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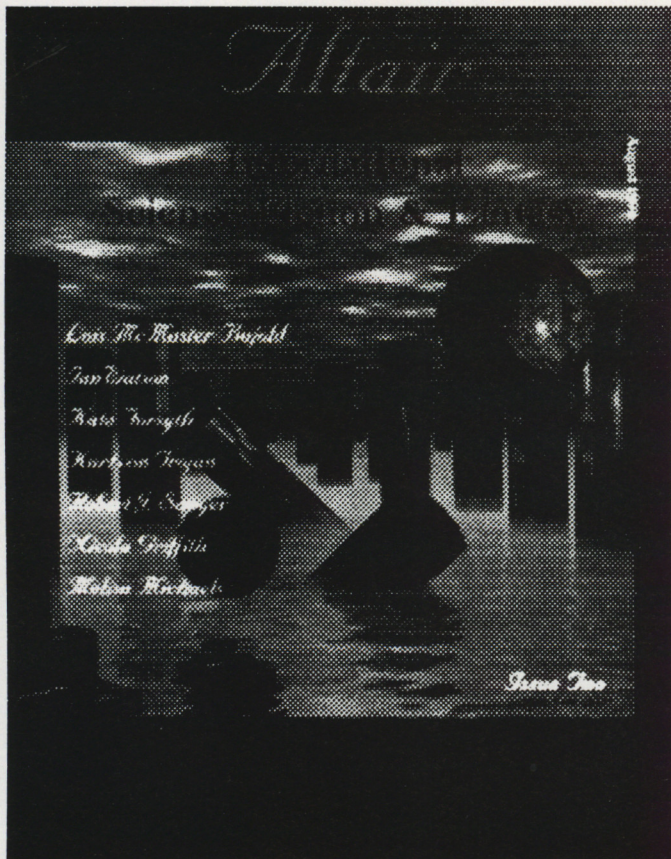
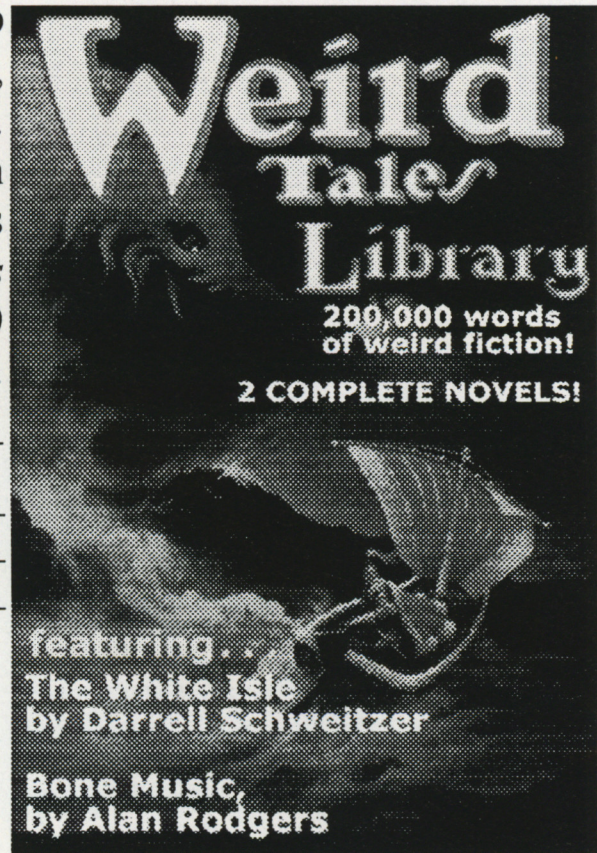


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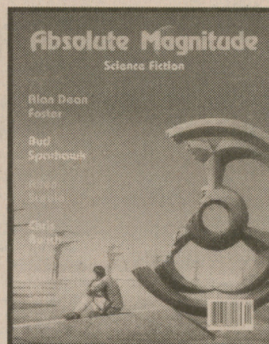
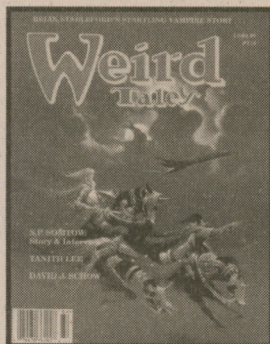
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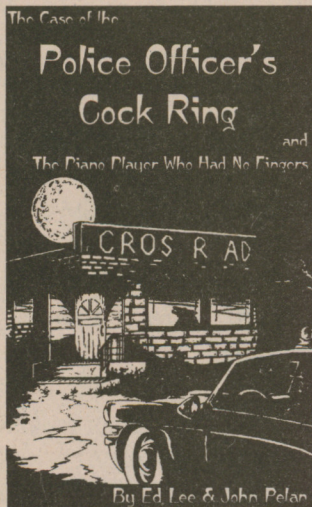
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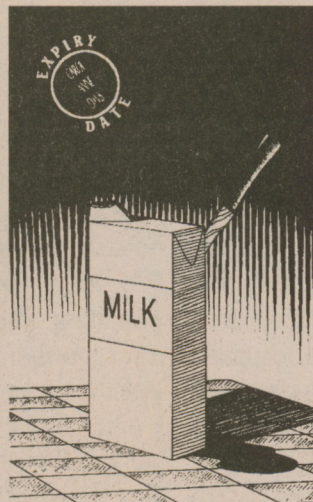
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From the Editor's Desk

"The times they are a change 'in..."

- Bob Dylan

It's been some time since I penned this editorial... almost a year. It was a cold Super Bowl morning when I last wrote to my readers... for this I am sorry. But even as it rains here in New York, on the eve of the JETS first home playoff game in many years, I find myself renewed much like my JETS. Tomorrow I will be at the Meadowlands to watch what may be the first step in a Super Bowl run, and like the JETS, I... and Pirate Writings... am looking forward to the future. There will be no letters this issue—your stuck with me. There have been so many changes since the last issue I don't know where to start... how about at the beginning!

Tom Piccirilli, my friend and Associate Editor, will no longer be reading regularly for PW. Tom's writing career has exploded, he has found the love of his life, he is moving across the country and he no longer has the time to devote to PW. Tom will remain on PW's masthead as he will still be intimately involved with the magazine as a writer, editor and promoter. Thanks for all the years of help, Tom. (Read an interview with Tom in this issue.) PW's new Associate Editor, Patrick Thomas, will attempt to fill Tom's shoes.

I mailed *Epitaph: Tales of Fantasy & Horror* to the printer several months ago. I then got a phone call which called my entire outstanding printing bill. This, along with my own personal time restrictions—I would like to start writing again, my job is killing me, I do have a wife—I am folding-up Pirate Writings Publishing. WAIT!!!! THIS IS GOOD NEWS!!!! This is great news for *Pirate Writings Magazine* because PW will now be published by Warren Lapine of DNA Publications. Now part of a stable of magazines which includes *Weird Tales*, *Aboriginal*, *Absolute Magnitude* and *Dreams of Decadence*, *Pirate Writings* can truly move to the next level. I will remain as editor and will have full creative control. What does this mean for you? It means you'll get the same magazine you always have and as DNA Publications grows, PW will grow and expand... so your subscription is worth more now than ever. Unfortunately, *Epitaph* was the casualty in this transaction—all *Epitaph* sub-

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Tales of Fantasy, Mystery + Science Fiction

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Cover: *Michael Apice*

DNA

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scribers will get there choice of any DNA Publication. Also, A STRICT QUATERLY SCEHULE WILL BE FOLLOWERD HENCEFORTH! No more waiting six months for your magazine. I am very happy about this and I hope you are to.

MY BOOK! *The Best of Pirate Writings* is now available! See the back cover of this issue for ordering details.

In the midst of all this positive change I feel it is appropriate to remember where *PW* came from; what brought *PW* from a 22 page photocopied fanzine to one of the largest semi-professional fiction magazines in the US. In that spirit, I have decided to reprint my introduction from *The Best of Pirate Writings*. Please read it, remember, then buy my book! :)

Introduction: *The Best of Pirate Writings*:

First, let me thank you for buying my book. The creation of this anthology was a long time coming and I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Second, the purpose of this introduction is to chronicle the history of *Pirate Writings*; to give you some insight into who I am and how I relate to *Pirate Writings* and why. For those of you reading this book that have never read the magazine—WELCOME! You folks are a big reason why I wanted to do this project—to reach a new audience. So let's get going.

I woke up one fine morning and I was a publisher.

I'm not really sure how it happened; in fact the last five years have been kind of a blur. Let's try and sort everything out together.

Pirate Writings: Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction started out, like many things in life, at a party. I was at a gathering with some old high school friends—people I hadn't seen in several years. One friend in particular was a poet; another a graphic artist. I had been writing and submitting my work for about six months at this time, and I knew something of the small press, having sold my first seven stories. I was bold and uttered the words—after several beers and some Jack Daniels—"Why don't we start our own magazine. Surely we can do better than most of the stuff out there." And like a bad hangover, the bastard-child *Pirate Writings* was born.

At this point I must point out the total lack of planning. I knew nothing about distribution, chain stores vs. independents, art direction, etc.. However, I did know what I believed to be good fiction and poetry and that was all we needed. The name—ah, the name. The name of the magazine is probably my single biggest mistake or my biggest success—all depends on who you talk to and what their concerns are. My partners (Amy Taggart and Mark Cudak) and I brainstormed for something different, something that would make people want to read the magazine. We didn't wish to imitate the uninspired clear wit of say, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* or *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. We were looking for a hip name that signified something different, cutting-edge—and *Pirate Writings* it was. Why didn't we believe people would think the magazine contained swashbuckling tales of the high seas; or better yet, stories we had stolen? We weren't thinking—we were creating.

Issue number one was a 24 page, saddle-stapled 'zine with a black and white cover. The print run was 200 copies and I never thought I'd sell them all. (I only have six left—they have sold to collectors for as much as \$40 each.) However, during the production of the first issue my partners and I went our separate ways. I, having invested all the time, energy and money, felt that *PW* was mine and no one else's. They agreed. So, alone, with no design experience, with no ability to even draw a stick figure or work the most basic of layout programs, I put out two more issues. Each getting a little better than the one before and by issue three I was printing 300 copies.

Those who know me well know that I am a man of extremes—there is no in-between, there is no half way. "Do or do not. There is no try."—Yoda. I wasn't comfortable going into book-stores and seeing *Deathrealm*, *Absolute Magnitude* and *Aboriginal* on the newsstands—I was as good if not better. But to get to the newsstand great sacrifices had to be made—both time and money. I admit, I was daunted.

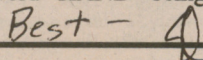
So I took a leap of faith.

I began soliciting big name writers, going to conventions and meeting people in the business, paying decent rates, expanding the page count and the design, incorporating a full color cover—issue number four hit the stores with a print run of 2500 copies. Then the magazine began to snowball. With issue number five I made the move to full size format, but retained my old logo and....wait—I forgot something... someone.

It was around the release of my big re-launch issue that I met my Associate Editor and now friend, mystery/dark fantasy author Tom "Nathaniel" Piccirilli. Tom had found an old copy of *Pirate Writings* #2 in a local library and wrote me a letter. I wrote him back, we met, and the rest was beer and tennis. With Tom on board and helping me read (At that time I was getting about 100 unsolicited manuscripts a month—now I get about 500) and line edit, things really began to roll.

Issue number seven was....

Well, you'll have to buy the book to read the rest. Thanks to everyone for their support and I look forward to the bright future of *Pirate Writings Magazine*. See you in May where you'll hear about my feeling on the word "HAND" being censored on the *Drew Carey Show*... and more. Read on and enjoy!

