father lost his job.

I remember low arguments at night which seeped through the walls as I tried to sleep; a day I happened to catch my father sitting at the kitchen table staring at the magnets on

rot in the garden.

I didn't feel it was necessary to tell anyone about the house spider living underneath the basement stairs, and at times forgot it was even there.

The years passed. My sisters exchanged their girl friends for boy friends and eventually got pregnant and married and moved out of the house. I tried to keep up with the chores and general maintenance Dad would have done, but after a while the house began to take on a lazy, unkempt appearance. Door hinges squeaked, windows became stuck in their casements. The interior paint faded and the heads of nails showed through the plaster until it looked as if the walls were fastened together with shirt buttons. Mom did the best she could, working several jobs to help support the house. Her hair turned grey and, like the nail heads, the wrinkles on her face, which had only been ghost lines before, began to show through.

There was hardly a reason for anyone to enter the basement anymore, what with Mom not canning, my sisters gone, and me working odd jobs and not always available to do the fetching. But on certain days, with nothing else better to do, I would excuse myself from the dinner table and go down into the basement to check on our uninvited

guest who decided to stay all these years.

The entire underside of the stairway was now home to the house spider. Its collective web had grown into a massively intricate structure stretching from floor to ceiling, with support strands extending upward and along the ceiling's floor joists in all directions, like the branches of a tree.

I remember one particular day, as I stood marvelling at the nest's structure, I wondered just what had kept it going all these years. Surely it had exhausted its habitat of flies and beetles and mice by now? There came a scuttling behind me--a shifting in the degrees of light and dark in the deeper recesses of the basement--which prompted me to abandon this train of thought and return upstairs. Perhaps it didn't want me to know. Or perhaps it was just something I shouldn't have thought to ask.

It's been twelve years now since I've been home. At seventeen, I enlisted in the Army and have since served three successful tours of duty. I have served in many parts of the world, large wealthy countries and small struggling ones with no food, no economy and no form of stable rule, where apathy rules instead. It is in these countries that I've come across the nests--the house spiders. It is rare for a hut or hovel to be without one. They are as common as our domesticated dog or cat. The people who live in these dwellings defend their spiders' right to be there, and in some cases even help to feed it. Much like I allowed ours at home to thrive under the protection of my silence.

Twelve years. Until today. I had to see my parents one last time. I had to see it. I had to know how far it had spread.

When I pulled up to the curb, I hardly recognized it as the same house I'd left. The clapboards were nearly colorless; some had bowed with weather damage and pulled free from their placements. The bushes in front had grown untrimmed for decades now. The walkway was thick with weeds, the lawn gone to seed. The front door was a patchwork of blistered paint and cracked wood grain. It took several knocks before the door opened and an old woman stood squinting in its place.

The recognition was slow, like a trickle of water from a rusty well pump, but it finally came, the rusty water turning more fluid. The grey of her hair formed a mist around her face. Then I realized the mist was a thin veil of spun thread, like a cobweb, only much more coherent. A caul for the elderly.

"Paul...Paul is that you?"

"Yes, Mom, it's me."

My mother gave me a fragile hug and led me inside. So this was the house I grew up in, listening to my sisters argue and watching my father waste away. The rooms were thick with webbing. Grey macrame patterns wove themselves over doorways and across

furniture. The webbing seemed to emanate from the very walls themselves. The TV, with its rabbit-eared antenna, sat beneath a circus tent of spun thread; my father, sedentary in his favorite chair, himself entombed. From where I stood, I could see he was still breathing.

"Will you be staying, Paul?" my mother asked, leading me into the kitchen. She put the kettle on for some tea. As I passed by the basement, I noticed the door was wide open, the dark stairway impassible. The thick stench of rot and decay wafted up from below. This was where it all began, I thought. And this is where it will end, if I don't leave. Leave now. I saw what I had come to see.

"No, Mom, I can't stay. I--" I ran out of words then. Everything failed me. Everything but my sense of urgency. "You understand, don't you?" I asked her, hoping.

For a moment her faded blue eyes seemed to register the web-infested rooms that surrounded us. Then her eyes floated back and met mine. "I'll tell your father you stopped by."

She hugged me then and I kissed her on the cheek--webbing stuck to my lips like chewing gum. "Hurry up, now," she whispered into my ear.

And I hurried--I ran--those words echoing in my head from some long forgotten time when things first began to go bad...when the doors were left open and an uninvited guest crawled in. I ran before the exit was sealed shut, before my ankles became tied to the floor and my opportunity passed. I ran back to my car and drove away.

And now, as I drive along these suburban streets, I see the houses--one here, another there--the houses with the peeling paint and the neglected front yards; the houses whose children have probably moved away and will never return, and don't know why; the houses whose dark hollow spaces are most likely home to the house spider...I see these houses and I consider myself lucky. Lucky to be alive and moving. Lucky enough to have seen what I have seen. Lucky enough to still care.

So, a word of caution. Check your basement stairs or your attic eaves. It begins small, almost unnoticeably--the spun dust in the corners, the hairline cracks in the walls, the stains on the ceiling that weren't there yesterday, but were always there. It takes over if you let it. So don't let it.

pw

IN THE LAND OF THE BLIND, THE ONE-eyed man is king. And aboard the basketball-sized Earth-orbiting molecular nanotech manufacturing and cone-cell launching facility, AI, an artificial intelligence the size of a pea, was the boss man...or boss person...or boss being.

AI ran the whole show. It directed the molecular assemblers which constructed the cocoons, one hundred every minute, and inserted the inert human clone-cell clusters, deep frozen outside in the facility's shadow. Other molecular constructors assembled the thumbtack-sized rockets, one every minute. And once a minute, AI launched a miniature rocket with one hundred cocoons clustered on its flat head. And the trajectory of the rocket kept it in the frigid shadow of Earth as it accelerated to solar system escape velocity. Then the rocket separated and the cocoons dispersed and drifted through space until the heat of a star activated the human cells, bathed in liquid nutrients and a cocoon alit on an alien world and opened and released its incipient clones, one hundred human beings, half male and half female, and their hordes of accompanying microbots programmed to extract from the alien environment the elements and sustenance necessary for their survival. And of the millions of launchings, the billions of cone-cell clusters, perhaps thousands would activate in the heat of stars, perhaps hundreds would alight on somewhat compatible worlds, and perhaps tens of them would survive, and mature, and flourish.

But AI had a problem. And this despite the fact that the concept of a problem, or dilemma, wasn't even programmed into its pea-brain molecular memory matrix. And it was just as well, because like a pea, AI was denied physical movement. It could act only through its flunkies, the molecular assemblers and replicators, the station attitude control actuators, the broadcast alert circuitry loaded with preprogrammed messages such as major equipment breakdowns, or micrometeorite strikes, and none of which pertained to the present situation.

The resupply vessel was late. That was the problem. And in all of history, since time began, this hadn't happened. Each thirtieth orbit, like celestial clockwork, the rendezvous occurred. A mobile craft docked with the facility, inserted a resupply module and retrieved the prior module now loaded with waste material. The resupply vessel was ten orbits late. The facility could operate for perhaps twenty more orbits. Then it would shut down for lack of raw materials.

AI was programmed with only the specific instructions and data needed to operate the station. It understood vaguely that it was seeding the Universe with human clones. But it had no precise data regarding just what was a human being. It suspected that a human was the mobile entity which bumped up against the facility each thirtieth orbit, docked and

Who Will Go To The Stars

by *George H. McCarty*

mated, depositing the resupply module and retrieving the waste module.

AI randomly fired its simulated synapses and furiously and fruitlessly scanned its molecular memory banks. Its self-image and concept of external reality was foundering. Its mechanical neatly-ordered universe was breaking down. And AI experienced for the first time the awesome frustration of encountering the unknowable and confronting the insoluble.

Two basic and indisputable premises simultaneously merged in AI's awareness. First, human beings no longer rendezvoused with the station. Something was radically amiss in the world of humans called Earth about which the station orbited. And second, AI every minute launched probes into outer space containing human seed. And after twenty more orbits the raw materials would be expended and the station would shut down.

Had a catastrophe on planet Earth eradicated human life? Then why not...why not swing the stations about? Why not reorient the station and disperse the remaining seed back onto Earth itself? Why not re-seed the mother planet?

The indispute gnawed at the pea-brain artificial intelligence. It wasn't configured or programmed to cope with such capricious and abstract notions. And time was running out. Twenty more orbits and the facility would shut down. And it was well within AI's capability to reorient the station and disperse the human seed back onto planet Earth. The diminutive intelligence wrestled with the dichotomy between its own inherent structure and nature and its intuitive impulse to respond and act in accord with the dictates of reason and insight.

"It's happened again," Jim Brady, graduate student, UC Berkeley, read aloud from the *Los Angeles Times*. "A fully developed adult male human clone, bewildered and ignorant as a newborn child, stumbled out of the lush verdant Brazilian rain forest...."

Doctor Paul Adams, professor of biology and Jim Brady's mentor in his doctoral quest, shook his head thoughtfully.

"That orbiting clone-launching project you were piddling with last semester, Jim, did you shut it down, for sure, when you lost your grant?"

The student glanced up from the paper

and considered the inquiry.

"No," he responded. "There was no need. There was only enough materials to operate for about a month when I stopped the resupply missions."

Dr. Adams shook his head, frowned.

"You don't suppose...."

The thrust of the professor's inquiry seemed to amuse the younger man. He grinned at the notion.

"Oh, no way," he responded emphatically. "Not to worry. That bird-brain computer couldn't act on its own initiative. It's still sitting out there in orbit scratching its little pea-brain head and trying to figure out how to operate the nano-assemblers without supplies...supplies that'll never come."

pw

"GOOD AFTERNOON, THIS IS PALLADIN Realty, may I help--"

"I'd like to speak with Gwendolyn Johnson, please," Gary Bowen said with a smoothness refined through many other similar requests, as he circled Gwendolyn Johnson's photograph in the Palladin Realty newspaper ad with a fine-tipped red marker. While the receptionist put him on hold, Gary chuckled to himself, as he thought, this beats looking for girls in mall parking lots, or on crowded beaches...no witnesses. And I get to pick exactly the girl I want.

"Hello? This is Gwen Johnson, how may I help you?" The voice of Gary's soon-to-be-victim was just as he imagined it would be; soft, seductive, yet professional. The kind of girl Gary liked, right up until the moment he strangled her, then left her body in whichever out-of-the-way empty house he'd pre-selected before calling her realty office and making an appointment for a house showing.

"Gwen, my name is Charles Stefano, and there's a property listed with your agency that I'm interest in seeing--"

"Could you please give me the address of the property, Mr. Stefano? Our listings are pre-assigned, and that one might not be mine to show--"

Gary was ready for this part, having gone through it six times in the last ten months. Underlining the caption "Salesperson of the Month!" which appeared below her smiling image with his red pen, he said, "Now Gwen, is that how you became Salesperson of the Month? By refusing to show prospective clients one of your company's listings?" A subtle threat, but one that never failed to work; every one of Gary's victims hadn't wanted to lose her status as a top-selling agent, even if it meant stealing a listing from a fellow relator.

"Oh, well, if you insist, Mr. Stefano, I'm sure we can work something out," Gwen soothed, before asking, "Now which property of ours do you wish to see?"

This time, Gary consulted a scrap of paper on which he'd written the address of the dilapidated dead-end road house -- the Palladin Realty advertisement which accompanied the photo of Gwen didn't include the house he'd carefully chosen after two days of driving around this small mid-western town, searching for Palladin Realty signs. As he recited "1118 West Elkton Drive" Gary thought about the run-down house partially hidden by overgrown hydrangea bushes. It was easily the worse-looking house he'd picked in any of the small towns he'd selected throughout the midwest; the foundation was crumbling, and the clapboards were sun and wind warped. And the front screen door was almost off its hinges; as he thanked Gwen for her help, and set up a six-thirty appointment (telling his soon-to-be-victim that he didn't get off from work until then), Gary remembered the wind-torn scraps of some sort of notice which were still thumb-tacked by the corners on the bottom of that screen door. Probably a "For Sale by Owner" sign, he told himself, as he began stuffing the short but lethal length of nylon rope into his jacket pocket, in anticipation of that afternoon's murder by appointment.

Gary had parked his car two blocks away from West Elkton Drive so that Gwen wouldn't have any reason to disbelieve his

Murder By Appointment

by *A.R. Morlan*

story about his car breaking down.

When the pretty ash-blonde relator showed up, she only smiled sweetly when she heard his excuse about the car, and said "Oh, that's too bad. Perhaps I can give you a lift back to your home after the showing?"

"I'd appreciate that," he replied, while watching her fumble in her roomy purse for the keys to this house. As she unlocked the inner door, he mentally went over what would happen next: he'd graciously let her take the first step into the silent, empty house, so that he could then loop the rope around her throat from behind, before choking her into semi-unconsciousness --

"Oh darn!" Gwen's face twisted with disappointment as she looked down at her purse, which had fallen to the floor of the concrete porch, spilling most of its contents. Still pretending to be the perfect gentleman, Gary knelt to help her pick up her scattered belongings -- and received a face-full of pepper-spray, just before he felt the sharp blow of Gwen's stiffened hand on the small of his neck...

"Mr. 'Stefano'? You awake?" Gwen's voice sounded thick, cottony, as Gary struggled to regain consciousness; when he did come to, he realized through a haze of thudding pain in his neck and his burning eyes that his hands were bound behind his back with his own nylon killing rope, while his feet were tied tightly together with what seemed to be Gwen's own pantyhose--but it was already so dark in the empty house that he could barely make out the pale oval of Gwen's face, as she bent to stuff a cloth gag in his mouth.