Best - 

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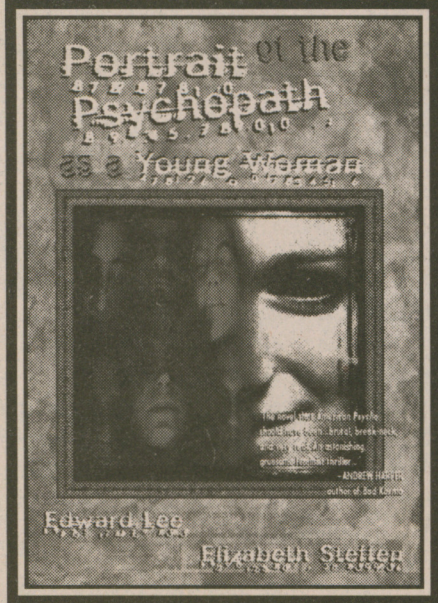
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Chris Bunch is a New York Times bestselling author. He has written scores of books including *Sten*, *Shadow Warrior*, *The Far Kingdom Trilogy*, *A Reckoning For Kings* and many others. This is the first of two stories I have in inventory by Chris; the second will appear later this year.

The Death of a Respectable Man

by Chris Bunch

Illustrated by
Michael Apice

David Reinhard was dead. There wasn't any question about that. He hadn't expected to die as he did, putting one client on hold as his secretary told him another was waiting while his chicken salad on rye sat uneaten on his desk.

Of course, he'd never much thought about death. He was far too young for that, barely 50.

There was no roaring in his ears, no narrowing of vision into a tunnel, no flash of all-embracing light.

Just pain, worse than any he'd ever known, a red hot steel band squeezing his chest. He felt himself slip sideways out of his chair and his body thud down on the carpeting.

Then he woke up sitting in a comfortably overstuffed chair in a huge room. There was the dying echo of the pain, then he felt quite normal.

He looked about him, and realized, to considerable astonishment, he was in Heaven.

He wasn't quite sure why the surprise, except that he'd never quite believed in God, upper or lower case, and assumed that disqualified him. More honestly, he guessed there was still some of his mother's shrilling that People Like David never went to Heaven.

But here he was. And, he thought truthfully, there was no reason a respectable man like himself shouldn't be here.

Here, at the moment, looked to be an enormous, quite comfortable waiting room. Actually, it was more like the library of a London's men's club he'd once had sherry in, from the chairs to the rather plush Oriental carpeting to the rich wood paneling, rather amused at what his host told him about the members' less-than-sedate behavior in the upstairs rooms.

He could not get an idea on how big the room was—sometimes he could see the walls, then they receded into the distance. Nor could he tell how many other people were in the room beside him. Sometimes he appeared alone, sometimes he saw half a dozen men and women sitting nearby. But when he looked again, they would be gone.

At the far end of the room was...was something he wasn't quite capable of sensing, let alone describing. Perhaps it was a throne...no, he quickly corrected himself. A great desk. No, a judge's bench.

Or maybe there was nothing but the Presence. David refused to use any other word for the Being he sensed there. He...David knew the Presence was male...exuded benevolence. Concern.

Yes. It was Heaven. But...it seemed a little traditional, Reinhard thought, realizing he was listening to just-audible harp music. He winced—that was a bit much.

There was another chair just beside his, and David wondered why he hadn't noted it before, just as he noted the chair was occupied.

The other man was in his late 20's, and David knew him instantly for what he was, from his carefully-shaped eyebrows to his lips just a trifle shinier than nature or saliva could make them to the ever-so-neatly-trimmed beard to the ostentatious manner in which he crossed his legs. David smelt a cologne that was far too sweet and flowery.

"Hello, there." It was confirmation when David heard the softly-cooed greeting.





"Hello," he said, a bit stiffly.

"What are we waiting for? Is the Old Man up there checking reservations? Or aren't our rooms ready? Somebody stiffed the maid again? Or wasn't stiff enough?"

David forced a smile.

"I'm Lance," the other man said, and extended a predictably cool and muscle-less hand to shake. David managed politeness.

"Well," Lance said, "we don't have to be so formal, do we? I mean, eternity's going to be a very long time if we stand on ceremony."

"I'm not standing on anything," David said. "I'm just..."

"...just tight-assed," Lance said. "Don't worry, darling. If you want to stay in the closet, even in Heaven, I'll never let on. But don't think you can go around fooling people. That's all over now."

David began to sputter a retort, and then the chair was empty.

He shuddered.

Lance was the kind of person David thought of as queer. Queer, not gay, although that was another word David hated. Gay was cheerful, happy. Lance...and David...were homosexuals. Inverts was another word he allowed himself to use. But never about a...a faggot like Lance.

David often thought it was men like Lance who were responsible for what even the most respectable newspapers were openly calling queer-bashing these days. David privately thought they brought it on themselves, with their dancing about...now there was a good word he hadn't heard used for years about Lance's sort.

He thought it appalling that his fellow homosexuals would ghettoize themselves in cities, and openly display their differences.

He knew better. He knew that private pleasures, private sins, are to be kept just that.

Although, he guiltily admitted, he had spent time in some of those places, and enjoyed himself. New York...San Francisco...Los Angeles...it had always been a simple matter for him to leave the Midwestern city he lived and worked in and fly to either coast for a weekend.

He would check in a hotel outside the district, and then change into clothes he'd brought with him, clothes far different from what he wore in Missouri. When he returned to his hotel, after a day, two days, three days, the clothes would be discarded as soiled, and the memories of what he'd done kept close to be brought up again and again when he'd gone back to his comfortable burrow in the heartland.

What he did on what he called a "vacation" was something that only mattered to him. He generally took careful precautions, although there'd been times when passion caught him up and made him reckless.

Of course he never told his partner Steve, the man who'd shared his life for more than seven years, the details of these vacations. David felt Steve could have his private moments just as David had. It kept their relationship strong, kept them from becoming bored with the other. There'd been a certain moment of luck required in these adventures, but David had always been lucky, and so taking the tests that everyone said should be taken wasn't necessary. At any rate, the things he did in the cities were things that he and Steve almost never did when they were together in bed, although David wasn't sure why not, or who would have objected.

David shrugged, wondering why he was trying to justify things now. His life had always been well-ordered, with never the sort of

things occurring that Lance probably thrived on. And now it was over.

He wondered how long he was supposed to sit here, in this room, and what would happen next. He mind reminded him of the music once more, and he winced, hoping that the rest of the middle-class imagery, white clouds and robes and choirs, didn't apply.

Although a comfortable church-going Episcopalian, he'd only thought of singing in a choir once, and that had been more than three years ago. Actually it had been because he'd become entranced with one of the choir's younger men, who always stood in the front row. David had attended one rehearsal. The young man had looked at David with a raw, hungry look that tore at his loins. He felt his body responding, had turned away, feeling the flush.

He'd never gone near the choir again. That feeling...that man...life could suddenly become dangerous.

David yawned. Heaven, he had to admit, was hardly the most exciting place he'd ever been.

He looked toward the far end of the room, and was astonished to see Lance there, in front of the Presence. Lance turned, saw David, and mouthed words that could only be "Fuck You."

Impossible. He'd been here far longer than that...that person.

David was suddenly standing in front of the desk, the bench, the throne. Lance was nowhere to be seen. The warmth, the benevolence, rolled toward him. David felt momentarily uncomfortable - it was too much like his uncle had treated him, always appearing interested, concerned, but David had felt scorn, contempt, underneath it.

"I...was just wondering..."

"There is a time and a place for all things, for all Men," he felt the Presence say, words without words. "In your time, you shall be rewarded. Please try to understand."

"Uh...yessir...I mean, yes, I'm sorry, I'll..."

He was back in his seat.

There was a middle-aged woman sitting in the chair Lance had been in. She was dressed like a somewhat successful real estate salesperson, and wore tinted glasses with some sort of jewel...imitation, of course...set in the lenses' corners.

None of the lines around her mouth had been drawn by smiles.

"Did you know him?"

"Who?"

"That...person who was sitting beside you. The one who spoke to you."

"I never saw him before in my...I never saw him before," David said.

"That's good," the woman snapped. "You don't look like one of them."

"Them?"

"You know who I mean. There's no need to be polite here. It's in the Bible...I don't remember where...that God wants all of us to be always honest.

"I always tried to say exactly what was on my mind, at least."

"I'm sure you did."

"I hope that person was a mistake. We certainly don't need them up Here, now do we?"

David looked at her, looked away from her glittering eyes. Her mouth, he decided, reminded him of an asshole. A constipated asshole.

To his enormous relief, the chair was vacant.

David took a deep breath.

Perhaps this great room was just what he'd first thought it to be - a waiting room. Or maybe a place of testing. In any event, if that woman was qualified for Heaven, he hoped he'd never encounter her again.

That brought up another thought, even worse. How did God, or Buddha, or Allah, or whoever was that Presence, arrange things? How did He keep people from encountering those who they'd rather not ever see again? What about people who'd had some messy divorces? What kept the ex's apart?

David thought of his own life, of people who he'd just as soon never encounter, and as he did, he saw with horror one of them was sitting across from him.

He'd met her just after graduating from college, after he'd taken his first job in the marketing division at General Motors. Rita. Rita Jameson.

He'd liked her a great deal. She'd been pretty, but no so pretty as to stand out. They'd had a great deal of fun together.

Better, she'd been undemanding, so the issue of his sexuality never came up. Not directly, of course. Not for some time.

She'd helped his career enormously. He could attend any of the corporation's functions, and no one would ever wonder about him. The worst that could be thought was that David was taking a bit long to marry his evident fiancée.

He knew the matter had to be resolved sooner or later, but delayed the moment for five years.

Then Rita had brought it up, asking him directly one night after they'd gone to a bar and David had allowed himself to be a little flirtatious with the bartender.

It had been late, and David had a bit too much to drink, or he never would have told her the truth as baldly as he did.

He certainly never did it again, after the explosion his confession sparked.

He'd only been able to take a little of it, of her horror, her shouts, her tears and questions about why, why had he allowed her to waste five years of her life, before he'd grabbed his topcoat and walked out into the night, not feeling the wind or the snow shipping against his face.

He never called Rita again, and the two letters that came he tore up unread.

A year or so later, he heard she'd left Detroit. By then it didn't matter, because he had met Steve, and the money and contacts were in place for him to leave the corporation for independent consulting, and no one cared who he slept with.

He put her out of his mind. It had been her fault, anyway. She should have known, should have sensed that he was different.

Why was he the one who was always in the wrong, always forced to take the first step?

Rita had vanished. Instead, sitting there was Monroe.

David, who prided himself on always keeping control, never showing his true thoughts, knew he was openly gaping.

Monroe had been his first lover, when he was fourteen. Monroe had been twenty, a senior at State College. Monroe had been everything David wasn't - he'd gone to the same high school David was attending, but had lettered in swimming and track, and been valedictorian. David had pimples and Monroe had presence.

His parents had money, and Monroe drove a whimpy little BMW 2002. David's mother had told David he'd have to work to earn a car if he wanted one.

Monroe had picked him up hitch-hiking one hot summer day, and instead of taking David to his job at the local Dairy Queen they'd ended up at the lake.

Swimming, feeling the sun bake them. Monroe's body had been tanned, sleek.

Everything happened very quickly, and David knew, at the height of the thrashing passion what he was, what he felt, what he was doing was right, and there could be no turning back, no turning away even though he sensed the trouble he was bringing on himself.

He guessed Monroe had other lovers...no, he knew, because the man knew far too much, was far too skilled, to have just memorized the stud magazines and mattress manuals like David had.

David had never...not before, not later...felt the same roaring fire. He'd made sure of that.

They'd loved and they'd fought. When they fought they used the hard words, and when they were angry they made sure to do something, anything, that would hurt the other.

Six years, six years of fire, fire that never was banked. Six years of pain and hurt, ecstasy and sorrow, when neither of them gave a damn who knew about their love, about what they really were.

Then David came to himself.

This could not go on. He had a life he must live.

He transferred to another college for his last two years, a college where no one knew anything about him other than he was polite, friendly, and always a gentleman. A straight gentlemen.

He burnt all the bridges he could think of, knowing Monroe was, as Vita Sackville-West wrote to Violent Trefusis, "the unexploded bomb to me...I don't want you to disrupt my life."

But what the hell was Monroe doing here? He looked no older than when David had last seen him. Had he died young? If so, what was he doing in this waiting room? Better, what was he doing in Heaven at all? David remembered some of the things that had happened, some of the horrible games Monroe had played with him.

The man no more deserved Divine Grace than...than David did himself, he sheepishly thought, remembering the things he himself had done for revenge, for hatefulness, to prove that he was loved.

Perhaps each of their evils had canceled the other's out.

Perhaps...but that didn't change one thing: Heaven for David Reinhard could not, must not, include Monroe.

This was truly intolerable!

David got up, started to walk over to Monroe's chair. Then he stopped in considerable confusion, seeing the chair was empty.

He sat back down, fuming, but making sure nothing showed, as he'd learned in a thousand business meetings, learning to always hold firm to his image, to always behave in a respectable manner.

But this was impossible!

All of this nonsense, plus that damned music, and now David swore he could dimly hear singing.

It sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Enough was enough.

He stood once more, turned toward the throne, toward the Presence, and firmly strode toward Him, expecting at any moment to be in front of Him, as he'd been before.

But it was almost fifteen steps before his perspective swam and he was before the Presence.

David sensed mild annoyance at the distraction, then interest.

"Sir...God...whoever you are," David began, hating himself for not having the words ready. "This...I can't believe You would permit this, here. If this is one of your Mansions, I'd like to go to another.

"I'm a respectable man, and I never expected to be treated this way."

"I never expected Heaven to be like this, to be like..."

David's words trailed off, as he felt the full intensity of the Presence.

David gasped, feeling, for just a second, feeling the same buried contempt he'd received from his uncle.

The scorn was unburied in a great wave of mirth, of cosmic amusement that filled the universe, while the words rang against his soul:

"What makes you think this is Heaven?"

Coffee Breaks...

Keith Allen Daniels

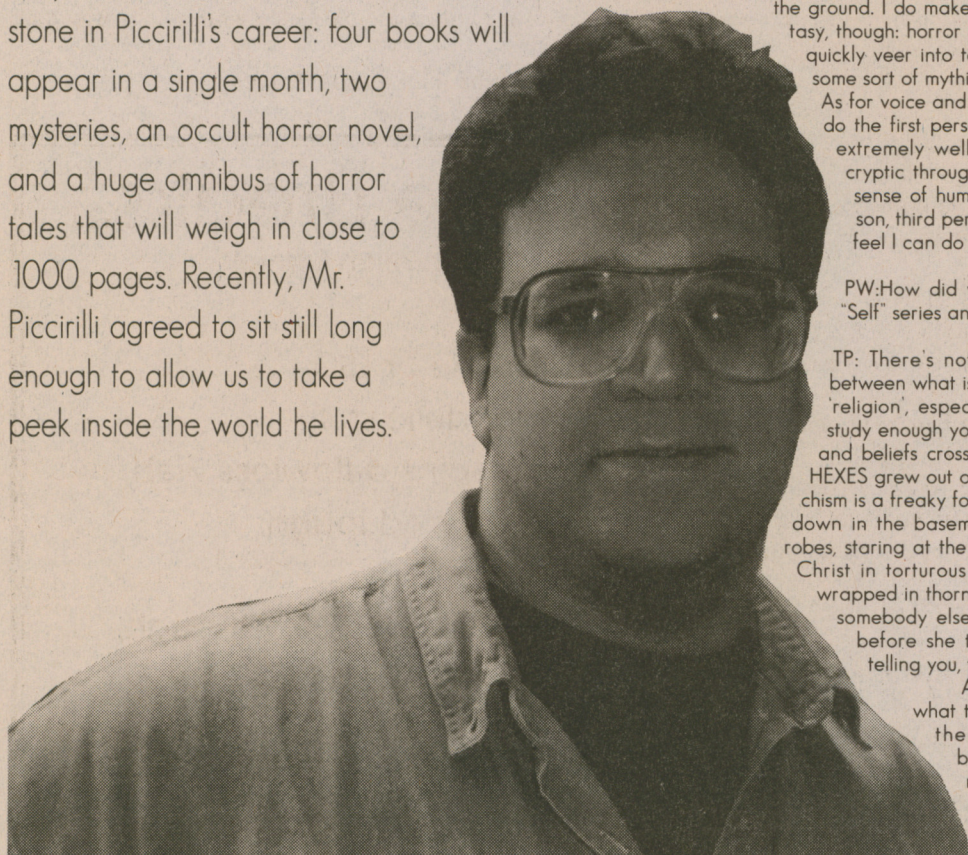
On mescaline or LSD-
that psychedelic stuff-
the spider spins a flawless web,
symmetrical and tough.

Caffeine's another story, though,
disrupting every thread.

Let's ban the dreaded coffee break
and wake the living dead!

PEERING INTO DARKNESS: an interview with Tom Piccirilli by Trey Barker

With reviews stating that Tom Piccirilli's work is "scorching hot," "charged with possibility," and "sizzling," you've got to think his career has gone pretty well for a man who admits to entering "ass-backwards" into the world of writing. A few years ago, Tom had written his first novel that somehow managed to find a publisher who then let the book disappear without much of a trace, but he didn't accept his presumed fate easily. He's continued to be a writer/ editor/reviewer and all-around bibliophile. His short stories have appeared in everything from small press magazines to major anthologies to chapbook collections, and his previous novels *Dark Father*, *Shards*, and *The Dead Past* have been critically well-received. But 1999 marks a milestone in Piccirilli's career: four books will appear in a single month, two mysteries, an occult horror novel, and a huge omnibus of horror tales that will weigh in close to 1000 pages. Recently, Mr. Piccirilli agreed to sit still long enough to allow us to take a peek inside the world he lives.



PW: You seem to write a little of everything, working in the genres of mystery, horror, and now science fiction as well. You also run the gamut of form and style. Why is that? Do you simply get bored easily?

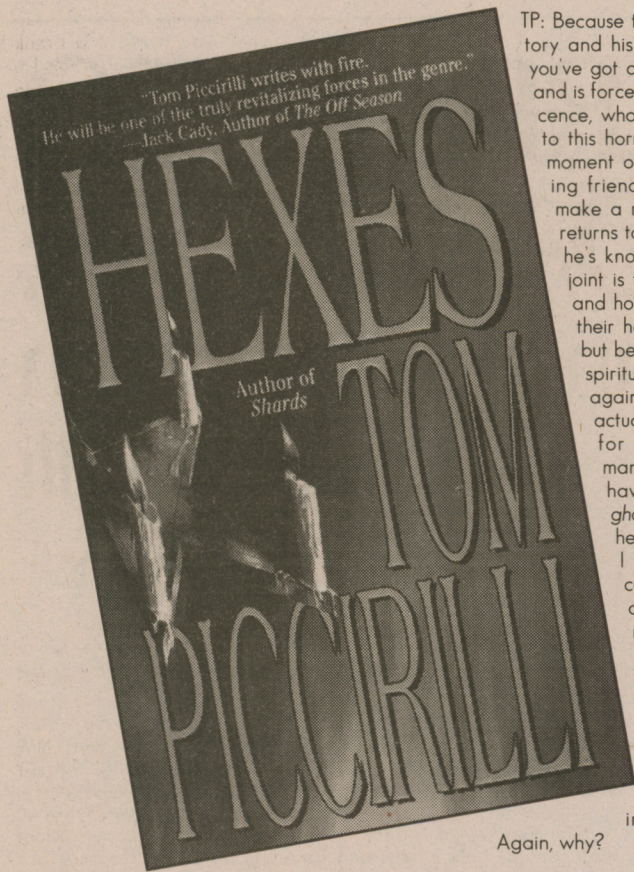
TP: There are certain styles, themes, and voices that I happen to fall into more naturally of course, but I prefer to mine new areas if I can. The challenge means as much as the final product itself. I feel comfortable in horror and mystery, but I've been slowly doing more SF tales although they're still heavy on the horrific side. I never thought I'd do so much in the dark fantasy field either—and I use the term 'dark fantasy' not because I think 'horror' is a bad word or because for years the publishers have been chopping us in the throat with it. I am a horror writer, but I do other things as well. That's the objective, to strive outside your strengths and take a chance on something you pray won't flop around dying on the ground. I do make a slight distinction between horror and dark fantasy, though: horror as stories that are essentially based in reality and quickly veer into terror and dread, and DF as those that are set in some sort of mythical, nightmarish world right from the start.

As for voice and point of view, I have a couple of different ways to do the first person, one sort where you get to know the narrator extremely well and another where he remains nameless and cryptic throughout. In my mystery novels my own basic acerbic sense of humor works well. In my horror novels, for some reason, third person works a lot better for me, at least so far, and I feel I can do more and go further with the story in that form.

PW: How did you get interested in the occult? Specifically the "Self" series and your new novel *HEXES* (Leisure Books)?

TP: There's not a particularly thick line of distinction for me between what is considered the 'occult' and what is deemed to be 'religion', especially where ancient history is concerned. If you study enough you find that concepts, gods, ideas, fears, laws, texts, and beliefs cross and recross all over the world and across time. *HEXES* grew out of my Catholic childhood, I suppose. Going to catechism is a freaky foray when you're nine years old and you're walking down in the basements of churches past all these people in black robes, staring at the twelve stations of the cross on the walls showing Christ in torturous poses, filing past paintings of bleeding hearts wrapped in thorns, only to get to a room where a nun tells you that somebody else died for you a couple thousand years ago just before she turns the television on to Davy and Goliath. I'm telling you, that was some seriously scary shit.

Anyway, from my interest in figuring out exactly what the hell all this stuff meant, I studied how it fit into the larger spiritual world where other people belonged to other religions. Once I started to research, I just kept going, and wound up taking some of the scarier and more fun parts and putting them into *HEXES* and my other work.



TP: Because there's so much to his personal history and his character make-up, I think. Here you've got a guy who, as a child, releases evil and is forced to battle it throughout his adolescence, who loses his family and his girlfriend to this horror that's a part of him, and in a moment of weakness abandons his remaining friends and neighbors and decides to make a run for safety. Five years later he returns to discover that a part of the world he's known remains the same, the burger joint is the same, the quaint county roads and houses are the same, folks are still in their hammocks and mowing their lawns, but beneath all that lurks a madness and spiritual corruption that he must battle again. That impending confrontation is actually his redemption, and that makes for a character who's got a great many facets to his personality. We all have our ghosts, but this guy has his ghosts. We all battle our demons but he must battle his demons. In essence, I think he is someone who gets to completely liberate himself from his own sins and failures in ways that most of us only wish we could. That makes him quite appealing to me.

PW: Equally, A.G., Matt Galen's best friend and partner in the world of the occult, seems to be someone you enjoyed writing, but on a darker, more disturbing and blackly humorous level.

Again, why?