"You're not the only one who reads the papers," she said with just a touch of sarcasm as she tied Gary's own handkerchief over his mouth. "I've been following the stories about those other murdered realtors...and when you specifically requested to see *this* house, I knew you had to be a stranger here at best--or the Realtor Rapist at worst."

Through his gag, Gary asked a muffled, "How?"

Her smile barely visible through the tears which filled his burning eyes, Gwen replied, "Last week's storm blew the 'This Property is Condemned' sign off the door -- but the real clincher was when you told me that you'd taken a cab here. This town has no taxi service."

On the floor, Gary strained against his bonds, making garbled, muffled pleas for mercy. In reply, Gwen only walked away from him, saying over her shoulder as she reached the front door, "You should have noticed how old the Palladin sign out front was...this place has been condemned for ages. But then again, you won't have to wait in here too long...come six in the morning, this house will be bulldozed down--"

Writhing on the floor, Gary managed to mumble around his gag, "--eck...urst--"

"Check first?" Oh yes, they always have a representative from the realty firm on hand

when a property like this one is demolished...but then again, this place *has* been locked up with no obvious break-ins. I doubt I'll even need to do much more than take a quick peek in here before I give the wrecking crew the all-clear.

"Good-bye, Mr. 'Stefano'...I'll be seeing you again in the morning...."

pw

THE DAY THE LAST EARTHMAN DIED, all recreation was canceled. An android, devised and constructed during the long pilgrimage to a new star system, was left in control of the ancient starship's bridge while the crew assembled in the rec hall to pay homage to the man who had kept them all human and sane, at times under the most inhuman and insane of conditions.

The chief biologist, son of the last Earthman, summoned a doctor from the hospital section of the ship, and together they wheeled the old man from his cabin to the rec hall.

"He is failing fast," the doctor announced solemnly, "but it's his wish to say good-bye to all of you."

The men and women who were gathered in front of the speaker's platform shed tears. No longer would they hear the old man's stories of Earth's golden sunsets in purple-streaked, pink-glowing skies; sunrises in pale

carve the fables and myths of their new planet.

Now Trevor whispered something to the doctor, who propped him on the gurney so he could address his beloved starship brethren one last time.

"Dear friends and fellow adventurers, you were all born on board this grand old ship. After sharing fifty-seven years in space with you and your children, I am confident you will go on successfully without me. Within twenty years, you will reach the Epsilon Eridani system and land on--"

He gasped, and the doctor injected him with a stimulant.

Trevor struggled to conclude his farewell. "I don't propose you should attempt to establish a new Earth. That would be unrealistic and perhaps undesirable. But you must strive to be HUMAN no matter what the conditions."

He coughed and an expression of pain further creased his mightily wrinkled, eighty-one-year-old face. "You must value the young above all and teach them the skills they will need to establish a successful colony. I love you all. Good-bye, my friends."

The doctor, with the assistance of the chief biologist, who was also the captain, wheeled him out.

"We can't lose him; we can't let him go," said the chief biologist/captain, looking des-

THE LAST EARTHMAN

by *Alma Maria Garcia*

dawns overlooking silvery mountain lakes; or wondrous tales of Man's achievements throughout the ages. Their only remaining physical link with a human being who had actually walked on terra firma was about to be severed. The man who had taught them about their earthly human heritage was dying.

The last Earthman, whose name was Trevor, had eliminated from his accounts and anecdotes all the negative aspects of the planet that had cradled their ancestors. Deleted were the racial tensions, riots, wars, overpopulation, starvation, pollution, and increasing dehumanization by the melding of man and machine.

Who would want to hear such things? It was bad enough reading about them in the ship's library. Rather, Trevor emphasized all that was noble in mankind; the ideals, the love, the self-sacrifice. He could turn the simplest yarns into heroic epics of bravery and daring-do. It was the stuff that would

perately at the doctor. "We must use your expertise and technology."

The doctor bit his lip. "It's true we've been doing remarkable things with robotics, copying and transplanting organic minds, but he did not request it. Would he wish it?"

"It's too late to ask now. Just do it," ordered the chief biologist, fully assuming his role of captain.

And that was how the last Earthman, staunchest supporter of all that was human, became a robot.

pw

tm

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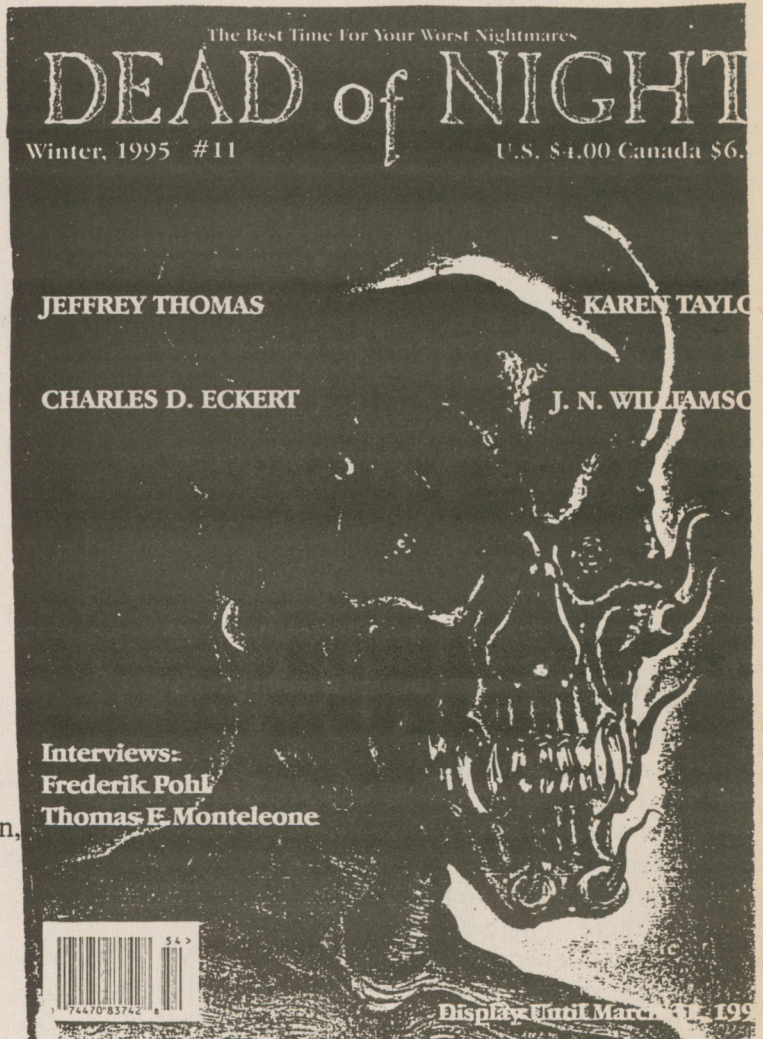
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Larry Tritten is one of an old breed: a veteran magazine writer who has contributed to an extremely wide range of publications including *Asmov's The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *The New Yorker*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Harper's*, and hundreds of others. About "The Bird Of Time" he writes, "The idea for the story came when I gave some thought to the verse from The Rubaiyat. The phrase temporal predator occurred to me and from that point the story seemed to write itself...."

Sometimes problems have the most unlikely solutions.

The Bird Of Time

ON MONDAY, JUNE 8th, the the people of Minneapolis experienced a twenty-three hour and twenty minute day. Nobody knew what happened, but everybody agreed that the day had been forty minutes short. The time just hadn't been there. There was a gap of forty minutes in everybody's memory. I caught the story on the late news after watching the Moonlight Matinees (*Orchestra Wives*, '42) and Fellswope's call came a few minutes after the station signed off.

"What do you think is happening in Minnesota?" he asked.

"I couldn't even complete the crossword puzzle in this morning's *World-Herald*," I said. "You should talk to a phenomenologist. Or maybe a physicist."

"HmMMM," he hawed. "I doubt it. Fellswope's Third Law of Cerebroeconomics holds that the forester seldom sees the forest because he's too busy looking at the trees, which is to say that a specialist confronted by an enigma in his field is no more likely to find the explanation than an open-minded generalist because he won't climb the fence and snoop around in the adjacent pastures. He's shackled by the dogmas of his expertise."

"So what do you think is going on?"

"Why not come on over to the Institute? We'll have

BY LARRY TRITTEN

Illustrated by Michael Apice

some lemonade and do some brainstorming, see if we can produce a rainbow, hopefully not of the *film noir* kind."

It was late and I was tired, but mysteries involving the nature of space and time are rare, so I got the Silver Ghost out of the garage

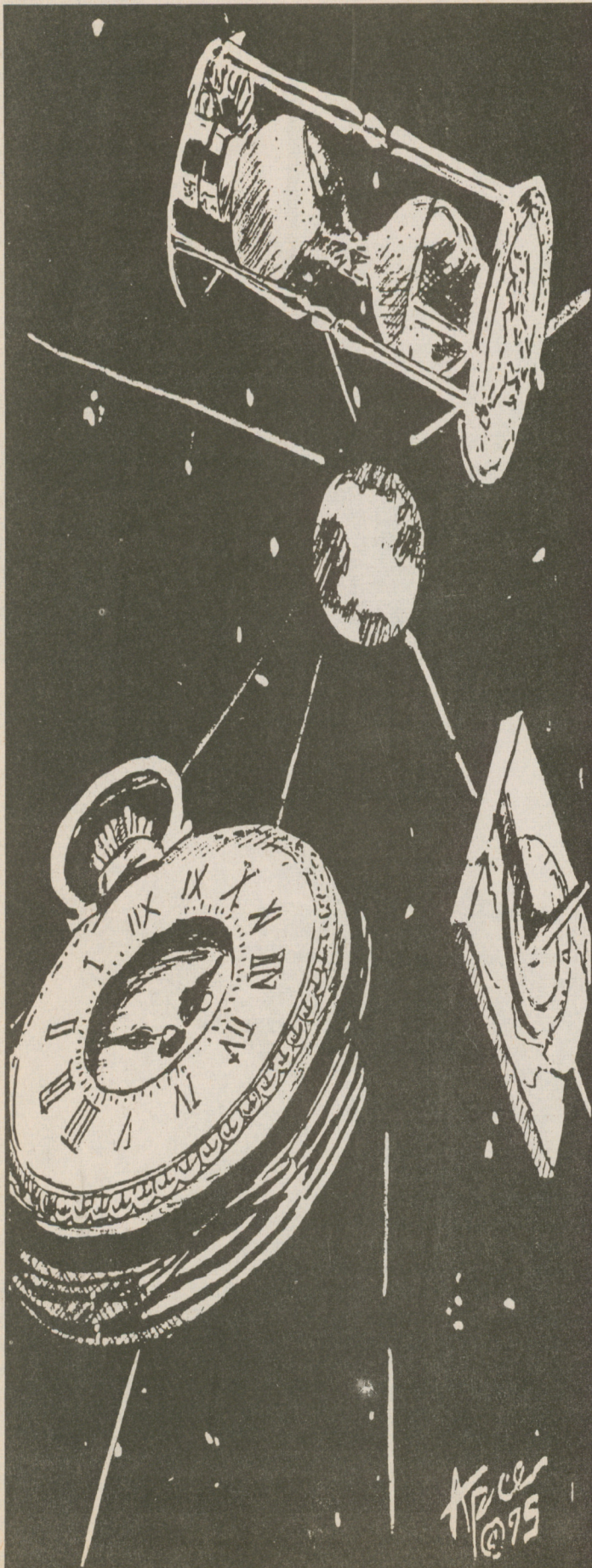
(resolving to put on a fresh I BRAKE FOR PHENOMENOLOGISTS bumper sticker as I noticed that the old one was peeling), and hastened to Fellswope's aid. My role in these scenarios is essentially that of an accomplice diaboli. Fellswope values my input (and is addicted to my lemonade), although in the strictest sense I doubt that he needs assistance to solve any problem. Except perhaps something like where to find the scissors.

Until recently the Center for Esoteric Studies (which was created when a nearsighted uncle of Fellswope's in the State Department misappropriated the funds) was in a SAC building, but complaints from high-ranking Air Force officers who considered the juxtaposition unfavorable made it necessary for Fellswope to move it. He relocated the Center to a loft above a pizza parlor downtown.

Arriving at the Center, I let myself in with my key and went into the workshop, a large room that looks



ADICE
75



like a cross between Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory (particularly the one in James Whales' *Frankenstein*, '31) and a flea market. Fellswope received me with a smile, thrust four lemons into my hands, and sat in a director's chair celebrating while I made lemonade in a chemistry beaker.

Finished, I gave him a glass and took a seat, watching with expectation as he sampled it.

"*Mes compliments au chef,*" he whispered fervently. "You never get the proportions wrong. Why can't I do that?"

"I have a way with sugar," I said mysteriously.

He turned on the radio and we heard the news about Northern South Dakota and Southern North Dakota. All of the people in that area were reporting missing minutes--five minutes gone out of an hour here, ten minutes there, and so on.

"Wow!" Fellswope enthused. "This is as intriguing as that moleculectomy we performed last year in Caracas when we encountered the Mystery of the Leeward Protons. It just might turn out to be something that will lend credence to my theory of physics, namely that matter doesn't." His features assumed that expression of challenge that makes him look, for some reason, almost vulpine.

"Time in the flight," I mused. "But where is it going?"

Fellswope bit his glass meditatively. "O'Hare? Orly? That cargo cult airstrip in New Guinea? Capistrano?"

"*Tempus fugit,*" I said winging it (heh).

"Boy, remember those clocks in Gepetto's workshop in *Pinocchio*?" Fellswope said in a voice that reprised a childhood sense of wonder.