TP: For similar reasons. A.G. is basically Matthew but with a few extra twists to his personality; here you've got the guy who stayed behind while his friend ran out on him and life as he knew it fell apart. He's someone who was forced to deal with responsibilities of heaven and hell when he was only a teenager, and how that wears on his soul until he finally cracks. Someone who realizes that the only way he can free himself from this burden and save what he loves is to stop fighting the good fight and let someone else take over.

PW: HEXES moves back and forth between supernatural and crime/murder fiction. Is that an example of your different interests merging?

TP: More or less. All my mysteries have a darker side to them, and all my horror has mystery elements to it as well. I think most authors dance between genres, it's just more prevalent in certain novels. In HEXES you've got complex tales of suicide and murder that are as much a part of the greater story as the supernatural portions of it. There are human tragedies as well as the occult. The jealousy, anger, desperation, and loneliness of central characters are what makes the greater horrific wheel turn.

PW: HEXES has lots of POV and structural shifts. Was this simply what the story demanded or was this designed? Do you enjoy playing with more complex stories?

TP: I enjoy working within the complexity of people. The book required that I go places my protagonist couldn't go. I had to show certain characters alone with their troubled thoughts in their own personal long dark hours of the soul. One of the factors I wanted to make sure to include in the novel is that even among all these supernatural occurrences, you still had some human, even petty trou-

bles happening to the cast. People still argue about what to eat at dinner or what to watch on television. Too often, I think, horror stories focus too directly on the monster, or the battle of good versus evil, or the race against time, or the end of the world, and so you wind up reading about dull characters who defeat big, loud bad critters and that's about it. I wanted everything to play back into the history and lives of the cast.

PW: Jello Joe, Bosco Bob, Zebadiah Crumpler, Lowell Tully. You obviously have fun naming your characters. Do you put much thought into them or do they just come to you?

TP: It takes me a while to name characters. I think that the names should reflect the character in some fashion, it should immediately make a connection from the name to the person. It's also why very often I don't name my protagonists in my short stories, because calling the guy "John Fredrickson" just doesn't do anything, it doesn't mean anything extra. You get a more mysterious, everyman feel to the piece if he's just unknown. Or they go by single names because to me, that's punchier and more effective at humanizing a character.

PW: Your Felicity Grove series now includes two novels: the new paperback THE DEAD PAST (Berkley Prime Crime) and new hardback SORROW'S CROWN (Write Way Publishing). What made you decide you wanted to do a mystery series?

TP: Mystery was actually the last genre that I became a fan of. I've been reading science fiction, fantasy, and horror since my childhood, but it wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties or so that I began to fully enjoy the mystery field. I think that had something to do with my own adulthood and the nature of the work; writing a mystery is a way to develop a more natural, realistic story and yet also get to play in a fantasyland where criminals get their lumps and the author gets to live out his fantasies of kicking ass and being a hero.

I wanted to play in the gray between cozy and hardboiled series, taking elements from both ends of the spectrum and putting my own spin on them. Pet books are all the rage, so in THE DEAD PAST I put in a pet, but instead of a cute crime-solving kitty I have a rotweiler named Anubis who occasionally gets to rip out a bad guy's throat. Part of my having fun with these books is providing lots of inside jokes where the clichés of the field are concerned: I get to toy with all of that and hopefully bring a fresh approach to the field. I decided that having a wheelchair-bound grandmother and her grandson working as a team, loving one another but often not fully understanding each other. Their personal lives and family history play into the books a lot. These were all conflicting emotions that I thought could lead to larger, more interesting storylines, with some murder and mayhem thrown into the mix.

Most mystery series you see are called the "put name of the detective here" series, but I wanted to do a little more with this one. I preferred doing mysteries that not only dealt with my protagonists getting involved with crimes and troubles, but also involve the rest of the town. A writer like Ed Gorman is terrific at peeling back the layers on a supposedly "quaint" small town to show all the secrets and misdeeds that lurk beneath, and I wanted to do something more like that. So even though my heroes are Jonathan and Anna Kendrick, they're constantly learning more about each other, their town Felicity Grove, and their neighbors, which can lead to sometimes startling or ugly revelations.

As for the "Self" series: a wandering modern-day necromancer and his demonic familiar second-self dealing with all kinds of supernatural events seemed a fun way to write a series similar to, say, Manly Wade Wellman's 'Silver John the Balladeer'. I wanted to create my own kind of mythos which I could return to and solidify over a number of years. I spent a lot of time in libraries reading all kinds of books on witchcraft, Satanism, anthropology, comparative religious texts. Historical accounts concerning the witchcraft hysteria and the Inquisition are amazing, really ghastly and evocative descriptions of some of the most ugly and savage periods in world history. You'll come across notes that were smuggled out of jail, written by innocent people with broken hands after they'd been tortured and starved for weeks, giving details about the horrors they've suffered and been forced to commit against their neighbors. You'll read how jailers asked the victims to spice up their stories to make them more frightening, so that the religious leaders themselves were creating Satan just so they could battle him at the cost of millions of lives. You see how these people were originally forced to dream up these accounts of witches' covens, then asked to edit them and rewrite them, and go back and rewrite them again, evolving the story to include more of their friends and family until even more people were murdered and they came out with a hell of a good, scary story that could be brought back to the Pope to show Satan on earth. My god, your mind whirls and your stomach sinks reading this stuff. Oddly enough, nobody ever mentioned any of this in catechism.

PW: Mathew Galen, your protagonist in HEXES, is a character you obviously enjoyed writing. Why is that?

PW: Are any more planned?

TP: I have another novel I'm currently only in the skeletal stages of writing. *THE DEAD PAST* will be out in January from Berkley Prime Crime, the sequel *SORROW'S CROWN* will be out the same time in hardcover from Write Way Publishing, and then Berkley will be bringing out *SORROW'S CROWN* in paperback about a year later. I'd like to do a lot more with some of the secondary characters and how they fit into the lives of everyone in Felicity Grove; I'm a big believer in having a character constantly shifting and growing in new directions. After only two books my protagonists already have new life choices to make, and that will affect their relationship as well as their relationships with the folks around them.

PW: Tell us a little about the character Zebediah Crummler, the slightly retarded caretaker of Felicity Grove's cemetery. He seems to be a wild man with quite a mysterious past. You've written major parts for him in the series thus far and most reviewers have taken notice of him. What's the draw about this character?

TP: He can be, at turns, humorous, sympathetic, frightening, mysterious, and even possibly dangerous. I purposefully left him ambiguous so that I could return from time to time and show different sides to him. As I mentioned, I like to show the oddity behind what might be considered a 'normal' town and Crummler lets me pretty much play it any way I like. In *SORROW'S CROWN* he becomes a murder suspect after someone is found killed in the cemetery and he's immediately sent to a mental hospital run by some rotten folks. In the novel I'm able to use him for humorous relief, make him part of a much larger mystery, but also keep the reader interested in the escalating suspense of his own plight.

PW: You've called the Felicity Grove series 'soft-boiled mysteries' since they aren't as dark as your horror work or your previous mystery novel *SHARDS* (where the son of a serial killer meets a woman who commits suicide shortly thereafter and entwines him in a number of violent escapades). Is it difficult for you to do different fare such as this?

TP: No, because it's not all that different at all. In fact, *SORROW'S CROWN* features the same mental hospital (read 'insane asylum') as in *HEXES*, as well as a mad poisoner, a kid whose head his face cut off with a shovel, and a few seriously deranged villains. But those are just some dark elements woven into a book with plenty of laughs, a lot of suspense, and maybe even some tears. There's as much ...poignancy to this book as in anything else I've ever written, and that matters a lot to me.

PW: You've got an omnibus collection coming out from Terminal Fright Press entitled *DEEP INTO THAT DARKNESS PEERING*. At forty stories and over 200,000 words, I believe it's one of the largest collections ever done by a small press publisher. Why such a big book?

TP: Ken Abner and I had been trying for a while to get together on a project but couldn't quite see eye to eye on what it should be. He always wanted to do a collection of the complete "Self" stories, but since I'd already done *PENTACLE*, which contained the first five tales, we really only would have been repeating ourselves. He suggested a bigger book and, of course, I went along with that...hell yeah. Ken had already brought out Brian McNaughton's *THRONE OF BONES* to great critical and financial

success, and that collection was also a huge tome as well. Gary Braunbeck's *THINGS LEFT BEHIND* was also a massive book and had done exceptionally well for Gary and Cemetery Dance Publishing. So Ken and I went back and forth a little bit on which stories should be in there and finally decided that a signed limited edition omnibus would be a big undertaking but worth the time and effort and money. I'm indebted to Poppy Brite for doing the introduction and Richard Laymon for following it up with an afterword. They're both terrific people for taking the time out of their schedules to help out. Also to Chad Savage for doing the cover and interior illustrations.

PW: You've been around as a published writer now for nearly a decade. But it seems your career really has taken off in the last two or three years. Why is that?

TP: I lucked into the business ass-backwards. The first serious piece of fiction I ever wrote was my first novel *DARK FATHER*. I finished the first fifty pages the summer I graduated college, sent an unsolicited partial off to Pocket Books—which breaks just about every rule of submission you can think of—but somehow the stars aligned correctly so that my manuscript wasn't drop-kicked back into my lap. I sold the book based on the sample chapters. Before the novel was finished my editor left and a new one came in who didn't think much of it, me, or horror in general, and when *DARK FATHER* came out it pretty much disappeared without a ripple. I spent the next several years writing novels I couldn't sell, and eventually decided I needed to break into short fiction and follow the more 'normal' route of honing your voice through your stories before entering into the novel arena. After selling thirty or forty tales, I returned to the books, edited and rewrote them, and managed to sell those off as well. The two halves of my career seemed to come together then, and I've got a lot of editors and writers to thank for it. Especially Ed Gorman, Jack Cady, Don D'Auria of Leisure, Dorrie O'Brien or Write Way, Kim Waltemeyer of Berkley, and Matt Schwartz of Horrornet.com and Barnes&Noble.com.

PW: How do you manage to edit so many different magazines, write your fiction, do reviews for Barnes&Noble.com and still have a life?

TP: I make time for everything because if you want to do something you make time for it, simple as that. I hear so many folks say that they wished they could write that novel they've been meaning to, but they really don't have time. Although everybody could use more hours in the day, what's really lacking is complete commitment. It's a hard haul to undertake. If you want to do something badly enough you do it, if not, then you toss it on the back burner with cleaning out your attic and grouting the shower stall and you spend your day watching football games or shopping for shoes or catching up on your sleep.

PW: What is your writing ritual?

TP: I don't have one. I try to write every day but if I don't I'm not someone who frets about it. Some writers, especially newer ones, get caught up in the goal of knocking off a certain number of pages a day. Sometimes they can get too wrapped up in the numbers, so that if they don't meet their objective they wind up adding more pages to their load the following day. When you've got that kind of system I think it tends to break down after a while and you start feeling like you're not accomplishing anything if you only

write a few paragraphs at a time. It's too easy to feel like an underachiever in front of a blank page, so I don't burden myself with it. When I'm working I have periods when the writing is coming along slowly, quickly, amazingly fast or not at all. Sometimes I take a while to come up with an idea that excites me enough to throw all kinds of hours and energy into the piece. That's what matters most, not the time you put into the work, but what you get out of it in the end.

PW: If you weren't writing, what would you be doing?

TP: Wishing I was writing. Or sitting around watching horror flicks. I have absolutely no aptitude for anything else, and I'm so dead-ass lazy I could never exist in the normal 9-5 routine. I have the greatest respect for people who can jockey in traffic for two or more hours every morning and afternoon getting to work and then getting home, sitting at a desk all day in between. I've only had the barest brushings with 'real jobs' and am thankful beyond belief that I've been able to eke out a living doing what I love to do. Not everybody is as fortunate.