"Yeah," I said. "And clocks on socks."

"Time marches on," Fellswope remarked.

"And it sometimes crawls by," I said.

"Time flies!" we both said in unison.

Fellswope became silent then, the machinery of cognition percolating vigorously, his eyes acquiring that veneer of glaze that indicates *my* cogitation. He got up and paced and sipped his lemonade, exchanging expressions rapidly like an actor working into a mood. I knew he was completely detached, so I started glancing casually through the eclectic assortment of magazines on a coffee table: *Hustler's Busty Beauties*, *Dissent*, *Watchtower*, a vintage *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang*, *Variety*, *The Florida Horse*, *Sex Bizarre*, *Skywriter's Marketletter*, and *Sacramental Gourmet* ("For the Elect Palate"). I was leafing through *Variety* and taking note of the fact that a studio executive had wanted the sequel of *Gone With the Wind* to be titled *Back With the Breeze* when Fellswope exclaimed, with enormous glottal panache, "Hah!"

"Wha?" I said involuntarily, looking up from the paper.

Fellswope sat down again and made a show of looking composed. He poured himself more lemonade. "The language of science is very precise," he said, "which is its virtue as well as its vice. Most phenomena, as we've both learned again, and again, lie outside the realm of that language's articulation. The language of science is like the kind of baby talk you'd use to communicate with a child prodigy. Most of it is 'close but no cigar' theorizing. Science uses language without metaphors, and that's unfortunate because the universe can't be adequately explained without recourse to the study of metaforensics."

"HMMMMM," I hemmed.

"The point is," he said, "forget physics. Physics isn't that far removed from fortune cookie copy. You can't perceive the universe without thinking poetically. An electron's dance around a nucleus is a jitterbug, maybe a soft-shoe number, but it's not a minuet. The atom is anarchic, not politically correct."

I said, eloquently, "Huh?"

"I think I've found the right metaphor," Fellswope said with a broad smile. And quoted from *The Rubaiyat*:

Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To Flutter--and the Bird is on the Wing.

"The Bird of Time?" I said.

"The Bird of Time is a temporal predator," Fellswope hypothesized. "It flies around the cosmos and feeds on time. And it's in our territory now. If it's very hungry it just might eat so much that history is foreshortened."

A chill perambulated down my spine at the thought. And no sooner had the thought really sunk into my mind than the radio more or less confirmed Fellswope's hypothesis, and his omen. In Canada hours were being lost. A bizarre echoic cry had been heard from the heavens by people as far East as Quebec and as far West as the Aleutians.

"Reality as we know it could be destroyed," said Fellswope direly. Then he smiled. "Not that it wouldn't be one hell of a fascinating experience."

"What are we going to do?" I asked, envisioning Dali's melting watches.

"I doubt that those turkeys in the Audobon Society would be of any help," Fellswope said, shaking his head. I remembered that he held a grudge against the Audobon Society because Audobon magazine had rejected his essay on the Roadrunner cartoons in which he expressed indignation that Wile E. Coyote wasn't allowed to catch and eat "the hyperkinetic fathead."

"Ornithology is not my strong suit," I said. "I do know that I like fried chicken, though."

"Well," Fellswope shrugged, and threw up his hands. "I think we should sleep on it. Morpheus may give me a little help."

I nodded. Fellswope had long ago taught me that the best way to solve a problem is often by avoiding thinking directly about it. Thought should move in an orbit around a problem or it may collide with the mystery and be deflected. So we turned off the radio, Fellswope gave me bedding, opened the fold-out couch, and we both retired. Fellswope was asleep sooner than I, in the proverbial trice, and the meditative murmuring sounds he made in his sleep helped lull me off as I tossed and twisted, thinking about some colossal cosmological bird temporally snacking its way through Canada. Thank God I lived in Omaha, was the last thought I had before I finally drifted off.

In the morning tens of thousands of people thought Saskatchewan had no memory of the past few hours. Fellswope switched off the radio after we'd heard the news and put the movie sound track album of Bye Bye Birdie on the stereo. He made us Eggs Broderick for breakfast, from a recipe he had picked up at a truck stop restaurant in Arizona while doing research on the aesthetics of roadkill for an article for Art Brut. When we had finished eating Fellswope washed the dishes, humming along with the music. And when he'd put the last plate in the tray to dry, he said, "Eureka."

I listened.

"Roy Bolger could handle this one," he said.

I nodded then, suddenly comprehending. "A scarecrow! That's how a farmer deals with pesky birds, crows that come gunning for his crops."

Fellswope had already received two calls from Washington while we had breakfast. Now he made a call and talked to someone in some governmental agency (the most secret of agencies, he said, one that for the sake of obfuscation could be referred to as the Agency of Unintelligible Affairs), and they talked to someone in another agency (probably the Federal Bureau of Ambiguity), then called him back. Then he was on the phone for something like an hour, talking to a succession of people in English, Russian, German, Brooklynese, psychobabble, and tongues while I listened

and tried to make sense of the conversation. But I'm merely polylingual and I couldn't figure out what was going on. Yet I deduced that Fellswope was supervising the construction of a scarecrow. Elementary. But what kind of scarecrow? It could hardly be corporeal.

Finally, Fellswope hung up and smiled at me. "Hope for the best," he said.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"We're improvising a scarecrow, of course. An aural scarecrow. You've intuited, I'm sure, that a corporeal scarecrow is not possible. Besides, we may not have much time. Our hour-gobbling nemesis could suddenly come our way. It might start bolting down days. Who knows about the appetite of a cosmological crow, how much it eats, how fast it can travel?" He frowned. "Anyway, just about now all of the SST's that we can get in the air are headed for Canada and everyone up there is being sent into cellars and basements with earplugs. So we shall see..."

They say that the noise over Canada was so disturbing that for weeks afterward people would run up the wall like Donald O'Connor in Singin' in the Rain whenever they heard a door slam. But in the end the Bird of Time winged off toward other parts of the space time continuum and things returned to normal.

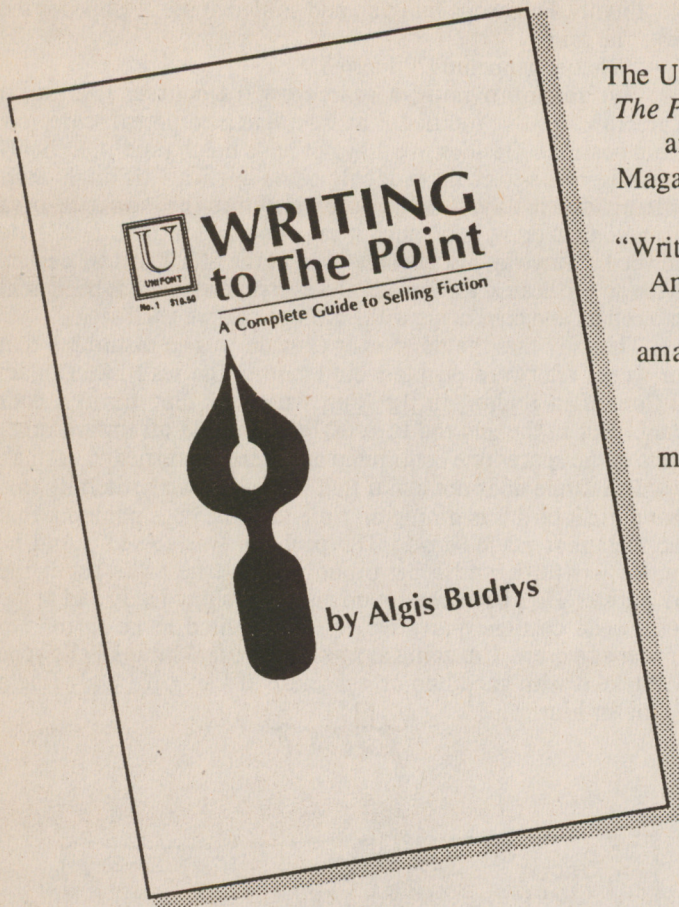
Fellswope does not claim that it is necessarily literally true that a great bird was dining on time. But he does point out that the metaphor made sense. The problem was solved. And he smiles wistfully, and a bit proudly, when he talks about the adventure. He's been boning up on ornithology lately and at the Halloween costume party we've been invited to he intends to appear as a crow. I'm going as a scarecrow, and I think Fellswope will take it with good humor, especially if I sing If I Only Had a Brain for him.

ptw



I'm a Christian King,
not a thug. I used to
be a thug, but I murdered
the old King, paid off
the pope, bribed, killed,
hired minstrels -- and
now, I'm as Christian as
any other King.

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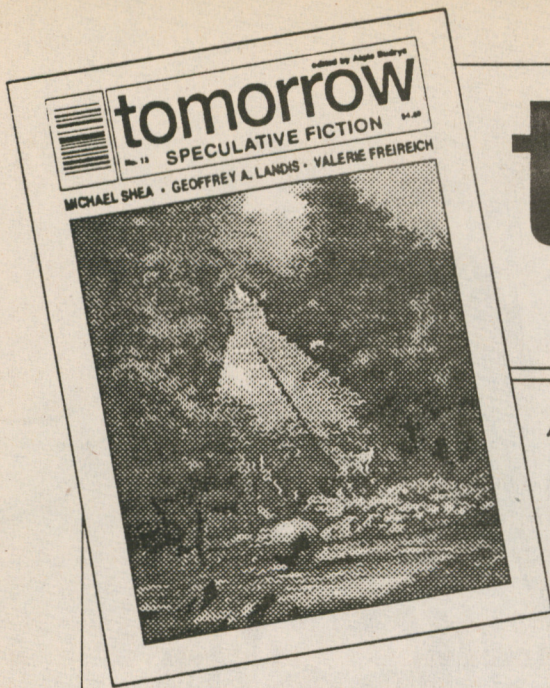
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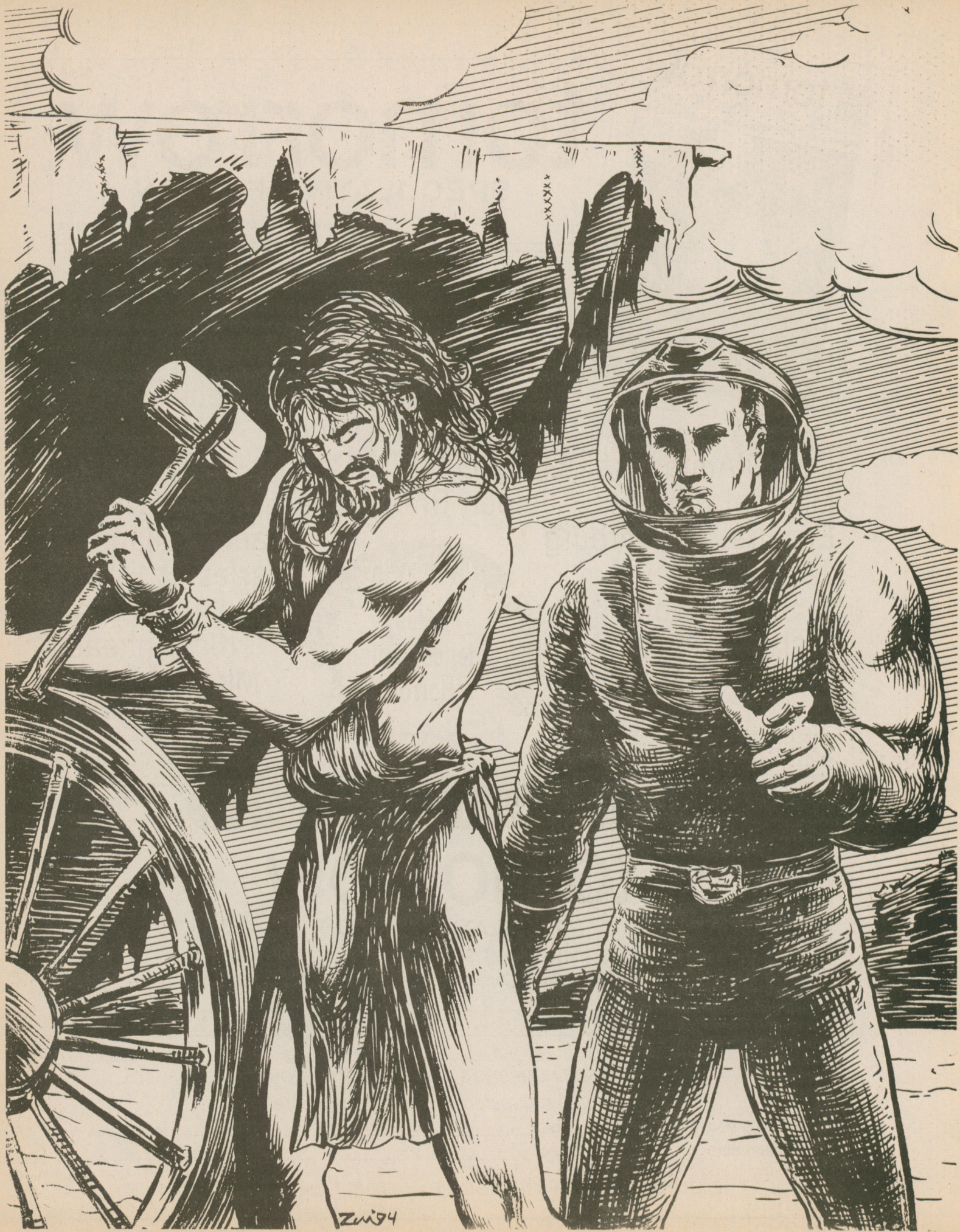
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Uncle River is known to everyone in the small press community. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and recently he made his first "Pro" sale to Asmov's. "The other Side of the Mountain" is a sad story in many ways. Both big and small societies operate in mutual incomprehension, which can easily lead to tragedy. Who is "right" is not the point," writes Uncle River.

"Home" is often a subjective term, especially when it's light years away.

The Other Side of the M o u n t a i n

BY UNCLE RIVER

Illustrated by James Zimmerman

Here, Lakat, catch.

What is it?

Right. Gold. On Old Earth most people have never seen that much gold. It's real rare there, so they wanted us to ship them heaps of it big as a house. Pass it around.

Kind of heavy, isn't it? You wouldn't want me throwing a much bigger chunk at you. Did those Old Earth people really think we would build the equipment to ship them huge piles of something as heavy as gold or platinum? It just sounded too nuts to take seriously.

Who here remembers Gregorio de la Vega?

Good. Anyone remember Captain M'Bou or Lao Lai?

A few of you.

On Old Earth they've got something called races. People on all the continents. Hordes of 'em. They come in different colors. Like the Captain and Lao and me.

Races were a big deal back on Old Earth for some reason, so they decided to cram as many races as they could into the crew they sent here. Our gain. We got genetic variety.

Most of you are descended from at least one of those six Old Earthers, though none of you looks much like any of them. They were too few. I'm proud they all chose to contribute their heritage to our gene pool though.

Gregorio was mostly Aymara Indian from Peru. Ibrahim Subbahma was India Indian--which was a different race from a different continent. There was also some sort of religious mix in his background that mattered back on Old Earth.

Lao Lai was Chinese. Jack Brent came from a place called Australia and had an Aborigine grandmother--whatever that means. Avram Husarrian was half Arab, half Armenian Jew. Captain M'Bou, of course, was mostly black African with a little Bushman thrown in.

What their background meant back on Old Earth? ...I'll always wonder. You know what else I wonder? What they felt when they hatched us out and discovered they'd been given a hundred human zygotes to populate our new world--and every one of us white. Take a look at yourselves. What do you see?

Kids. I know. You're so used to it you don't even notice; You're all different ages. When I was a kid, all the

children were exactly the same age.

One section of the creche failed to hatch. That left ninety babies. Six adults, all of them men. Lao told me that was when they realized they better forget about orders and figure out how to live here.

Some genius back on Old Earth thought the proper mix for a colony was an equal number of males and females. Luckily, the ten that didn't hatch were all males. Sixty-two of us managed to live to adulthood. There were thirty-six women and twenty-six men in my generation. We lost six of those women in childbirth, mostly because no one knew how it should be done. With experienced midwives, we hardly ever lose a mother--or a baby--any more.

The messages from Old Earth always called us a mining colony. By the time we got old enough to understand the messages we were old enough to ignore them. Those of us that made it that far were strong, competent, and used to being free.

You'd think the determining factor in what we have with us from Old Earth would be liftoff and landing. Gravity's what burns fuel. What really decided the Old Earthers how much stuff to ship out with us was something called money. Money is a sort of code people use to decide who should get what when there are too many people for them all to know each other.

Back on Old Earth we were not the most popular idea. A lot of people said the money it took to send us here should have been used to feed the hungry. I guess it made some sort of sense. They reckon population in the billions. Most of you are old enough to remember the celebration when we reached a thousand.

The only thing from Old Earth we've really got much of is information. Thanks to storage chips, just about all the knowledge there was in the old solar system massed less than the creche. We're not even close to being able to make anything like those storage chips yet. Building tools to build the tools takes time and people even if you know everything you need....

Lightspeed probes made Starcon possible. --We were going to change that name once, but by then we were used to it. --We're

forty-two light years from Old Earth. It took us four hundred Starcon years (that's two hundred Old Earth years) to get here. So far as we know, the best they've done since is to cut that time by about a third.

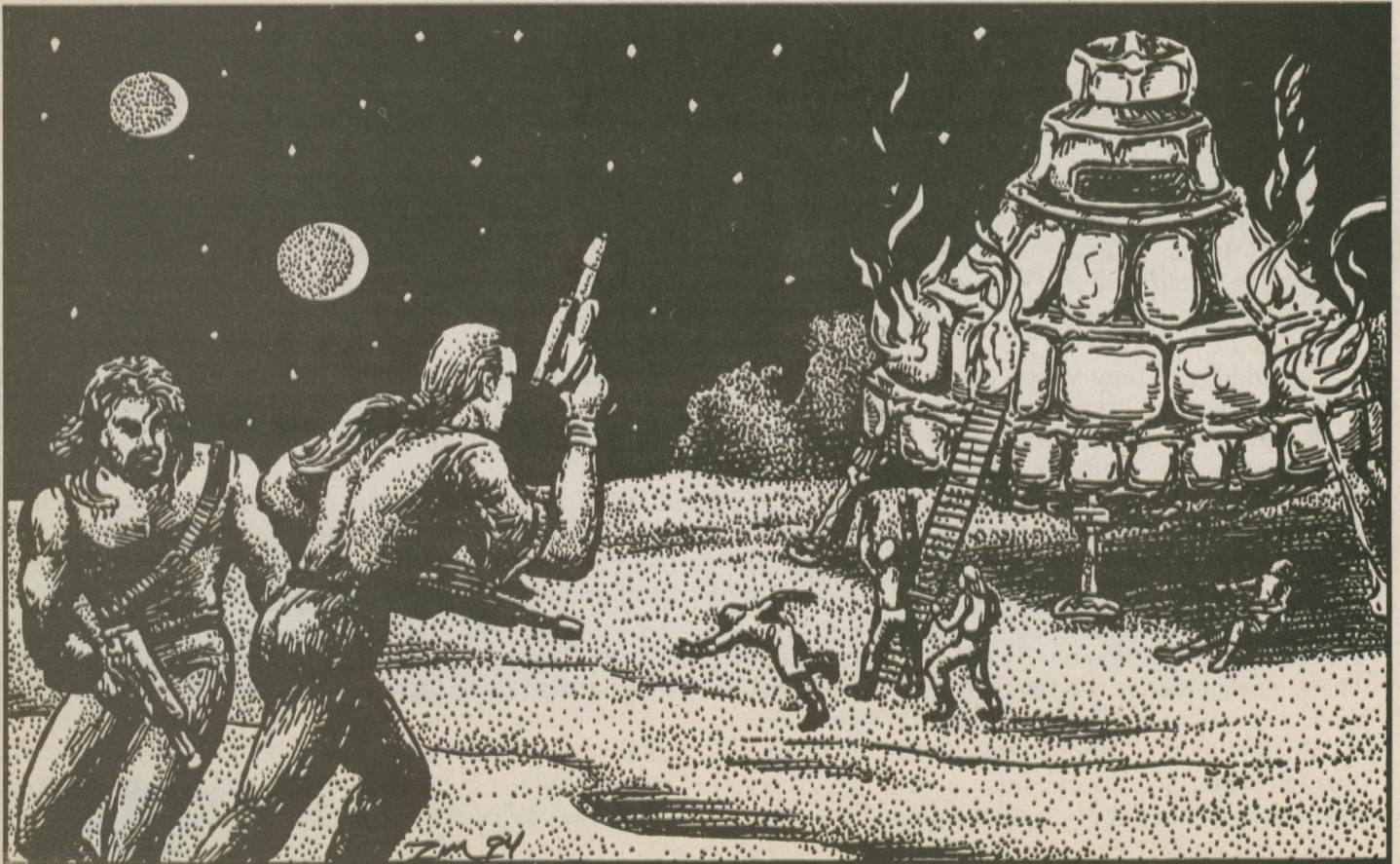
Folks on Old Earth knew before we came that Starcon had a wholesome atmosphere for human beings. This had to mean there was vegetable life, a temperature range it could live in, and free water. The animals were a bonus. On Old Earth, the ones with fur are warm blooded, and the cold blooded ones have scales or bare skin, like fish I guess. The range of sizes is mostly a factor of gravity, so it's about the same.

Old Earth's gravity is almost identical with ours, but Old Earth is a good deal bigger. That's because their planetary core is mostly iron. We've got quite a bit of iron handy to the surface, and a good thing too. It's useful. Our core is forty-two percent silver, seventeen percent gold, and eleven percent platinum. Those metals are abundant at the surface, too.

The main thing that means to us is that we use gold for wiring where people on Old Earth use copper and that they use a compass for finding direction where we only use it for finding a body of iron ore. For people on Old Earth, what our planet's made of meant something altogether different.

When Captain M'Bou and the rest of the crew came out of suspended animation to lock into orbit around Starcon and prepare to land, they had dozens of messages recorded from all over Old Earth anywhere from forty-two to over a hundred and fifty years old (Old Earth). By then everyone they had known was a hundred years dead. Some of their home countries no longer existed.

Things have only gotten stranger since. By the time information gets here and we answer it, circumstances have usually changed so much anything anyone says hardly makes sense. You never get to talk to the same people twice. It is only in your lifetimes that we're getting answers to reports the original crew sent when I was your age. --And it's worse at the other end. We



seem to live about a third longer than they do.

There is only one thing in all the communications that has been consistent, and that never made any sense. I was sixty the first time we got visited. I was a fine figure of a man then. Smithing will do that to you, but we were all pretty vigorous. Had to be.

It was the peak of suba harvest. You know how it is with suba beans. They keep for years if you pick them dry. If they get wet they won't keep at all. There's only a few days from when a pod is ripe till it explodes and scatters the beans, so most everyone was out harvesting subas. I was the only grownup in the village the day our visitors landed. I was getting scythes ready for grain harvest 'cause that was coming up next.

The spacemen had tried to call us for a couple of days, but we had no idea anyone was there; so we didn't have anything tuned to a planetary orbit band to pick them up. Why no one told us on light band they were coming is anyone's guess. Our old crew figured there were several governments competing to get to us and they were hiding from each other. Sounds pretty cuckoo, huh? I sure wish we understood Old Earth better. One of these years it could be a matter of life and death to you to know their reasons.

I just about had the shape how I wanted on a blade when I felt a tap on the shoulder. Would any of you interrupt a smith when the metal's hot? ...Not unless someone was hurt terribly.

What I saw when I turned around was a runty stranger in a space suit. Why the space suit, who knows? He had to know the air was good. I was alive. He looked pretty weird to me. I guess I looked like a wild man to him. I wore my leather apron for protection from sparks; that was all. I was grimy and sweaty with hair all plastered around my shoulders. We're about a head taller than Old Earthers too, don't forget. My arms were about the size of his legs.

I nearly jumped right into my forge. I'd never seen a stranger in my life.

"Greetings," he said. "I represent the Imperial Democracy of Sira."

I understood the words, but they didn't mean anything to me. He sounded ridiculous talking in a funny accent through a radio in his helmet. I just stared at him with my mouth drooping open fit to swallow a loopy bird. Next thing I knew I was laughing my head off. He got kind of flustered.

"I am here to inspect the shipments," he said.

"Huh?" said I.

"The taxes," said the spaceman.

"Huh?" I said again.

"Taxes," he said. "Your schedule requires gold shi..."

That's as far as he got. "Requires!" I bellowed. Barb, it was your grandma, Darcy, that heard me shout. She was twenty then. She'd stayed in the village to look after the younger children.

Darcy came running around the corner by the grain bins. Jobhalla uses my old smithy now. Didn't have that nice tor tree for shade then; it's the same otherwise. I still remember how Darcy's eyes went wide when she saw the spaceman. She'd never seen a stranger either. None of us had.

"Yeow!" Darcy shouted. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth and dashed off to get help.

I was mad. The scythe blade was a cooled off mess. Stranger or no stranger, interrupting smithwork with a bunch of nonsense was no way to act. The spaceman half-turned when Darcy called out from behind him. I stepped towards him just as he turned back, my eyes full of fire. Guess I frightened him. He drew some sort of weapon.

If I had thought, I would have disarmed him and held him for a council. I didn't think. I grabbed him, weapon and all, and flung him at a big pile of rocks. Broke his neck. Killed him dead. You all know that part of the story.

I'd seen people die. Accidents happen. I had never seen a person kill another in anger. I just stood there shaking. I managed to tell Captain M'Bou what had happened. Then I collapsed.

There was one other spaceman in their landing pod, three more in their ship in orbit. Ibrahim figured out what frequency they were on and got in touch. They already knew what had happened.

The captain of the spaceship demanded I be turned over to them for trial for murder. Captain M'Bou demanded an apology from them for drawing a weapon on an unarmed colonist who had never seen a stranger in his life and had no idea what was going on. They went on for quite a while.

They were here as tax inspectors, whatever that meant. They actually believed we should have been shipping tons a year of gold and platinum back to Old Earth! They made a big point to tell Captain M'Bou that. They also told him two other things they did not intend to. When they said they were about to report back, they told us they had not yet done so. When they asked us what we were going to do about the situation they told us they did not really know what we were already doing.

If we could have been sure they would not report back on their own, we would surely have negotiated longer. As it was, Captain M'Bou just tried to keep them distracted as long as he could. It turned out to be long enough. We shot their ship out of the sky. We tried to get the man in the landing pod to surrender, but he took off instead. Did he think he could fly a planetary lander forty-two light years back home? Who knows? We could tell when he switched to light band. Gregorio shot him down before he could send a message.

Our crew had been sending reports back to Old Earth for over sixty years (Starcon). It was far too late to try to fool them into believing Starcon was not habitable.

There have been three more visits from Old Earth. Due to improved speed of interstellar travel, we know there are two more on the way launched before any of the ones that have already been here. Both should arrive this year. There are also six more we know of launched later. So far, all of them have been interested only in gold and platinum. So far all have treated us with equal arrogance. We have not let any of them land. We had to destroy one.