PW: Where do you see yourself in ten years?

TP: I don't bother trying to look that far ahead. I couldn't have imagined the changes I've gone through in the last decade, what I've accomplished, what I've failed at. I love what I do and can't think of myself ever not being involved in it. I do my best to concentrate on the moment, to finish the book I'm working on, to complete whatever short story is on my plate, and most of all, to get satisfaction and have fun with it all. The rest will take care of itself.

PW: Thank you, Tom Piccirilli.

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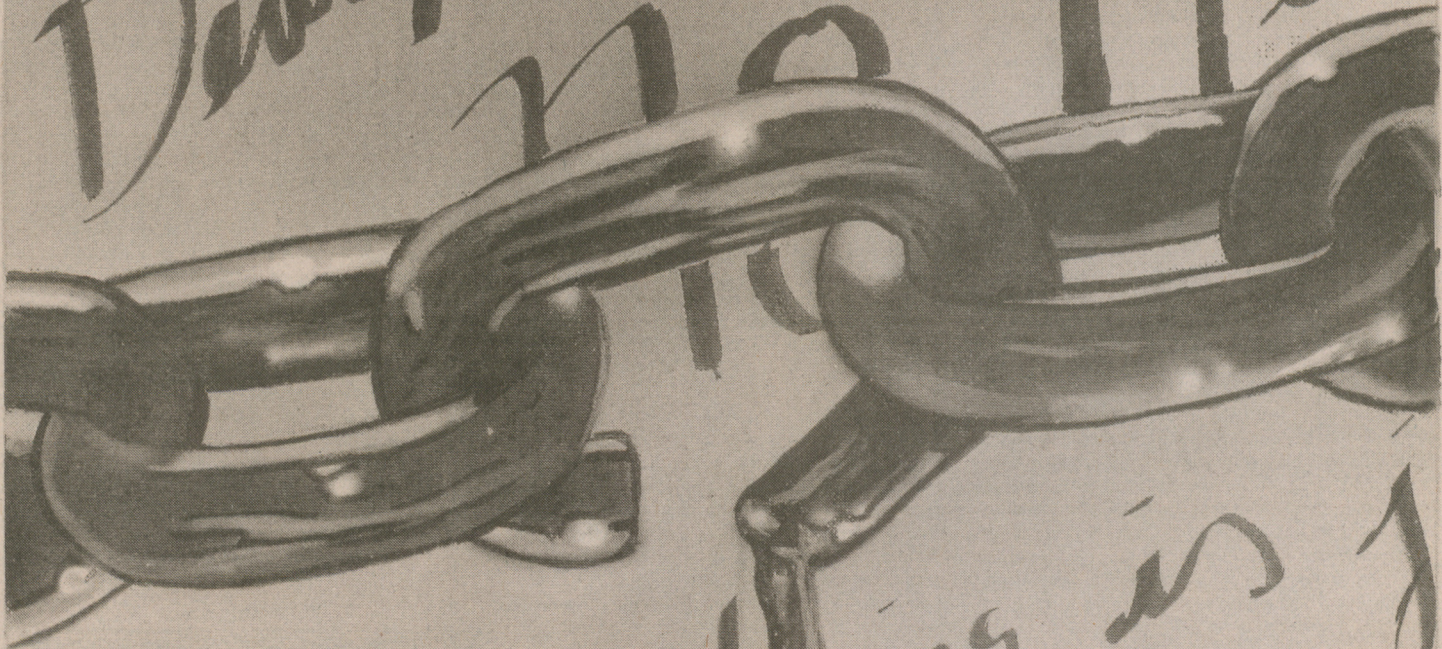
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Dear Kottie,

Ma Mae



Everything is so

fine, Mom

Love

April
1948

Marthayn has published widely under her own name as well as one other pseudonym, Christine Matthews. Her work has appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine; great anthologies like Deadly Allies II, Cat Crimes On Holiday, Hot Blood, Borderlands 3, and many others. She is currently collaborating on a novel with mystery author Robert J. Randisi.

Dear Lottie

by Marthayn Pelegrimas
illustration by Michael Apice

THURSDAY

Dear Lottie,

I've started this letter over and over throughout the day. You know that horrible Virgo in me wants everything to come out just right. Perfectly. Without offending anyone, without one misunderstood phrase between us, but after so many starts and abrupt stops, I've decided to dive right in and hope you won't get upset with me. I know how much you hate it when any of us referred to you as "the sensitive one," but you've always been a little too quick to get hurt. And believe it or not, I'd do anything to avoid hurting you.

So here it is. This decorator person you sent over is driving me crazy!

I'm thirty-five years old now, big sister. I'm college educated, married—divorced—married again—all right, divorced again, but I've raised two children rather well, even if I do pat myself on the back. Neither one has been inside a prison or signed up for any rehab. program of any sort. Their grades are decent and they seem to love me, and their father, but why they respect anything about that man I'll never know.

If you remember, I was the one who left home right after high-school and never came back or asked Mom and Dad for anything. So I think I'm able to choose a pastoral color to paint a bedroom with. Dare I even attempt some wallpaper?

I'm smiling, Lottie. I know how humor can come across as sarcasm in a letter but I hate to write "ha,ha," after every-

thing I'm hoping will be funny, so please keep in mind that I'm merely expressing my reservations to you, not criticizing.

Back to the house...

I promised you I'd clean up the old place after Mom moved out, or should I say was moved out. All these years since Dad died, you know how much trouble Mom started having with her eyes. Things got bad, Lottie. Bas as in filthy rotten.

You used to always send Mom a plane ticket—so she could come to you for the holidays. I remember how generous I always thought that was of you. Mom did too. But you haven't been back here in, as far as I can figure it, eight years. At least you can still hold on to your memories of the mother we had. The one who couldn't sleep peacefully through the night if the house wasn't spotless. Remember the time she spent days cleaning before Christmas and after taking her bath, changing the sheets and happily climbing into a clean bed in her clean room, wearing her freshly laundered nightgown, she suddenly remembered she hadn't cleaned beneath the refrigerator? How Dad fought with her when she woke him up to move the old Frigidaire away from the wall so she could scrub.

Well, with me living an hour away and not getting over here as often as I'd liked, and so many times Mom and I would meet midway for lunch or shopping, I started noticing the cobwebs here and there. It was to be expected when her back went out. I offered to come help, or at least send one of

the kids, but she said no. She always said no to any offer of help I extended. But now that I have been getting her things together, eating at the table we had so many family meals around, sleeping in my old room, I see how the cobwebs have multiplied and even look to be growing mold.

Smoking is such a filthy habit, too. I mean if a person wants to contaminate their body, far be it from me to say anything, but you'd never believe how yellow the walls are. The curtains, that I know started off as a light beige now look to be the color of dead leaves. And they smell bad.

So, dear sister, you can see that the job of getting this house in order is much bigger than we anticipated. I didn't know if you wanted to just cover expenses to redecorate the bedroom, or, now that you have been made aware of this dreadful situation, maybe you could pay half the bills to get the entire house fresh and clean. I have some money saved and would cover the other half. We could also save the money a professional would charge since I have some free time now to fix things myself.

There is so much to do here, I plan to begin right away. By the time you return home and find this letter I should have made some progress.

All my love,
Tessa

THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1997

Dear Miss Bower,

Although we have never formally met I feel I know you and your sister Tessa, very well. My name is Marie Slater; I live in the big Victorian behind your mother's house. We've been neighbors for the past six years, every since I moved to Marion to be near my boyfriend, Quincy.

Your mother was an angel, never held it against me that Quincy was in prison. She understood that shit happens. (I hope my language does not offend you). Serious shit, like convicting innocent people of crimes they never committed.

Because of all the kindness she showed me, I wanted to express my sadness at not having her to talk to during my days. She often told me about her family. Even though she didn't get to see you as often as she would have liked to, and after your father passed away, she did get lonely. I never had the chance to meet your father, I moved in the summer after he died, but I feel as though I knew him from the way your mother went on. It sounds as if they truly did have a perfect marriage.

Her daughter Lottie, how she would go on about you! Bragging how you were the first woman in her family to graduate not only regular college but law school as well. I was with your mother the day she went shopping for the purple wool to make you that suit you wanted. Have to admit she drove me a little crazy with all her fussing. Right down to the buttons. They had to be pearls. pearls for Lottie's birth month she said. The ones we found at Wal-Mart were not good

enough. She had to special order the good ones from the fancy place in St. Louis.

I've had the chance to meet your sister, Tessa. In fact, I can see lights on up at the house as I write this and recognize Tessa's white van in the driveway. I know they had their problems but your mother loved both her daughters equally. A fairer person I never knew.

There isn't much to be said now but I did want to let you know there are many people who will miss Irene.

Please call upon me should there be anything I can do.

Marie Slater

Campbell Cleaning Services
238 Brighton Way
Marion, Illinois

JUNE 13, 1997

Charlotte Bower
5116 S. 152nd Street
Marion, Illinois

Dear Ms. Bower,

This is to inform you that I drove out to your mother's house yesterday afternoon. when I attempted to let myself in with the keys you sent, however, I was met by a woman who identified herself as your sister, Tessa. We discussed the job and she told me my services would not be required, that she would be doing all the cleaning herself.

Since no work was done, the charge to your credit card has been adjusted to only cover my time traveling to and from the house.

I'm sure by now your sister has informed you of her decision. This letter is simply to serve as verification of this cancellation for my files.

Sincerely,
Dympna Campbell

Doctor William Very
239 West 7th Street
Evansville, Indiana

JUNE 13, 1997

Charlotte Bower
Assistant District Attorney
49 West Claymore
Marion, Illinois

Dear Ms. Bower,

I am sending my monthly report to your office as

requested. While you are in Chicago on family business, I can only hope this will be forwarded to you.

When you hired me as your sister's psychiatrist it was with the stipulation that she visit me at least once a week and that I report her progress to you. Yesterday, Tessa did not show up for her ten o'clock session. I had my secretary call and she was unable to talk with Tessa herself, but left a message on her machine.

I think it would be wise to remember the period of three weeks last winter when she became depressed during that tedious custody battle. She missed several appointments but we were able to help her work through it all.

Having your mother taken away from her so abruptly, has left, I fear, your sister in a similar state. Quite frankly, it would be only normal for her to react this way. I'm sure we're safe in letting her have the time alone. However, if I haven't heard from her by next week, I will drive out to see her myself.

Tessa's past problems have all stemmed from traumas resolved years ago. And when the oldest female member of a family is suddenly not there to counsel and advise, the responsibility falls to the next in line, which would be you, Ms. Bower. I'm confident that it shouldn't be very long before one of us hears from Tessa.