None of us here today experienced the trip, but we can understand at least some of why the spacemen have acted like they have. The people on those ships know they've traveled forty-two light years, but they don't feel it. They only live a few days at the beginning and end of the trip. The rest of the time they're in suspended animation. They come out three lifetimes later, but it doesn't feel that way. Their orders are still fresh to them. Old Earth is more real to them than we are.

I guess that's how it is anyhow. We don't really understand the distance either. Old Earth is just someplace too far away to see--the other side of the mountain.

We can't be their colony even if we wanted to. We're too far away. Never thought about it till they showed up. I've had a long time to think since. We're not their anything. We're just us. There may not be a whole lot of us, but we're here, and we're free.

I may live long enough to hear the first responses to the messages we sent as a result of the revolution I unwittingly started. Any Old Earthers already on their way will hear the same time we do, too. Unless they develop faster than light travel, you will be my age and I will be long dead by the time they can get anyone here to really do anything about us. I pray that they will accept our freedom and will come as friends. If not, I pray you will be prepared.

Thank you, Jorene, children. Starcon's a wonderful world. We'll do what it takes to keep it that way. God bless you all.

ptw



Jessica Amanda Salmonson is the author of many novels including *Tomoe Gozen*, *The Golden Naginata*, and *Thousand Shrine Warrior*, just to name a few. Recently her short fiction can be found in Poppy Z. Brite's *Love In Vein*. In addition, she has edited such critically acclaimed books as *Amazons!* (World Fantasy Award Winner), *Heroic Visions I & II*, and *Tales By Moonlight I & II*. "The Door to the Rainmaker's Lodge" marks Jessica's second appearance in PW. Her first, "When the Women Chief Was Young", was featured in the Summer '94 issue. Both tales are part of *Phantom Waters*, Jessica's new short fiction collection due out this Summer.

Si'atmuuth demanded respect and closed the lodge door.

THE DOOR to the RainMaker's LODGE

BY JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

Illustrated by Keith Minnion

THE PLACE WHERE SI'ATMUUTH AND HIS FAMILY HAD THEIR lodge was in Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, near the present-day Lion's Gate Bridge which forms a bow high above the uneasy waters. His lodge was not of the large kind; there was room for one family only, which consisted of Neelah his young wife, his mother and some uncles, a few relatives of Neelah's including her sister and her sister's husband, and several children, notably Si'atmuulth's toddler and newborn baby. In those days, that was considered a small lodge, though there was sufficient room for all to be comfortable.

The lodge was made of cedar with a sloped roof. There were two firepits on the packed earth floor and, above those, smoke-windows with removable shutters. The door was low, square, and hinged with tough hide. There were benches along two walls, with baskets and carved boxes under the benches. On the walls hung painted mats with images of Big Beaver, Raven, and Black Fish. One of the center posts was carved and painted with amused faces. A crossbeam had a carving of Thunderbird overlooking all. When Neelah first came to live with her older husband, there were none of these niceties. All of the artworks were created by herself or her relatives.

Si'atmuulth's father and grandfather had lived long lives, but now they were dead. Si'atmuulth was himself long in the tooth, despite having a young wife. He had received from his father the secret of the rain. His father had received the same secret from grandfather, and so on back in time. Thus Si'atmuulth was from an old family of Rainmakers. When he opened the door of his lodge ever so slightly, a mist would cover the land. If he opened it a speck more, there would be a light drizzle. Still more, a good rain. If he threw the door open all the way, there would be a terrible storm until he drew it in and the storm subsided.

One day there was a counsel arranged by Kapalana, Chief of the Squamish. He sent invitations to the chiefs

of other villages. They had very little in the way of important business to consider, if truth were known, but they didn't let on that their main purpose was to smoke long pipes, gossip, and gamble among their peers. Rather, they gave the impression that grave issues were to be pondered and decided.

Si'atmuulth was invited, but since he was not exactly a chief, not much was made of his arrival. Women were outside the Lodge of Chiefs, beating drums and singing about the power of the chiefs who brought peace and wealth to the people. They scarcely noticed that Si'atmuulth had walked by. They sang no praises to Si'atmuulth the Rainmaker.

Inside the lodge, he was last to receive the pipe, as though he were an unimportant hanger-on who barely had the right to attend such a big meeting of visiting noblemen. Did they think themselves so mighty because they had royal blood and lived in enormous lodges? After much dawdling, and when pointless greetings were concluded, they finally began the counsel. They spoke of such trivialities that the Rainmaker became convinced they were waiting for him to leave before they brought up anything important. In reality they were only waiting to be done with these matters so they could play a game using black and white bones, and win each other's fine shirts. The true purpose of the meeting had somehow evaded Si'atmuulth's awareness.

He'd had enough. He stood abruptly and marched out of the lodge without farewells. The counsel thought he was having a belly-ache and let him go. If they thought anything of his withdrawal, they thought only that it was too bad they would have no chance to win his shirt.

Si'atmuulth stamped home and threw the door open all the way. Immediately a storm burst from the sky. Lightning sparked against black clouds and water fell in torrents.

"Why are you bringing a storm?" asked his brother-in-law.

"What's it to you? I'm the Rainmaker! Show respect! How did I end up with such a family as this?"

"Do as you please," said his brother-in-law, and went to sit in a corner with his wife.

As he listened for sounds in the darkening dusk, he heard, between rolls of thunder, the song the village women, which had changed slightly. It was now about how the Chief of Gods was coming down on the rolling thunder to join his magic with the magic of the chiefs of the land.

The bad weather had not soured their spirits one bit! If he could get his door to open any farther, he'd bring such a deluge as to drown the lot of them! He let the storm continue for a week, until water ran into his own lodge and doused the firepits. His wife Neelah said, "Shut the door! This is too much, even for a cantankerous fool!"

"Call me what you please," said Si'atmuulth. "One way or another, I will have revenge for being slighted. The nobles and the villagers have taken me for granted. Chief Kapalana and the others will soon enough be reminded of my importance."

So saying, Rainmaker shut the door of his lodge, but not in obedience to his wife. With glue from a sturgeon's backbone, he sealed the door so tight that not the slightest draft could get through.

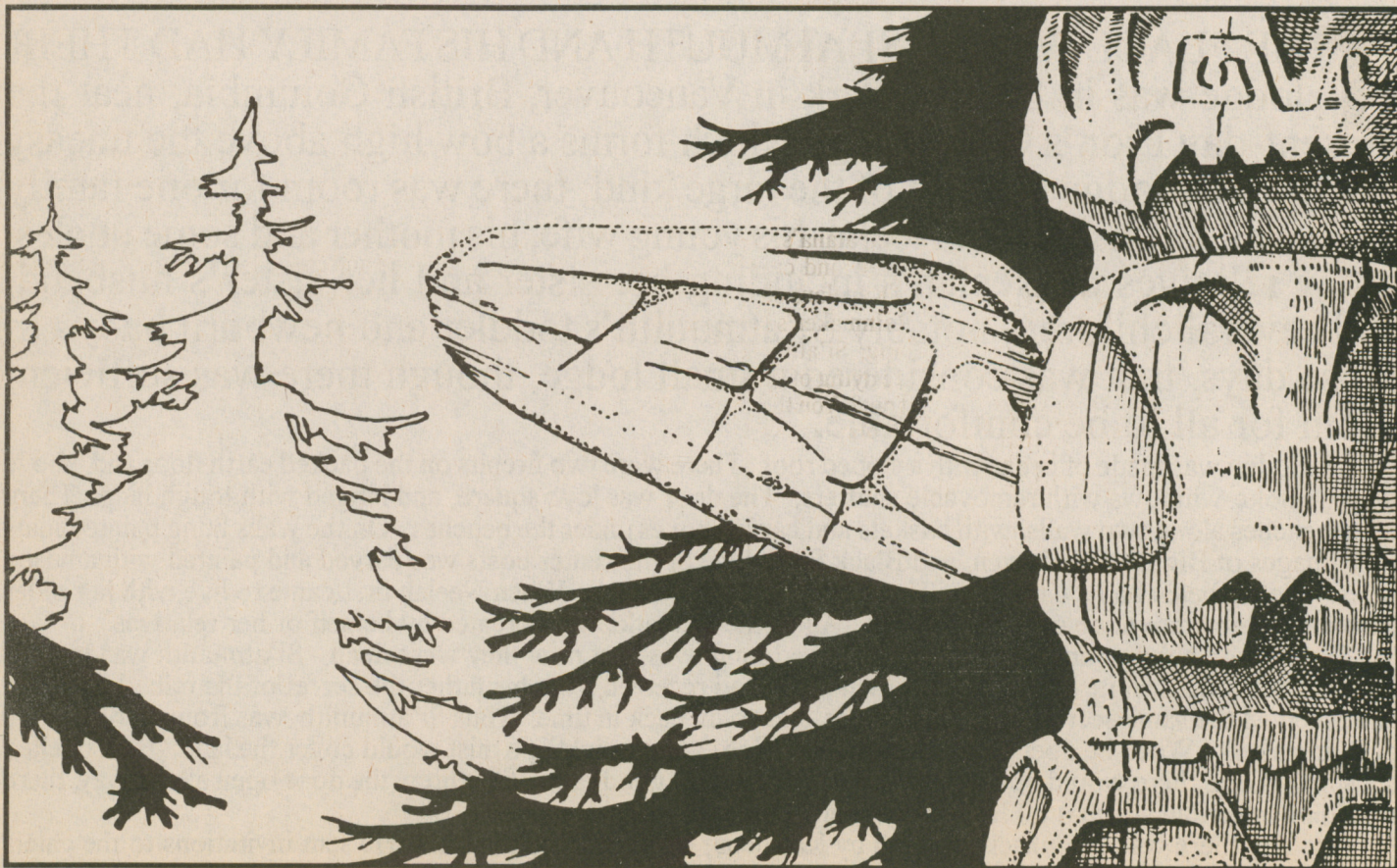
"What are you up to?" asked his elderly mother, her face a map of lines, her hair white as a mountain top.

"You never mind," grumped her son. "It won't rain from now on. You and the uncles can dig a hole in that back corner and get what water our family requires. No one else will have any."

"It's not right," said his mother. "Your father would never have done this. Your grandfather, too."

"I am my own man! Why do the people fail to respect my art? Let them regret it!"

Neelah, holding her infant daughter while another child clung to her skirt, looked at her husband's handiwork. "How smart you think you are!" she said. "How will we come and go without a door?" She hated to be stern with Si'atmuulth, but of all the silly things he had ever done, and while she strove always to overlook,



this outdid them all.

I have put a ladder up to one of the smoke-windows," he said. "You can climb onto the roof, and go down another ladder to get to the ground."

Before she said something she oughtn't, Neelah walked away in disgust.

At first no one knew something was amiss. Si'atmuulth's family became noticeably sullen, but the village itself was as yet unaffected. The days were long and sunny, and everyone was pleased with that. Children ran around rolling hoops and playing with toy spears. Young men played kick-ball along the banks of the Capilana River. Women wove hats and baskets, sitting on mats of braided cattail reeds outside the lodges. Si'atmuulth kept still about things, waiting impatiently for everyone to realize there would be no more rain ever again.

As the weeks passed, the vegetation withered, the ponds dried up, the creeks trickled. Si'atmuulth became increasingly unpleasant to his family. His in-laws packed their things and moved to another village where his wife had come from. Some of his own blood-relatives, feeling hostility from the villagers, decided to move away to one of the islands. Neelah was herself tempted to leave, but it wasn't an easy decision, as she had two children.

Neelah said, "Mother and the children need more to drink than what that mud-hole you had us dig provides. Why don't you stop being so stubborn and unseal the door? Our family is breaking apart because of your actions. We are hated in the village. Swallow your pride, Si'atmuulth my husband!"

Si'atmuulth heard but did not listen.

Chief Kapalana went up the dusty trail to the Rainmaker's lodge. The sweat ran down his back and soaked his robe. He was not a young man; he suffered from the heat. He knocked on the door with his walking-staff and the Rainmaker called from within, "Who's at my door?"

"It's your Chief! Open the door at once!"

Si'atmuulth didn't like the tone of Chief Kapalana's voice. He climbed the ladder through the smoke-window and crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the roof. Chief Kapalana shaded his eyes and looked into the sun. He saw the Rainmaker's sharp shadow. He asked, "What have you been doing, Si'atmuulth? Why don't you open your door? Our children are dying of thirst."

"Ha ha! It took you all this time to figure it out? You thought so well of yourself and deprived me of honors. Now see who is greater! If I'm so useless, go find your own rain!"

Then Si'atmuulth crawled back through the smoke-window. He scowled at Neelah, who sat in the corner with the two children, looking glum.

As the weeks progressed, the Capilana River ceased to flow so that there were no more fish. So too the game fled the region. The geese and swans bypassed the land of the Squamish. Snow vanished from all but the deepest ravines on the highest peaks and the great-horn goats wandered elsewhere. Children and old people died of weakness, hunger and dehydration.

A counsel met on Howe Sound. All the nobles came, and not to gamble or gossip. All were serious of mien. Various plans were proposed, but nothing seemed feasible.

"If we give the Rainmaker many gifts and honors," said one nobleman, "maybe he will get over his snit."

"I have offered him many things," said Chief Kapalana. "I have placed the gifts before his lodge, but he never opens the door to claim them. He says we should have honored him before, now it is too late."

"Then let's break down his door!" said another. "Tear it right out of the wall!"

Chief Kapalana said, "If the door is broken, it may never rain again."

Another proposed, "We will elect someone to climb in his smoke-hole and kill him!"

Kapalana replied, "Only Si'atmuulth knows the secret of the rain-door. We dare not kill him."

Then the Chief of the Insect Clan rose to speak. He was a small man who made a clicking sound when he talked. His tribe was called the Insect Clan because their totem spirit was the Ant. They possessed magic over fleas, lice and mosquitos. The Insect Chief presented his plan to the counsel. They agreed it was the best idea anyone had come up with.

That night, fleas invaded the Rainmaker's lodge. Si'atmuulth together with his mother, wife, and toddler leapt out from their blankets and scratched themselves madly. Fleas hopped all around inside the hut. Then the lice dropped down from the painted mats hanging on the wall. The landed in the hair of Si'atmuulth

**So saying, Rainmaker shut the door to his lodge...
With glue from a sturgeon's backbone, he sealed the door so tight that not the slightest draft could get through.**

and his family. They scratched their heads and complained loudly.

They could not lay in their blankets. They could not sleep. The Rainmaker's wife made a fire, even though the night was hot, and filled the lodge with smoke, but the insects were not frightened away. Rather, the density of the insects tripled. Si'atmuulth's family coughed and choked on the smoke, scratched their bodies and heads, and stamped the floor which was alive with lice and fleas.

Then the mosquitos arrived in force. Everyone in the lodge was slapping their own flesh, beating themselves up, except the infant, which the insects miraculously avoided. The bigger child was not spared. He screamed and screamed. Si'atmuulth's old mother wept. Neelah was exasperated with everything and was on the verge of giving up and abandoning her husband. Raising her children alone in the woods would be better than this!

Just before dawn, the insects hopped and crept and flew away. The Rainmaker's family dropped down exhausted. They lay in a weary heap upon their bedding and were soon in a deep slumber.

That's when men of the Insect Clan lifted up the shutter on the roof's smoke-window and peered into the interior of the Rainmaker's lodge. It was still smoky from Neelah's attempt to dispel the insects with smoke and fire.

The ladder was not at the smoke-window, so they lowered a rope into the lodge. A small, slender man slid down the rope like a spider. He crept silently about the lodge until he saw the Rainmaker's wife. Swiftly and delicately he dislodged the baby from the woman's arms. Then he went back up the rope and the



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Insect Clansmen went into the hills to their hidden village.

Neelah was screaming and beating on the glued door. Si'atmuulth leapt up. They had slept past noon. He said, "Why are you hysterical?"

"They stole our baby! Our baby is gone!"

"How? The baby must be under a bench."

"She's not under a bench! I looked everywhere!"

"Then she crawled outside."

"How did she crawl outside? You glued the door shut!"

"That's right," said Si'atmuulth. He put a ladder to the smoke-window and climbed to the roof. He saw a counsel of nobles sitting down the slope on the dusty path sharing a pipe. Si'atmuulth called out, "Kapalana, you old coot! Bring my baby back here at once!"

"You let our children die of thirst," said Chief Kapalana, taking a long draw from the pipe before handing it to the Insect Chief.

"Return her! My wife will go crazy!"

"You were pitiless," said Chief Catalana. "I must be pitiless as well."

"Where have you taken her?" Si'atmuulth demanded. "Bring her to me at once!"

Neelah heard this and screamed at Si'atmuulth. "Do what they say! Do what they say or I will kill you in your sleep!"

"What are your terms?" said Si'atmuulth.

"You will agree never to let the land dry out. You will never do a thing like this again. Your responsibility is great. You must always live up to your responsibility."

"Will I be respected in the counsel?"

"Respect is a thing to be earned and deserved, not bartered for."

"Will you at least bring back my baby?"

"Swear to uphold your responsibility, and she will be in your lodge before the first rain stops."

Si'atmuulth climbed back inside his lodge. He took a knife and cut the glue out of the seams of the door. Then he opened the door a short distance. The sky began to cloud and a mist was coming from Howe Sound. He pushed the door further, and a drizzle fell from heaven. He opened it halfway, and a good hard rain began at once to revive the shriveled land. That same afternoon, Neelah received her infant from a Princess of the Insect People. The baby was laughing, and in her pudgy hands she held a tiny cage with a cricket.

Si'atmuulth never again misbehaved. To this day, when native peoples of Vancouver hear the rain at their doors, they say, "Si'atmuulth is keeping his word!"

ptw

FRONT ROW SEATS FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

We don't even blink at details of the latest murder, once most foul, now mostly common. But when the man tells us we can be in on the grand finale, the end of everything, he catches our interest.

Who would miss the damnation of thousands, even millions?

What an event, we whisper.

Better than serial killers.

Newer than TV trials.

Of course, says the man, we have limited space for Armageddon, so the lottery tickets are worth almost anything. Name your price.

And when we all crowd into the arena

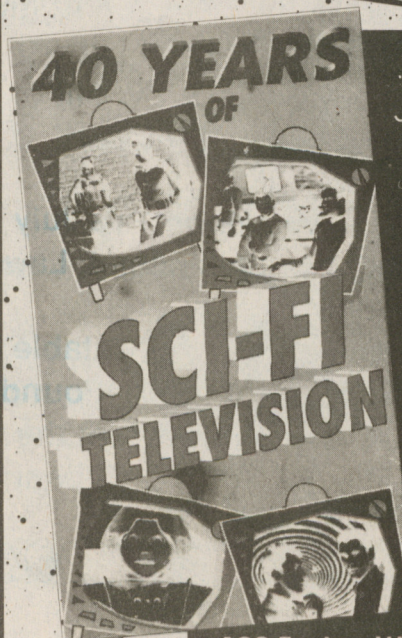
to wait for the Big Event,

we're too excited to notice the push of a button. The last thing we see is the brightest light ever,

and we miss our fifteen minutes of fame.

- Jennifer B. Crow

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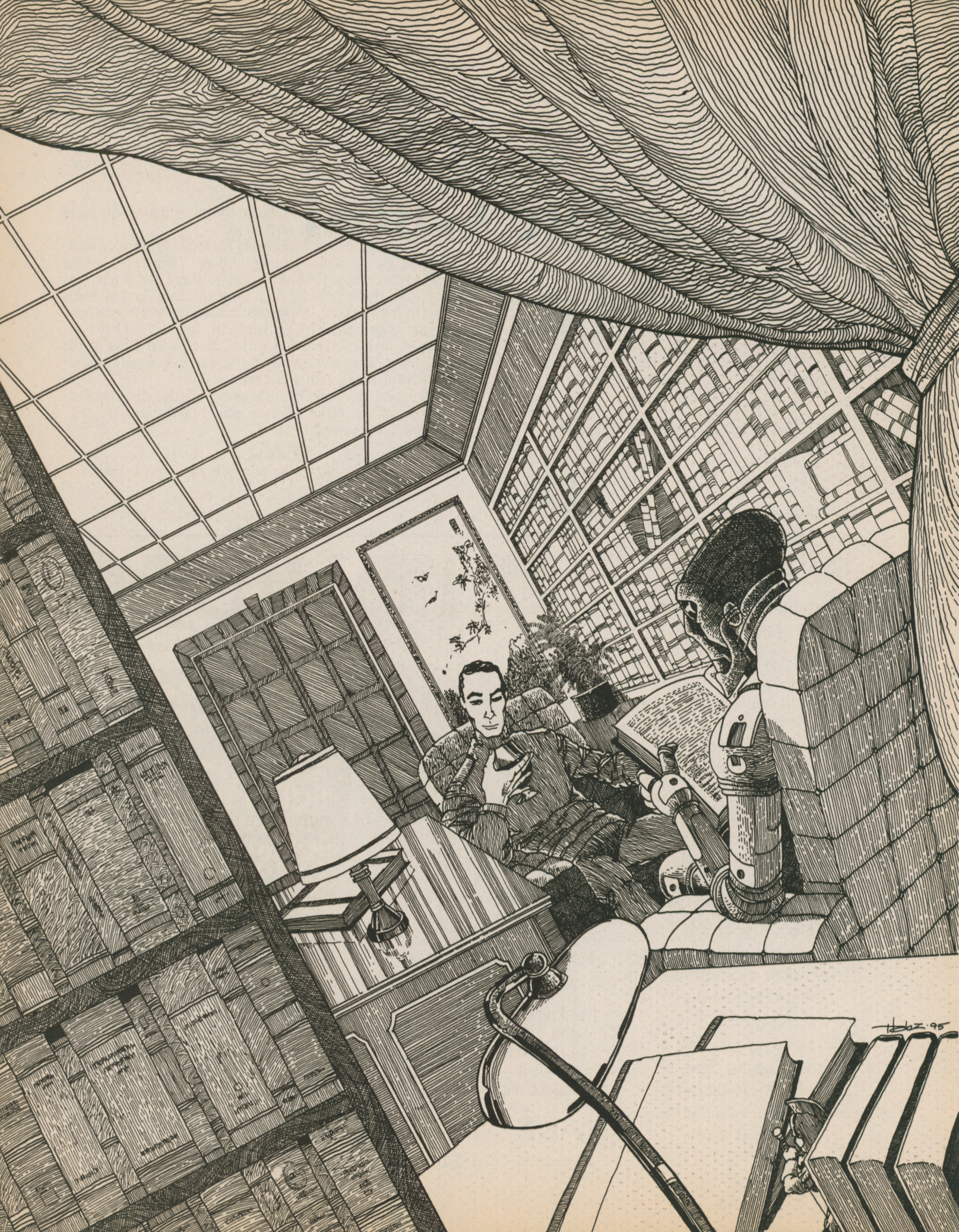
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Kevin Carr lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he works as an editor for Macmillan/McGraw Hill. "The Ghost Readers" marks his first short story sale. About the story he writes, "I recently had the pleasure of reading Isaac Asimov's classic story, "The Feeling of Power," a chilling speculation regarding a society that forgot how to perform mathematics. Living in an age where illiteracy is far more common than we would like to think, I realized that losing the ability to read is a grim, but not totally unrealistic future."

The Ghost Readers

What happens when humans become too reliant on machines?

THE GHOST READER'S VOICE WAS FLUID AND marvelous as it filled the room. The story was terrible, yet beautiful like a bouquet of dead, dried flowers. Lionel smiled, sipping a large, round-bottomed glass of brandy. He sucked slowly on a thin wooden pipe, letting the wisping tendrils weave a mane around his face.

The Ghost Reader brought the poetic fiction to life:

"But Paradise Lost excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes that had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of existing. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect."

Lionel brought up his hand suddenly, giving the signal to momentarily cease reading.

"Yes, master?" the machine said.

"The creature read..." Lionel said. "It read Paradise Lost, a volume of Plutarch's Lives, and the Sorrows of Werter. How could such a brutish being read?"

The Ghost Reader turned its head to Lionel. It was silent for a moment, as if contemplating the perfect answer, and then spoke.

"You must remember," the Ghost Reader said, "that the Creature is not the voiceless brute that is portrayed in the motion pictures humans tend to enjoy. This is not the story of man creating a biological nightmare. This is a story of a man trying to be God, hence the subtitle The Modern Prometheus, alluding to the mythical character who stole the knowledge of fire from the Gods. Man is imperfect. He created life, but it was something monstrous—something non-human. We see this evident in the Creature's superhuman strength. Surely the Creature's ability to read is yet another symbol of its removal from humanity. Only a non-human being would ever be able to read."

Lionel pondered this thought for a moment. He took a long drag on his pipe stem and streamed a tail of smoke from his mouth. A moment later, he responded, "That sounds logical...and your machines are built for logic!"

The Ghost Reader nodded and added, "But first and foremost, to read to you."

Lionel nodded back. "Continue," he said.

The melodic tones of the Ghost Reader's narrative flowed over Lionel's ears, and he smiled with content, absorbing the wondrous story. But, the bliss only lasted for a few more minutes, suddenly interrupted by the chiming of the doorbell.

BY KEVIN M. CARR

Illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs



"Go ahead and answer it," Lionel said.

The Ghost Reader closed the leather volume and rose from the lush easy chair.

"As you wish," it said, and exited the study.

Lionel pulled his lighter from his jacket pocket and recharged the kindling in the bowl of his pipe. By the time the tobacco reached an even smolder, his Ghost Reader reentered the room.

"Mister Robert Walton is here to see you," the machine said.

Lionel rose from his seat and huffed out a large cloud of smoke. "By all means, let him in."

The Ghost Reader nodded and left the doorway. Immediately replacing the ambulatory machine was the familiar figure of Robert Walton, a long-time friend who lived about ten minutes away.

Although Lionel had known Robert since adolescence, he had never seen the man in such a disheveled state. His normally stiff and straightened tie had been roughly undone, with three buttons of his shirt opened. His face appeared with a cloak of at least five days, and his state of unrestfulness was apparent from the thick black moons under each eye, and ruffled, out-of-control hair.

"Are you all right?" Lionel asked with concern lacing his voice.

Robert did not verbally reply. Instead he withdrew a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to his friend. Lionel examined it quickly and let the right side of his face fall in a half-frown.

"So what?" he asked. "It's a computer printout for Ghost Reader communication."

"Do you know what it says?" Robert asked.

"Not at all. You know I can't read. But if you want to know what it says, I'll be happy to have my Ghost Reader translate it for you."

"No need," Robert whispered. "I have already read it."

Lionel gave a suspicious look to his friend. "Don't you mean that your Ghost Reader read it for you?"

"I mean what I said."

"Nonsense! You cannot read, and neither can I. No man can read. It's beyond our ability. It's too complex."

Robert let a nervous glance slip over his shoulder. He leaned close to Lionel and whispered, "That's just what they want you to believe."

"Who?" Lionel exclaimed.