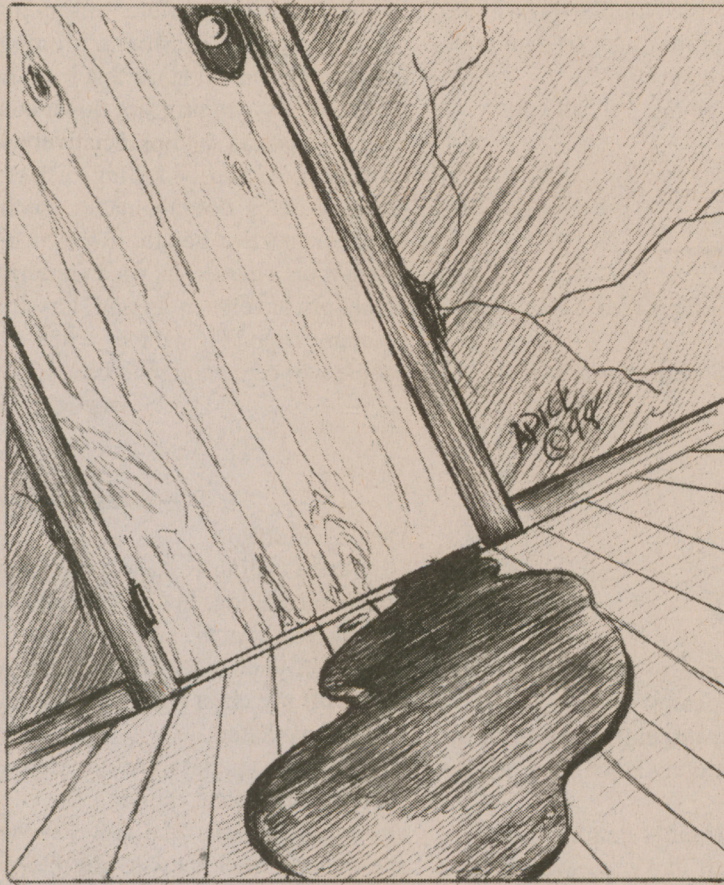
You have my home phone and FAX number should you need to reach me during the weekend. I will call you next Friday to report any further developments.

Sincerely,
William Avery

FRIDAY

Dear Lottie,

Guess what I found today? Baby pictures, first day of school pictures, dance recital pictures—all of you. I haven't come across the box of my stuff yet. Maybe Mom gave them



to me already. I can't imagine that the one scrapbook would be everything. I'll keep looking.

Anyway, you should see how sweet you looked in that gown at senior prom. I don't know why they always said I was the pretty one, you looked beautiful. But that tiara thing in your hair, what were you thinking?

It's been really quiet today, well considering what's been going on the last few days. I tried calling the kids but they were at school, Sam never sends me a copy of their schedules like I ask and so I keep forgetting when they have some sports thing or club meeting. Did I tell you that Amy is taking karate now? There's an exhibition next month she wants me to come to.

I started cleaning out the closets today, keeping things that Mom would want kept. You know—memories. There aren't really any heirlooms to speak of. What a screwed up family we

come from, huh? Grammy was always saying that this thing or that thing was lost like she couldn't remember what happened to the clock I wanted. Remember the one? It always sat on that frilly doily, on the buffet table in the dining room. There was a little girl and a boy in this miniature woodland scene. They moved back and forth on swings, ticking out the seconds. I know it was only plastic but why did Grammy have to lie, tell me it was lost? Then Aunt Cathy found it in the back of that closet in the basement. You know as well as I do that no one in our family has suffered any lapses in memory. We always go out with at least that faculty in tact. No, Grammy was selfish, she just didn't want us to have any of her things. Even her own daughter, our mother, got lied to. Like the ring she wanted that belonged to Granddaddy. Guess we can't blame Mom for some of the stuff she did when you think back to how she was raised. Everyone so cold, heartless.

Guess even a family crisis couldn't keep the famous D.A. in town. When I called your office to ask where you were I got that witch of a secretary you hired. Honestly, Lottie, I know you like to help everyone but that girl can't even get a message straight. She kept trying to find out where I was calling from and how long I would be at that number, it was a regular third degree. I told her I was your sister and had the right to know where you were. She tried to apologize but I hung up on her uppity attitude. Maybe it was her that tried calling back, even though I never gave her Mom's number, she could have gotten it from your book. But after I hung up I

unplugged the phone. No muss—no fuss. Not like those awful answering machine leaving beeps and messages to deal with. When I need to make a call, I'll plug it back in.

Take care of yourself and don't call me, I'll call you.

Love,
Tess

WITH LOVE AND HEARTFELT SYMPATHY

*Though you lost someone you cared for,
You will never be apart,
For you'll always be together,
In a place within your heart.*

FRIDAY

Dearest Charlotte,

I know it's been awhile, but I had to write a few lines even if they are attached to this atrocious sympathy card. It was the only one they had at the newsstand across from the office and I wanted to write this during my lunch hour. It's the sentiment that counts anyway, right?

What a shock hearing about Irene's death on the six o'clock news. I always thought myself lucky to have her for a mother-in-law. She accepted me into your family, even though I know it bothered her I wasn't Catholic. And after the divorce, when I finally got custody of the children, I kept in touch. I never told Tessa, no need to stir things up.

I know you never wanted me to bring this up again but, there was always something special between you and me. So, if there's anything I can do, please ask...just ask. I would certainly understand if you didn't want to stay at your mom's house when you get to town. And you might not want to be alone at your place right now. Amy and Tim would love to spend some time with their Aunt Lottie. Stay with us. Please.

I'm sending this card to your office, marking it personal and urgent in hopes your staff will forward it. Who knows how long this whole mess will keep you in Chicago. Lucky for the rest of us that we have a brilliant D.A. in the family.

Call me—night or day. You have my car phone number.

Love,
Sam

SATURDAY

Dear Lottie,

That dinosaur of a vacuum cleaner Mom bought when she was first married still works! I couldn't even believe she still had it. I'm getting things in order quicker than I thought. I should be able to start painting the kitchen later today. I picked out a soft green, they call it "lime sherbet." The man at

the hardware store offered his sympathy. I've decided not to change anything in Mom's room. The walls need washing, desperately, but I'll leave that for last.

That nosy tramp from down the hill came over. Her husband's in prison, I think I remember hearing somewhere that he was convicted of killing two or three men in a robbery. Guess it really doesn't matter much after the first one. Why Mom even gave her the time of day, I'll never know. She brought up a casserole, tried coming inside. Some of the other neighbors have been around, too. It's nice to know Mom had so many friends. I wonder when my time comes how many people will care enough to bake a cake?

Later,
Tess

Dear Charlotte,

I tried calling Tessa at you mama's place, figured she'd be up there cleaning, but the phone ain't working. I planned on writing you a letter, seeing as how you're out of town and so busy with your work all the time. But I needed to get a few things off my chest right here and now. Looks like I'll have to do it in two letters.

The newspapers are covered with the story of Irene's murder and I ache thinking she died so afraid. I don't have any family—looks like now I never will. The day Irene said she'd marry me I knew it was meant for me to wait around all those years for her to come along. But without her now, there's no one that needs an old coot like me for much. Not like they need you.

Did you know your mama referred to you as her very own Marcia Clark? She would have been so proud knowing that her own Lottie was the one to go up to Chicago with those extradition papers to bring that bastard back who slaughtered her that way. But...you got the wrong guy, Charlotte.

I've lived in Marion my whole life. Retired four years ago from serving my time up at the Pen—on the other side of those bars. Being a guard meant I was surrounded by killers most all my life. Even had a conversation with John Gotti once. What I'm saying, Charlotte, is that I wasn't no good for your mama. I was contaminated by all that scum.

I knew that son-of-a-bitch, Cleeter. Knew him for all the twelve years he served. In that time he must have overheard my conversing to Irene on the phone. Hell, I loved talking about her, he didn't have to do much snooping around to know who she was. I might as well have pointed him in the direction of her place and put the key to her front door in his pocket. Especially after she gave me that ring for my last birthday, I guess it gave the son-of-a-bitch reason to think she had money.

There's some papers in my desk, Charlotte. Receipts for two burial plots and a headstone I ordered this morning. If the circumstances weren't so drastic I would never think of asking this, but please see to it that Irene and me are buried side-by-side. You know she would have wanted it this way. And by

the time you return I will have joined my sweetheart. It's just not fair that I be left here, alive, while she had to suffer so greatly because of me being carried away by my love.

Don't be sad about this.

My best to your family,
Thurman



SUNDAY

Dear Lottie,

The air conditioner broke today. Again! I'm hot and tired and it looks as though I haven't made much headway in all the work there is to do round here. At least the kitchen is better and I managed to do the little bathroom downstairs. Why do I always get stuck with all the shitty jobs? That powder the police use to dust for fingerprints is all over everything. When they left here the other day they told me not to touch anything until they came back but screw them. This is my house now—well yours and mine—and I can do any damn thing I please.

Mom's death notice was in the paper this morning. Naturally they misspelled my name. You'd think Tessa would be the easier of the two. Charlotte has so many more letters; they even got your middle name right. But me, I was recorded as being Trudy. Thank God they didn't spell it with an i-e at the end.

I see that the temperature up north is at least twenty degrees cooler. Did you take the good weather with you?

I started to call your office today before I realized it was Sunday. Do they work on Sunday in the D.A.'s office? I wouldn't know because I never finished dialing.

I'm supposed to get a call tomorrow about when we can get Mom's body down to Oakwood. I suppose I'll end up making all the arrangements myself. It figures. You know what clothes Mom would have wanted to be buried in, not me. You both had the same taste when it came to that short of stuff.

I haven't slept in days. If I sound crabby it's because I am.



Oakwood Perpetual Care
289 Serenity Lane
Marion, Illinois

JUNE 16, 1997

Charlotte Bower
5116 S. 152nd Street
Marion, Illinois

Dear Ms. Bower:

Please allow me to extend my sincere condolences. Irene and I were friends since first meeting in the third grade. She

confided in me often about her illness and had come to terms with the diagnosis that gave her a little more than a year. Believe me when I tell you that she expressed her appreciation for that time.

Enclosed please find a copy of the prepaid funeral arrangements made by your mother last winter. It was right after Christmas when she came to my office. It was her wish that her efficiency would make this transition much easier for your family. Do not feel upset by the fact that she never discussed any of this with you. She had definite ideas concerning the way she wanted things, right down to the shoes she was to be buried in. (I have her clothing along with all last instructions safe in my office.) Irene just felt she might be influenced by her daughters and said to me many times that this was the one time she was going to be totally selfish. I'm sure you understand.

God must have had good reason to allow her remaining days to be taken away from her in such a brutal manner but for the life of me, I cannot make sense out of any of it.

When the police release her body, please call the number on the card enclosed and we will handle everything for you with the dignity Irene would have wanted and deserved. Be assured that we have had dealings with the Press before in cases like this, and any person in search of a story will receive no cooperation from myself or staff. Your family's welfare is our only concern now.

Respectfully,
Raymond D. Schaffer
Grief Counselor

cc:Tessa Bower



6-16-97

To:Charlotte Bower

From:Campbell Cleaning Service

I'm hoping this FAX will reach your attention quicker than a phone message or letter could. Due to a turn-over in personnel, there was some confusion as to whether the job at your mother's house had been done. Had they known to check the files first, they would have found my letter to you confirming the cancellation of this job.

This confusion resulted in two of our workers going to your mother's house this morning. They apparently found the keys to the house on my desk. I had not enclosed them in the envelope with your letter fearing they would get lost and decided to return the keys to you personally at a later date.

Our people knocked several times. Using the keys is always our last resort. But when no answer came to their knocks or ringing of the bell, they let themselves in and proceeded directly to the upstairs bedroom to clean the murder scene. That was when they found your sister Tessa, asleep.

Tessa

Not wanting to frighten her and surprised by what they found, they returned to the office and told me of their experience. After hearing what they had to say, I thought it best to pass the information on to you immediately.

Apparently your sister has made no effort to wash the room herself as she told me she intended to do. In fact, my cleaners reported to me that she was curled up inside the taped outline the police had made when they found your mother's body. From where they stood, it was obvious that the carpet was still saturated because your sister was covered with blood herself. Her hair was matted with it. The inexperienced employee was very upset at the scene, and the other, who has been with us for more than ten years, said he had never seen anything as upsetting as the sight of your sister peacefully sleeping in that room, in the tape outline.

I'm writing this, Ms. Bower, not to frighten you but to alert you to the fact that your sister obviously needs help. I do not feel it is my place to contact anyone else regarding this very personal matter. I have used the FAX number you gave me—the one at your home. I can only hope you will stop there for your messages before visiting your sister.

Sincerely,
Dympna Campbell

Charlotte Bower
P.O. Box 62
Marion, Illinois

MONDAY

Dear Lottie,

Someone was in the house this morning. I can just see you rolling your eyes at me! It wasn't my imagination, they *were* here. I heard voices and footsteps heading *back* down the stairs. They must have seen my sleeping and decided to leave. I was so scared. I just laid still until I heard them drive away. It was so frightening. I was more afraid than I was when Mom asked us to help her die. Oops. I know, you told me to watch what I write.

Lucky for me I had the phone plugged when you finally decided to call. You didn't have to scream at me that way, though. I told you why I wanted the phone to stay quiet. Doctor Avery probably tried calling me a hundred times to come in for my session. But you were right about me not going. It would have looked so cold. Oops again. Are you getting angry with me? Boo-hoo.

I think all your worrying is a gigantic waste of time. Cleeter was caught running away from the scene, for God's sake. You got to go up to the big bad city to make sure he's coming back here for a trial because of all your connections and being the most important of the Bower sisters. Everything's done.

Why do they have laws against helping someone in such pain get relief anyway? I don't see how you can be involved

with such lopsided laws. I will never understand how a jury would ever convict me—or you for that matter—for just trying to help our mother. It wasn't our fault that that Cleeter guy decided to break in and help himself to Mom's jewelry. She was so stubborn. How many times had we told her not to keep so much cash in the house? She wouldn't even lock her own front door half the time.

The paper said he hadn't even been out of prison for a full hour. I wonder what made him head this way in the first place?

And what were we supposed to do, I ask you, when we walked in to find that bastard beating Mom like that? And with a chair? What an animal. He probably thought he was going to make it clear up to Canada once he stole her car. Surprise, Chicago is still in the United States!

Any decent, loving children would never leave their mother in such a state. But my hands are raw from the scrubbing. I feel so guilty even if I was just pinching Mom's nose shut like you told me to. Do you feel badly for holding your hand over her mouth like that? Did you notice how she didn't put up much of a fight? I think it was her way of telling us she thought we were doing the right thing. Anyway, I know she would have suffered some sort of brain damage from that horrible beating.

And she was slowly dying before that anyway, right?

I miss her so much. Lottie, I'm afraid to leave here; I'm afraid I'll lose my memories of her if I don't stay close.

I'm sending this to your private box at the post office. No one would dare open your mail. Don't worry. There are laws about invasion of privacy. And laws are always for our own good, right?

Ha! Ha!

Tessa

*** **WESTERN UNION** ***

To: Tessa Bower—5174 Hillside Road—
Marion Road—Marion, Illinois

From: Charlotte Bower

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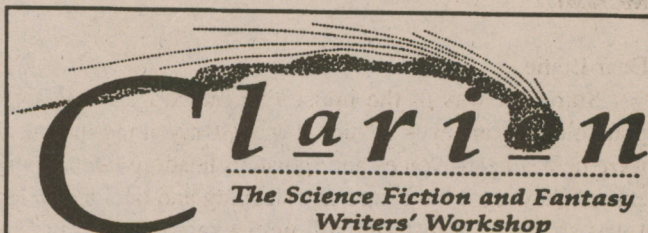
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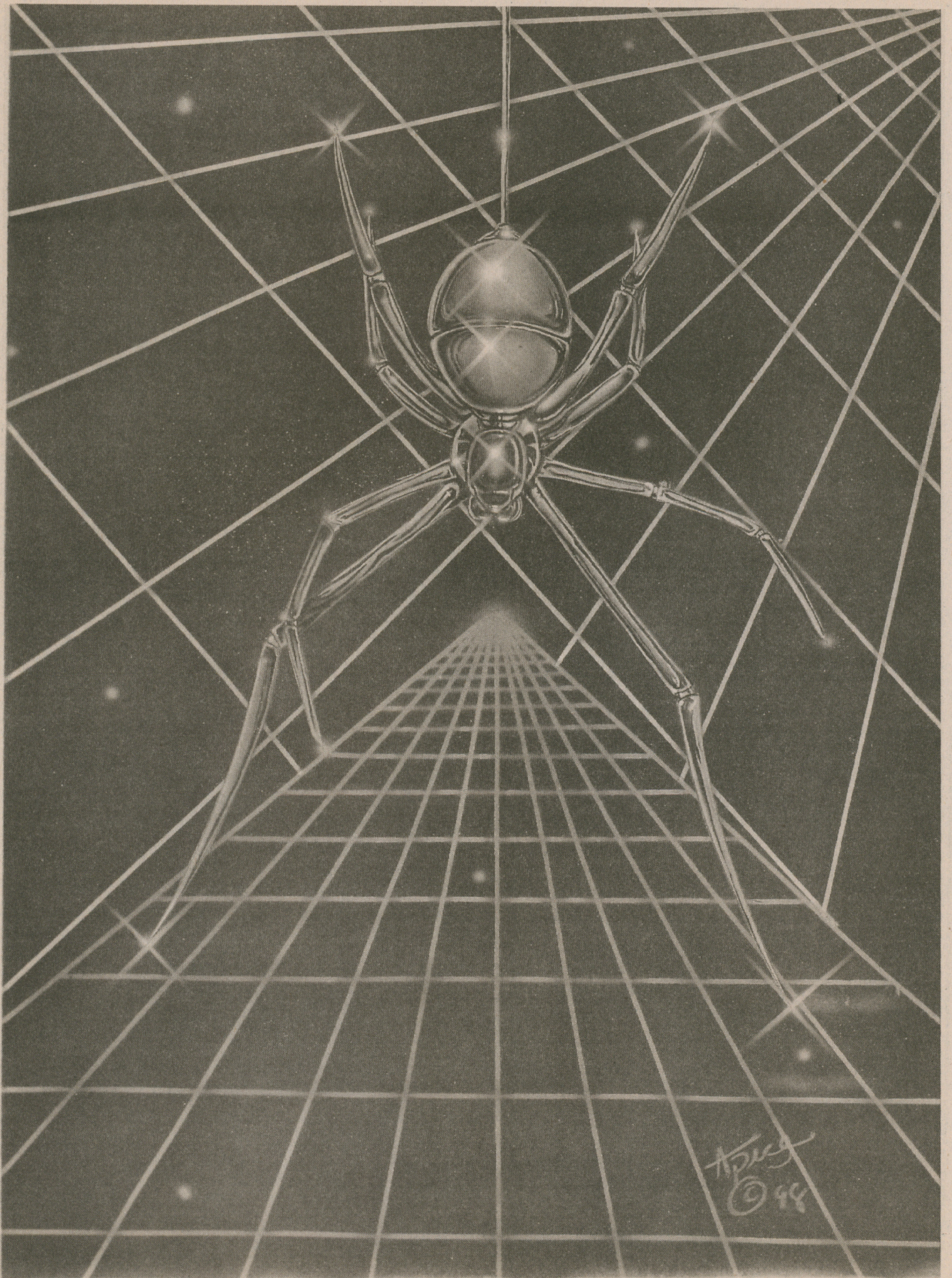
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APUS
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Asphalt Moves marks Eric's third appearance in Pirate Writings. His first, *The Meek*, appeared in PW#11 and was Eric's first fiction sale. Since then, he has sold fiction to Tomorrow SF, Terra Incognita and others. His second story to appear in PW, *Fall of the House of Value*, appears in *The Best of Pirate Writings*.



The warehouse stank. I smelled it through the dirty rain that fell from the drab, twilight sky: the burning plastic stench of security nano gone sour. Its programming long degraded, nano this old could no longer distinguish friend from foe, legal defense of property from murder. My target must have been crazy to hole up here. Maybe I'm crazy too, because I agreed to go in after him.

Some kids were playing basketball half a block up the street. A skinny one caught the ball and went up for a shot, street light glinting off wet arms like neon. I watched him jump and spin, feigning left, then twisting viciously right, his foot shooting out to slam into another player's stomach. It would have been a flagrant foul if they were really playing basketball, but I realized with sudden clarity that they weren't. The netless hoops and grimed orange ball were only diversion; the underlying moves were Asphalt.

If I was going to walk away from this whole dubious affair, now would be a good time to do it. They'd assured me that my target would be alone, but these kids looked a lot like a support team. Adrenaline flooded my system. For a few beats my heart pumped ice cubes.

The kids suddenly quit playing. They stared at me silently, bodies steaming like a pack of mountain wolves. Nothing moved except rain and steam and distant smears of light from the highway washing off the low clouds like tattered angels. After a while I remembered to breathe.

"Hey," the skinny kid said. "Scan that! Drunk gonna take the dive!"

Something flew at me, and instinct took over. A quick shoulder roll landed me behind the uncertain cover of a wire mesh trash can. I heard a snicker, then the hollow ring of basketball hitting wet pavement. The ball bounced where I'd been standing, then rolled to a stop inside the open door of the warehouse. Very

slowly it began to deflate, a coat of blisters forming on one side, the ball coming apart like flesh in acid. The nano were feeding.

The kids moved forward in a tight pack, chanting "Dive! Dive! Dive!"

"Fuck off," I slurred, deciding to play my part: a drunk about to commit suicide by entering the nano infested warehouse. "Let a man die in peace."

The skinny kid stepped around the trash can, an oddly distant gleam in his eye. He looked about the same age as my kid brother Leo. Had he also started the downhill slide of Ramp? Would he end up like Leo, quivering in a hospital bed, unable to eat or shit without a nurse's help. I felt determination focus inside me, a tangible thing like a sharp pain. I did have one clear reason to be here, and that reason was Leo.

"Before you dive," the kid said, "let's see what you got." A small gun flashed into his left hand, sleek and creamy gray as a fish.

"Fuck off!" I slurred more dramatically. I pretended to trip but lurched against him instead, making him catch me. I planted my feet and locked my hip against his, grabbing his gun hand above and below the wrist. I threw him up and over, trying for a joint lock. Slick with rain and sweat, he slipped from my grasp. He twisted in the air, too smooth for a simple street kid, and landed perfectly, slightly crouched. But he didn't fire. He stood quiet instead, confusion and horror growing on his face.

Then I smelled the burning meat.

The warehouse was surrounded by a coherent magnetic induction sheet, not to keep people out but to keep the degraded nano in. It's harmless enough for a person to jump through, but this kid had landed, and stayed, directly inside the field. And he seemed to be carrying a lot of metal under his shirt. He was cooking like chicken in a microwave.

I didn't waste any time. A kick to his gut sent him backward

through the warehouse door. His gun fell forward. I grabbed it and turned, but the other kids had vanished like ghosts, leaving nothing but rain and slowly turning mist. A desperate shriek from behind cut abruptly to a gurgle as the nano made pudding of the kid's insides.

I didn't want to watch, so I examined the gun instead. It was pure government, unnumbered, a custom eight millimeter of sleek, gray ceramic. The rounds were just as custom, semi-smart fluoro-carbon resin in ceramic casings. The semi-smart bullets were filled with nano which would reshape them mid-flight, spreading them out flat enough to take off half your body at fifteen meters, or narrowing them for armor. Definitely a support team, I thought. The chance he'd gotten this on the street was just about nil.

I looked down the empty street and started shaking again. I can still just walk away from this, I thought. I'm not a hitman, after all. I'm a cop. But thinking about Leo had steeled me somehow. If I turned my back on the warehouse now, it felt like I would be turning my back on him.

I swallowed hard, and keyed the flashers in my shoes and gloves. These flashers would wipe any degraded nano near my feet and hands every time I took a step. As long as I didn't touch anything with some other part of my body I would be relatively safe.