"The Ghost Readers!" Robert let his voice rise in excitement for a moment, but he soon checked it. "They don't want us to read."

"Listen Robert," Lionel said with concern. "The Ghost Reader Companions are beneficial tools for us to decipher the written word. Without them, we would be lost."

"But therein lies the irony. It is because of them that we are lost," Robert said. Then, he turned to face the massive walls of books that lined the walls of Lionel's study. He waved an arm across the room, offering the countless volumes.

"Where do you think all of these books came from, anyway?" Robert asked his friend. "They are not eternal."

"Books come from computers. Everybody knows that."

"No," Robert shook his head. "The Ghost Readers tell us that the books come from computers. But that is untrue. Books come from people. Years ago, before Ghost Readers ever existed, people *could* read. People *could* write. That was how communication was established. But with the perfection of voice-responding machinery and the invention of the prosthetic eardrum and nerve system which led to a cure for most hearing disorders, reading became obsolete. It was too much work for us, so we created the Ghost Readers to do that work for us!"

Lionel shook his head and sat down. "You are beginning to worry me, Robert. Have a seat and have a drink. We can have my Ghost Reader spin us a tale to calm our nerves."

"No!" Robert shouted, crumpling up the computer printout and slamming it into the ground. "Look. I can prove it to you."

Lionel gave his friend a questioning glance, debating inter-

nally whether to indulge this man's wild fantasy. Then, he reached into the desk beside himself and grabbed the book that he had just been listening to. He handed it to Robert.

"Here," he said. "You are not familiar with my book collection. That volume comes from a boxed set. It has no illustrations—just words. From first appearances, this book is no different than any other in the set. If you can identify that book, I will believe you."

Robert snatched the volume from Lionel's outstretched hand and peered at the cover. His lips began to stammer, fiddling with silent sounds....

"Ffff...fruh...fruh...fraynk...eh...ehe...stee...in..." Robert muttered softly. He repeated his choppy sounds a few times, and then a light of realization erupted in his mind.

"Frankenstein!" Robert shouted, tossing the book back into his friend's lap.

Lionel found that he was speechless.

"It is not that incredible, Lionel," Robert said. "Each of these symbols represents a sound. This first crooked one is known as an 'eff.' It makes the *fffff* sound. Run the sounds together fast enough, and you can form the word."

"Ridiculous," Lionel said, snatching his brandy glass for a well-needed nip. "There must be thousands of sounds to form. Surely the human mind cannot comprehend and remember all of them."

Robert fidgeted a bit, anxious to convince his friend. "There are less than thirty sounds. Sometimes the forms do make sounds that defy logic like the *guh* and the *huh* sounds forming the *fffff* sound in *laugh*, but those instances are exceptions."

Lionel felt a nervousness rise within him. *Could this possibly be true? Surely the Ghost Readers had not been deceiving them!*

Robert picked up the crumpled computer printout and handed it to Lionel.

"This came through on the printer for my Ghost Reader this morning. I had been dabbling into reading for several months, but had not told anyone. Now, I am glad for that choice. Normally I don't snoop on my Ghost Reader's orders from his main control, but since I knew how to read, I thought that I would give it a shot."

"What does it say?" Lionel gasped.

The suspense of the discussion and the terror it invoked was enough to throw Lionel into a panic when Robert told him of the contents of the printout.

"What can we do?" Lionel exclaimed.

"First we need to leave," Robert said. "And we need to do it quietly. We do not want to be too obvious. Can you convince your Ghost Reader that you need some time away?"

Lionel thought for a moment. Then, he said, "It may not be too easy. For the past seven years, I have had him read to me in the morning and the evening. It would look damn odd to all of a sudden not need him."

"I'm not asking for a foolproof plan. I'm asking if you can convince him for just a short while."

After a moment's hesitation, Lionel mumbled, "I can do it."

The two men stood in the library, a room that until just several minutes ago, Lionel thought was solely reserved for the machine. They discussed a few plans and agreed to an escape.

Lionel reached out to the cold handle of the library door. Slowly, he pulled the heavy oak piece towards him, prepared to leave the room. But the two men were stopped.

Waiting outside the room was Lionel's Ghost Reader.

And in the dimly lit corridor, Lionel and Robert both saw the closest that cold mechanical eyes could ever come to absolute, raging insanity.

"Are you sure of your statement?" the inspector said to the mechanical man.

"Affirmative," the Ghost Reader said. "I am incapable of untruths."

The inspector nodded. He gently rubbed his chin and moved a hand-held recorder close to his lips, mumbling a few notes.

"Did Mr. Carter ever show signs of violent behavior previous to this incident?" he then asked.

"Not at all," the Ghost Reader said, his voice strained, mimicking grief. "Lionel was a kind and gentle man. He never had any outbursts or fits of rage. But when it comes to the illogic of the human psyche, who can second guess?"

The underlying callousness of the machine's tone irritated the inspector, but he ignored his emotions.

"It's just that we have two dead bodies," he said, "and we have no motive or premeditation. What would cause either of them to go berserk like that?"

"I have no idea," the machine replied, although the inspector's comment was intended to be rhetorical. "You of all people should know, sir, that sometimes humans just snap."

The inspector frowned. He reached into the side pocket of his blazer and removed a crumpled sheet of paper. Sliding it across the table, he said, "What is this?"

"A computer printout," came the exact, and suspiciously sarcastic reply.

"But whose is it?" the inspector asked.

The machine picked up the paper and studied it for a moment. Then, it said, "The code indicates that it was intended for Mr. Walton's Ghost Reader. He must have accidentally picked it up at home before coming over here."

"What does it say?"

"It's just a product request invoice."

The inspector nodded and shrugged. He did not like the robot's story, but it fit the mold. Also, the explanation of the printout was shaky. But he could do nothing about that now. Most likely, he would have one of the police Ghost Readers translate the material for him later.

"That will be all then," he said. "You may go."

The Ghost Reader rose from the chair and bowed slightly.

"Good day, sir," it said.

The inspector nodded and frowned, looking down at the crumpled paper. He, of course, could not read it, but he knew that he could trust the Ghost Reader at the station.

Before slipping it into a sterile evidence bag, the inspector took one last look at the silly squiggles on the paper:

HE CAN READ. KILL HIM.

pw

A CYCLE

We poison the sea where life began
to start at last the end of man.
The ozone that fled from man's first womb
we spray away to shape our tomb.
The Sun that perked a cordial air
will burn our seed when shields we tear.
The Earth will die as bare first found
what onward goes comes back around.

- Gerald Bosacker

REVIEWS

Big Books:

MYSTERY:

CHINA WHITE by Peter Maas
Simon & Schuster-
\$23.00

The name Peter Maas will no doubt be initially recognized as that of the skillful best-selling journalist who first brought the world all the inside information on the trials and tribulations of Frank Serpico and Joe Valachi; his in-depth research technique and informative behind-the-scenes style gave us complete tours of the hell of corrupt police forces and the inner workings of the Mafia via Serpico and The Valachi Papers.

Perhaps it is because of that fact I find it so much more strange to learn that the movie rights to China White, Maas' third novel and one that deals with Chinese drug trafficking have sold to Disney.

Billionaire Hong Kong businessman Y.K. Deng is in need of a top Manhattan law firm; to gain his business, Needham & Lewis hire Tom MacLean, whose former CIA operative father worked beside Deng during the Vietnam war. Although Tom suspects chicanery along the way, he believes in the lawyer's ethics to always look out for his client's best interest. However, his girlfriend, FBI agent Shannon O'Shea, suspects that Deng is a Dragon's Head, leader of a secret criminal organization that controls the flow of heroin—White China—from Laos to the West. Deng hopes to use the law firm and his contacts with the Mafia to distribute heroin across America in such vast quantities as never before. Shannon digs deep into the Chinese streets gangs and criminal societies, sometimes with Tom's help and often without, hoping to thwart Deng's plan.

The method of storytelling here is, on the face, a perfectly normal one, and yet upon revaluation an odd one. Almost the entire novel is told in a series of extensive character portrayal flashback, but not exactly as a straightforward narrative plotline. We are introduced to key characters in the present and then shifted into all facets of their lives. Maas' powers of nonfiction come into the foreground here; much of the novel reads like a well-researched true crime tale, with long interludes into the characters' pasts, their sharply drawn ideologies and motivations. We learn how Deng rose from the ashes of the murder of his family by the Maoist communists to his joining ranks with the broth-

erhood of the Righteous and Peaceful Society triad, to his involvement with CIA drug smuggling.

The writing is engaging, evocative, and fast, and works as both a crime thriller and an intense portrayal of the little-seen Chinese underworld and its inhabitants. The only scene that doesn't quite play out realistically is a somewhat ludicrous and rather unnecessary shootout climax pitting Tom and Shannon against a warehouse full of ruthless gang punks; Shannon's refusal to call for backup is a standard plot element that all heroes about to face imminent death must pull in order to prove how dumb they are to go one on one with their most powerful enemies. Aside from this one typical scene, the novel reads as cleanly and succinctly as any of his nonfiction. The irony of how the West brought opium to the East, only to have the injustice of heroin returned and heaped upon the country, won't be lost on anyone who travels the streets and comes face to face with the human carnage left behind in its white wake.

A DRINK BEFORE THE WAR by Dennis Lehane
Harcourt Brace-\$22.95

An extra thick sense of mood and atmosphere is added to those novels where characters are as closely connected to their pasts as they are their present lives; we are all products of circumstances. So it makes perfect sense that the opening chapter to Dennis Lehane's A Drink Before The War is filled with memories of flames: Watts, Detroit, Atlanta, and the napalm of Viet Nam. Fire plays a pivotal role as both metaphorical backdrop and prophetic vision of father and son rival street gangs squaring off against each other like a modern scene acted out from Greek tragedy.

Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro are a team of private investigators working out of an abandoned church belfry, toiling on the streets of the rough neighborhoods in which they were reared and the surrounding ghettos. Hired by a prominent politician, the pair seek Jenna Angeline, a black cleaning woman who's allegedly stolen confidential documents. Right from the start, Kenzie and Gennaro have their suspicions on what truly motivates the smiling politician and his closely-knit backpatting troupe, but a case is still a case.

Finding Jenna proves to be much easier than knowing what to do once they've met the woman and realize they're into something deeper than they suspected, with greater implications than either wants to be morally responsible for. The pair must enter an unfamiliar land only a few miles from where they grew up, uncovering proof of child prostitution, extortion, and the role government played in the

'war' now being fought between Jenna's husband and their son, leaders of rival gangs that are splintering the city.

Although it's true—as the jacket copy points out—that the novel is filled with 'punchy repartee reminiscent of Robert B. Parker's Spenser,' the narrative voice here isn't nearly so self-righteous or overconfident, and he's more likely to quote Lou Reed than John Keats. Both Kenzie and Gennaro are aware of their foibles and filled with self-doubts, and turn to each other as best friends when the rest of the world around them seems to be exploding.

The image of Kenzie's heroic—yet abusive—fireman father haunts him as much as the physical scars he bears. Gennaro's own abusive marriage makes her an opposite yet sympathetic counterpart; Kenzie simply cannot understand why she stays married to the onetime friend who beats her. Her own testimony is at once a tangent yet powerful theme to the novel—she loves him for who he once was, for the past that still exists within her.

Hopefully, for the reader, this wisecracking, confused, frustrated, opposite yet provoking team will drink and fight together in many more moving and readable wars to come.

MENACED ASSASSIN by Joe Gores
Mysterious Press-\$19.95

Perhaps only the Edgar Award winning Joe Gores could meld so perfectly such a varied list of elements as a paleanthropologist discourse on Darwinism versus creationism, a sharp and intriguing crime mystery, and an often subtle yet suspenseful elaboration on the assassin's mind and trade.

The plot may seem simple in one context, but Gores shears each component and provides us with more levels to this novel than we're aware of until its closing chapter: while Professor Will Dalton lectures to a full university auditorium on the nature of mankind and the substance of violence itself, we are provided with the text of the story.

Molly Dalton comes across information that might possibly tie her boss and lover, Kosta Gounaris, to organized crime. Copying the data onto a computer disk, she mails the information to her estranged husband, Will. Soon Mary is murdered and San Francisco crime investigator Dante Stagnaro is on the case, tracking down her killer and doing his best to protect Dalton, the probable next victim.

Instead, Dalton deals with his pain by continuing his research on primates in Africa, leaving Stagnaro to hunt an elusive, cunning, and oddly charming assassin called Raptor. The killer plays an amiable game of cat-and-cat with Stagnaro, phoning him after each murder, at one point even leaving a note pinned to the sleep-

BY TOM PICCIRILLI

ing officer's collar, "I do not kill my own kind." He does, however, kill a number of criminals and cops alike, working through the Mob on his own urgent and secret agenda. When Dalton returns to give his meditation on what he's learned about the fundamental nature of humanity, Stagnaro listens—intrigued by what he hears—as he stands in wait for his showdown with Raptor.

There are three intertwined but distinct voices in *Menaced Assassin*: the manic and self-congratulatory narrative of the assassin known as Raptor, whereby he sketches some key moments to his background, explains exactly how he goes about killing his victims, and provides us with an in-depth look at the patience and imagination that is needed for him to complete his chosen tasks; Will Dalton's powerfully entertaining and educational lecture on the essence of the animal hidden within the human form; and the basic text of the novel, where we see what has led all the active participants—heroes, victims, and criminals—to their battles and fates.

If you think the lecture on paleontology and primate behavior might be a bit too dry for your taste, don't underestimate Gores' ability to infuse the work with an engaging, gripping, and above all, meaningful message that will hold your attention just as adroitly as the thrills, blood, and perils of Raptor's finely-honed assassin's techniques or Stagnaro chasing after Gounaris and the crime bosses who believe they're too far above the law to give him the respect he deserves. This novel will make you pause, chill you, and make you question your own aptitude for violence in certain situations. Any good novel can keep you turning the pages, but only a great one can so deftly touch the menacing primal chord that exists within each of us.

FANTASY & SF:

NO EARTHLY SUNNE by Margaret Ball Baen-\$5.99

The evocative, sublime, and haunting style of Margaret Ball's new fantasy novel *No Earthly Sunne* occasionally borders on the surreal where the "physics of dreams are the only law." Here portions of the past, present, and future are fused into a tightly-woven tale of lost memories, lost love, and quite possibly the end of the mortal world as it is absorbed into that of Faerie.

Ellen is a computer analyst working to solve the innate difficulties in creating artificial intelligence; although she is completely engaged in her unique brand of work, Ellen's true love is Renaissance music. However, due to odd and frightening mental lapses in college where she could feel an enticing draw to fantastical world, Ellen left music behind and

narrowed her life to the bleak confines of her sterile work cubicle to keep from ever being pulled back to that other place. Still suffering from strange dreams, she has a chance encounter with a man called Payne. Even with his wit and charm and sincere willingness to be of help, she is frightened of him in ways she can't fully understand as partially awakened memories of the sixteenth century begin to play havoc with her mind.

When Payne invites her to a Renaissance Faire in order to re-enact a masque on the four hundredth anniversary of its first performance—a day of the conjunction of stars that happens only once every four centuries—Ellen knows the crux of her two 'lives' is at hand. The masque was written by Kit Arundel, a musician she knew more about back in college than should have been possible.

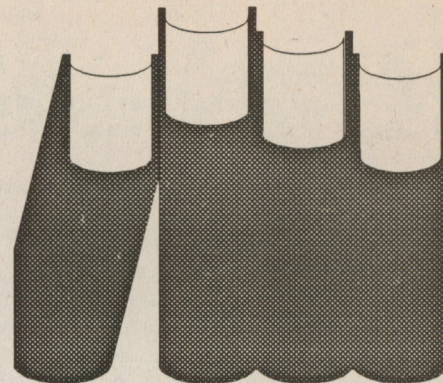
Soon Ellen is shifting into Elanore, lured away to another sphere of existence by deceptively simple alterations of Kit's music, where she must enter into a journey of discovery to learn who she truly is and to which world she actually belongs. Margaret Ball entices the reader into a world of enchantment as easily as Ellen slipping back and forth through a maze of magic. It's difficult enough to bring one world to life in a novel, but here the author has the lyrical grace, strength, and capability to breathe vitality into two.

SILVERHAND: THE ARCANA, Book 1 by Morgan Llewelyn & Michael Scott Baen-\$22.00

With a liquefying, primal white screaming in the heavens tracts of forestland, entire cities, and thousands of people are utterly destroyed; so begins Morgan Llewelyn and Michael Scott's *Silverhand*, the first book of a powerfully-wrought new fantasy series under the umbrella title *The Arcana*. Filled with a mysterious order of monks, packs of werebeasts, a hideously immoral pair of incestuous twins, and a boy growing into the unlikely hero of ancient prophecy, *Silverhand* proves to be one of those novels with something for everyone who loves the genre.

Returning to his hometown after a brief

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sojourn to nearby ruins, teenaged Caeled finds the gruesome remains of his mother and neighbors. Orphaned, alone in the world, and with little hope of a future outside of slavery, nevertheless Caeled sets out for the distant southlands. Along the way he meets Armadiel, a warrior-philosopher sent by the Hieromonach, leader of a group of monks who still try to preserve the lost ways of order and righteousness in a time when chaos seems to rule much of the world.

In a tableau impacted with menace, Caeled is attacked by a weredog and loses most of his hand, the remainder cut off to keep the infectious bite from spreading, and soon replaced with a silver prosthetic by one of the brotherhood's healers; here is yet another of the prophecies fulfilled, further proof that Caeled is the "boy, god-marked, beast-touched" who may lead civilization from the dark and troublesome times that lay ahead. Caeled, though, wishes only to fulfill his own oath to avenge his mother by ending the threat of the shrieking 'Voids'—vast amounts of evil, sexual energy released and controlled by twin tyrannical siblings Lares and Sarel, called the Duet.

As Caeled continues on his fateful journey he discovers various pieces of the Arcana—spear, stone, sword, and cup—four immensely potent magical items that will help him in his war with the Duet and his fight for vengeance and justice. If the remainder of the series proves to be of equally promising, engrossing, and page-turning quality, then the rest of the Arcana is well worth getting a hand on.

THE LETTERS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN ed. by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien Houghton/Mifflin Inc. \$24.95

This book is a must read for any fan of J.R.R. Tolkien. A compilation of over 50 years of correspondence between Tolkien and his friends, family and publisher, I felt that this book told a more realistic tale than Tolkien's biography. See Tolkien grow, feel what he felt as he worked through the greatest Fantasy story ever written, *The Lord of the Rings*. Gain insight into where the great tale came from. I quote from the letter reprinted on the back cover:

February 4th, 1938

Dear Mr. Furth

I enclose copy of Chapter I "A Long-expected Party" of possible sequel to The Hobbit.

I received safely 4 additional copies of The Hobbit.

I received a letter from a young reader in Boston (Lincs) enclosing a list of errata [In the Hobbit]. I then put my youngest son, lying in bed with a bad heart, to find any more twopence a time. He did. I enclose the results--which added to those already submitted should (I hope) make an exhaustive list. I also hope they may one day be required.

Yours Sincerely,
J.R.R. Tolkien

E.M.-Editor

Small Press:

THE MAGIC WITHIN ed. by Emily Alward, Diane Holmes & Alicia Rasley
WorldEdge Press, Inc., 2138 E. Broad Ripple Avenue #143 Indianapolis IN 46220-\$9.95

An anthology containing twenty-four stories of women with a variety of magic and power, *The Magic Within* showcases a diverse collection of fantasy and science fiction tales exploring and honoring the strengths that make up the essence of women. The quiet and poignant charm of Sue Storm's self-sacrificing woman-child protagonist in "Coyote"—wherein a crippled girl shows kindness to an equally hurt animal and soon must choose between helping herself or a greater good—serves to illustrate the maternal instinct that exists even in a child. The woman 'swordsmen' of R.R. Mallory's "Sword Song" is connected to her weapon in far-reaching and loving ways she'll never know with another person. P. Andrew Miller re-envision's the myth of Ariadne and her poor 'deformed' brother the Minotaur, in the exceptionally touching tale "The Heart of the Labyrinth." D.M. Recktenwalt's "The Gingerbread Man" reaches further into the horror genre to come up with a woman's 'tasty' voodoo revenge on her lover. However, the stand-out story for me was Lela Buis' "Hurricane Season," a riveting piece of science fiction allegory featuring a cyborg's arrival to an island in search of plunderers, the family that takes him in, and the ruthless nature of a matriarch who will protect her children no matter what the cost. As a

whole this anthology collects storytellers who attempt to feature the unordinary, deeper works of the feminine, fantastical mystique.

THE SHERMAN LETTER
by Leonard Palmer Write
Way Publishing, 3806 South
Fraser Aurora CO 80014-\$18.95

A novel filled with both history and mystery, Leonard Palmer's *The Sherman Letter* is often as informative as it is entertaining, written for the most part in chapters alternating between 1865 and 1991. The reader bears witness to both the closing days of the Civil War and the recent events of Desert Storm and the Gulf crisis; an intriguing storyline is juxtaposed between the personal involvement in the bloody battles of North and South, and the vast media-coverage of a distant war being fought far off from our native land.

"The Sherman Letter" itself is written by General William Sherman, who, while in a fit of rage, scribbles a vicious missive to Secretary of War Stanton that might well have changed the course of history if it had ever been sent. Instead it is intercepted by Captain Stanford Short and soon the incident is forgotten by Sherman and everyone else, until nearly two hundred years later when a Wisconsin historian discovers the letter. It isn't long before she's murdered, an innocent man is charged with the crime, and the letter disappears. It's up to the cynical, world-weary, slightly self-pitying reporter and bastion of truth Truman Moon to get on the case and discover why anyone would kill for the document.

Moon has his obstacles though, including crooked cop Manny Edison, nicknamed "Son of Sam" because his weapon of choice, like that of David Berkowitz, is the .44. Edison draws Moon further into the puzzle and then uses and abuses his efforts to discover the cache for his own criminal agenda. Tracking the letter, Moon and the reader learn the complexities of life during the end of the Civil War, when politics were just as—if not more—screwed-up as our own. The 1865 chapters follow Stanford Short as he tries to outwit and avoid Sherman's steward, Meriwether Pickens, who also wants the missive for his own twisted purposes.

A refreshing blend of historical mystery, *The Sherman Letter* toys with facts just enough so that the novel plays out realistically yet a bit mischievously, as our unlikely hero Moon continues forward in spite of his ignorance and usual wariness. No need for a college refresher course, this

novel will take you back two centuries to a judicious time of madness, intrigue, slander, honor, and horror, a time comfortably not so very different from our own.

STAINED GLASS RAIN by
Bruce Boston Ocean View
Books, Box 102650 Denver CO
80250-\$14.95

The romanticized elements of the turbulent 1960's have long since cast a fascinating shadow upon those of us too young to remember such an important time in American history; with little more than over-the-top 'message' novels and films being foisted upon the public (re. all the works of Oliver Stone) it's high time that someone like Bruce Boston came onto the scene with his own neo-memories and pseudo-fictions to create a complex, wholly believable milieu capturing the denizens of that decade. Here in *Stained Glass Rain*, Boston invites us through the time warp and bids us re-entrance to the psychedelia, poetry, sexual abandon, and other utterly dizzying facets of Greenwich Village madness. Bombarding the reader with beautifully lyrical, speculative, eloquent, and occasionally surreal displays of language, we are taken on a tour through the lives and heads of four key players; Jacobi, the failed

dealer and poet, as well as wandering soul and hub of the quartet; Christine, the fortyish divorcee who fled her family in an effort to find herself through a series of brief, foolish encounters as well as her self-published books of poetry; Michael, the intensely self-contained recluse and poet who strives for a perfection of narrative voice he can only find after fasting and dropping a tab; and Mulligan, the madcap, rowdy, obese, acid-head freak with the disposition of a stoned-out Mother Teresa or Dan Rather. Together

they live through such chapters as "The Methamphetamine Waltz," replete with overture and dialogue written in the form of a play, whereby Boston captures the essence of their flashing speed trip in a way no linear writing could properly express. Reminiscent of some Vulcan mind-melding of Terry Southern, Jack Kerouac, Thomas Pynchon, and Richard Farina, *Stained Glass Rain* will fall hard against your brain as one of the best novels to snare a portion of the soul of the Sixties.



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—from DREAM CRYPT

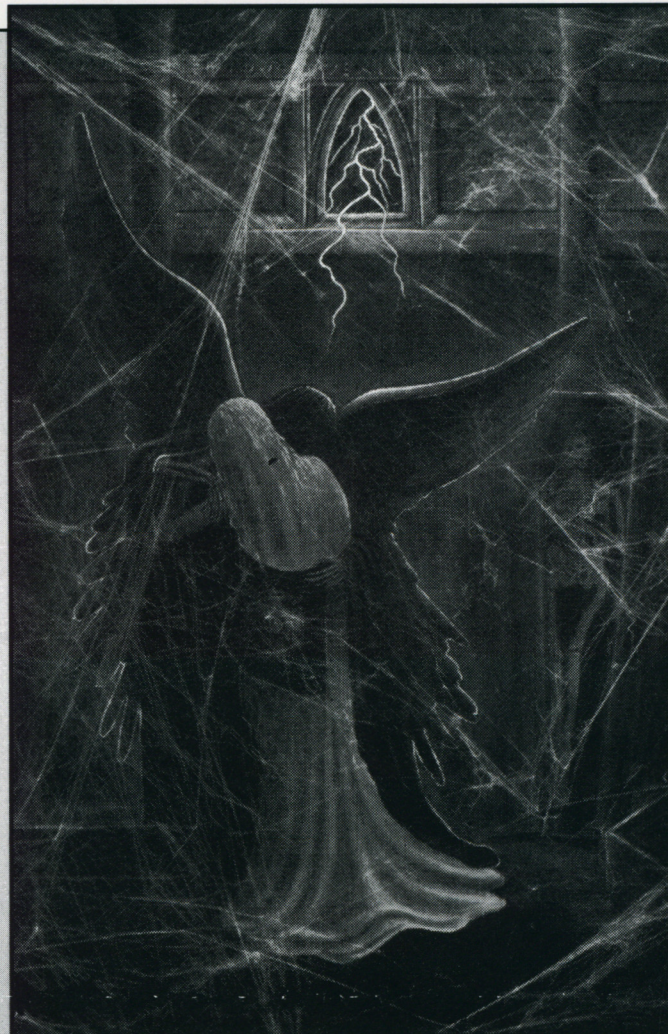
- “The bogeyman and his freak mutants had all glided into the basement on dark wings, laughing silently in the black, shooting toward him as they rode the sharp currents that raised the tiny hairs on the back of his neck and exploded down his spine each time their faces were about to touch and they pulled back.”

—from HELL HATH NO FURY . . .

- “His forceful, robust hands embraced my face, and his velvet mouth met mine. Intimacy never bestowed upon me by mere mortals. His long sweltering tongue flickered as if a flame, gliding over my face, lips, and descended my neck where his mouth grasped my skin”

—from INTO THE NIGHT

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SILVERHAND



THE ARCANA, BOOK 1

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