From the nano.

My target was another story.

I've studied Asphalt for half my life, both on and off the police force. That's one of the reasons I'd been contacted for this. Still, if it came to a direct face off between me and my target, I'd probably lay even money on him. If he had a support team... I jumped through the M-I shield, trying not to think too hard about what I was jumping into.

Like me, his older brother, Leo had gotten heavily into Asphalt. Unlike me, he'd also gotten into Ramp. Ramp and Asphalt seemed to go together a lot these days. That wasn't always the case.

Some people think it's strange that a martial art could be developed from a game like basket ball, but a lot of martial arts had equally unlikely beginnings. Capoeira, for example, is so graceful because Brazilian slaves built it from dance steps, allowing them to practice their deadly art right under the noses of their masters. And the nun-chakus you see in martial arts vids started life as threshing tools used by East Asian peasants.

Asphalt was developed covertly by Jason Barber, some say when he was just a kid, growing up in East Saint Louis in the early nulls. It's full of feet and knees and elbows, lots of jumps and surprise turns that would never work in most arts. If you read about a street kid with a crushed windpipe, dead from a kick to the throat, you can bet his killer was an Asphalt fighter. Jason Barber, and Asphalt, are the stuff urban legends are made of.

His technique stayed underground for years, cabalistic, clandestine, full of rigid hierarchies. The media has tried to make it sound like some kind of street gang, but it was more like a secret society, drawing initiates from many walks of life, races, nationalities. It's now mainstream, of course, but rumor has it that the original, underground school still exists, that it's still led by Barber himself. Another rumor says that Barber is dead. He would be seventy-three years old now, and he hasn't been seen in public for the last fifteen of those years.

I know that this second rumor is false. Jason Barber isn't dead. He's my target. I've been hired to kill him.

I stepped gingerly around the twitchy pile that had once been a young kid, then moved quietly along the inner wall, careful not to touch the cobwebs that hung from the rafters. Most were probably authentic, but some undoubtedly came from nano.

My "employers" had shown me blueprints of the warehouse:

three cavernous floors of storage space with a giant freight elevator in the center. There was also a partial fourth floor that was all office space. Furthermore, they'd shown me a mosquitocam vid of Barber, unarmed and with a shotgun wound in his leg, limping into one of the fourth floor offices. The vid, they'd said, had been shot only this afternoon, about an hour after Barber himself had been shot.

My plan was to climb the elevator shaft to the meter high crawlway between the fourth floor ceiling and the roof. If Barber was still in that office—chances are he would be—and if he was still alive—chances are he wouldn't—then I'd finish him off with one of the toys in my pocket. If he wasn't where I thought he'd be, I'd work my way down through the building until I found him.

The elevator car was at the ground floor. I ignored the tiny access hatch in the car's roof and scalped my way through the wall instead, cutting a careful, spiraling pattern. Security nano cluster along freshly cut seams so they can trap the intruder as he steps through. A spiral cut often fools them, trapping most of the nano on the piece that falls to the floor. As a cop, I'd seen the spiral cut at countless break-ins, never dreaming I'd do it myself someday.

The maintenance ladder was right where it belonged, in a thin recess that climbed the height of the shaft. I blinked my contacts to infrared. Good. Colonies of active nano leak heat as they move, and the whole elevator shaft was cold. I started climbing carefully, my body angled outward like a rock climber's to keep from touching the ladder with anything but my boots and gloves.

By the time I'd reached the third floor I became aware of a faint, insistent hissing, like a million slow leaks in a million balloons. I blinked back to infrared, looked down, and suddenly felt like the idiot in a bad vid who blunders into a dark room and turns on the lights only to find...

Shimmering below me, stretched across the entire area of the elevator shaft, was a delicate web, glowing faintly in infrared. This was no safety net. If I fell into that thing I'd quickly end up like the kid near the door. As I watched, a second group of nano came alive about half way up the second floor and started spinning another net. I turned to sprint the rest of the climb, but above me was a third net, glowing with nano.

I heard a rusty scraping and felt the ladder swing loose from the wall.

The first thing you learn in Asphalt is to be aware of your center of gravity, to move it efficiently, to draw an axis through it and to quickly spin. I'd flipped over to the other side of the ladder before the top hit the opposite wall of the elevator shaft, and I held tight as the cheap steel crumpled and wedged. Now I was stuck, the broken ladder a wildly askew catwalk, nets of nano above and below.

Stalemate, for the time being.

But something was wrong.

This nano was old. Decades old. And I'd seen no sign of it in infrared when I started my climb. It was unlikely that it had waited—patiently, without moving—as I'd climbed past on the ladder. One of the first things nano loses as it degrades is the ability to act together, in complex strategy.

I watched a chunk disengage slowly from the net above and try to fall on me, an inverted jellyfish moving with lazy corkscrew motion. Nano isn't very good at falling. It tends to buffet in the random air currents, and it takes a lot of energy just to keep moving downward.

In addition to the flashers on my boots and gloves, I carried a stubby gun called a flashlight. A quick shot broke the corkscrewing nano into a thousand aimless mites, drifting in Brownian motion.

Flashes don't kill nano, they simply wipe its programming. Flashed nano lies dormant until live nano finds it and dumps new

programming in. My flashlight blast hadn't only disrupted the falling nano, it had also blackened a circle about a foot wide in the nano net above me. I watched as live nano branched methodically into the deadened area and lit it up again. It took less than two seconds.

This was also wrong. Degraded nano never acts in such a well orchestrated manner.

I didn't have time to think about it though. The ladder lurched under me again. With a harsh grating like an engine running without oil, the elevator began to rise.

Scraped upward by the elevator, the ladder surged toward the net above my head. Without thinking, I swung off and grabbed the elevator cable. Hand over hand, I worked my way frantically downward as the cable rose.

Meanwhile, the nets below had become invisible. The rising elevator put out a lot more heat than the nano did, and the infrared view was rapidly washing out. Besides, the car was half way up the second floor now. It had probably pushed through the lower two nets already.

Which gave me an idea. Undoubtedly the roof of the car was now thickly pasted with nano, but my boots could deal with that more easily than with falling through an airborne net.

I let go of the cable and landed hard, twisting my ankle, but somehow managing to stay on my feet. Of course the elevator was still rising toward the fourth floor net, so I'd only bought myself a little time. I took out the flashlight and started firing upward. Perhaps I could clear a large enough area for my body to pass through. But I couldn't see the net anymore, so I couldn't aim effectively. And besides, the net would stick to me as I went through, wrapping around me with active nano.

I've never been one to panic in a tight situation, but I came pretty close now. I crouched down and continued to fire upward, my eyes scanning the passing walls for any opportunity of escape. All I saw was the ancient, sweating brick, the tightly sealed doors to the third and fourth floors, and various electrical boxes and wires.

Which gave me another idea. The flashlight beam was a polarized patchwork of electromagnetic radiation. It wiped nano by inducing loops of strong current in their tiny, silicon brains. If it could induce current in nano, it could induce current in other metal too. I fired like mad at the motor above the third floor elevator door. The odds were weak that I'd hit the relay, but I was desperate.

The car's roof was more than halfway up the door before I connected and the door started grating open. I watched it open, tremendously slowly, and shorten, much more rapidly. As soon as it looked like I could fit through, I threw myself into the gap and landed, face first, on a concrete floor.

Like many youngsters, Leo got into Asphalt as route to self-respect and discipline. It helped him avoid many of the pitfalls that kids his age are prone to. But a few years ago, Ramp started to seep through the cracks of Asphalt culture.

First developed for the military, Ramp heightens your reflexes, steps up your precision and control, improves your speed and keeps you clear-headed in extreme situations. It's not addictive *per se*, but it leaves toxins behind, pseudo-drenalines that gather like street litter in your peripheral nervous system and brain. The chemical residue eventually leads to a degenerate, shaking palsy and an almost schizophrenic quality of thought. Rampers don't die immediately. They shudder and babble instead, sometimes for years. After a while, they can no longer sleep.

My employers approached me with three vid clips. One was an "expert," who looked like a cheesy, netservice weatherman, explaining that Jason Barber was at the top of a pyramid of Ramp distribution and supply. Possible, but not very convincing by



itself. The second clip had nailed it home. This showed Barber himself, smiling, as cool as ever, doing something like a slick commercial for Ramp. He never mentioned it by name, but he encouraged Asphalters to "get the edge" and "boost higher." It would never run on the big, commercial networks, but it wouldn't have to. If it was distributed through Asphalt hacknets, millions of kids would become users overnight.

The only way to break the pyramid, they told me, was to take out Barber himself, before he could upload the clip. They had tried to do this, had even shot Barber in the leg, but he'd escaped to this warehouse as the third vid clip showed, a shaky mosquitocam shot that lasted about two minutes.

Barber had been my childhood hero. I'd even met him once, when I was ten, after a talk he gave for grade school kids at a local gymnasium. The luster of my feelings from that night never really faded, and I'm still proud of the "Star" tattoo I've worn on my forearm since earning my black bands twelve years later.

Childhood heroes die hard, and when they do, they kill part of you with them. The whole world becomes harsher, flatter, like a stage after the last performance of a play, the house lights on, the props ready to be broken down. A big part of me still didn't want to believe it was over, didn't want to believe what Barber had become.

The third floor was a jumble of smashed crates, bales of rotten wire, metal bands. There were three mountainous piles of bright yellow packing foam, blackened with age, that had leaked from broken cylinders like exploded cans of shaving cream. Through large, grimy windows I could see that the rain had stopped. Moonlight cracked wet patterns over the concrete floor.

I pushed myself upright and ran flash gloves over my head and clothing. Whatever element of surprise I might have had was blown. It was now best to get to Barber fast, finish this off as quickly as possible. I skirted the maze of broken crates and found a staircase to the fourth floor. No webs. No activity in infrared. I stepped lightly up and found myself in a hallway, offices on either side.

This had once been something of an executive floor and the hallway was carpeted, which didn't make me happy. I've seen nano do some nasty tricks with carpeting. I tiptoed rapidly down the hallway, almost running, until I came to the room Barber had run to, the room he'd finally collapsed in with his wounded leg. There were no footprints or blood spots on the carpet, but that only meant the nano had been busy.

I flipped off the safety on my gun, took a deep breath, and kicked open the door. Or rather, kicked the door. Pain shot through my sprained ankle, but the door didn't budge. I looked at it more closely, and saw that all four edges of the door frame were smeared with grayish material that glistened like wet toothpaste, flecked with silver and lead.

"Shit," I mumbled, and it slowly dawned me why the nano in the elevator shaft had been so coordinated. This gray stuff was nanopaste, *fresh* nanopaste, and it would be easy for state-of-the-art nano to colonize and reprogram the original degraded stuff in the warehouse.

If Jason Barber had smeared fresh nano around the door frame, it meant he wasn't dead. If he'd smeared some on his leg, it meant he wasn't even wounded. I wasn't fighting a mass of ancient nano and a half dead man. I'd walked into a highly coordinated nano trap, and the man who invented the most effective martial arts technique I knew sat at its center.

I looked desperately toward the window at the other end of the hall. Perhaps I could survive the fall to the street below, roll through the M-I screen to safety.

A dark figure stepped from another office door and stood between me and the moonlight.

"Are you looking for someone," he asked.

For an instant the years seemed to roll away. I felt I was ten again, quivering for an autograph from my hero. I shook myself, remembered what this man had become, remembered the gun in my hand.

As I squeezed the trigger Barber was already a blur of motion. He darted forward in a long, low dive, pivoted upwards on his hands, and kicked my gun away with a swift, crescent motion. By the time I'd recovered my balance, he was standing again, leaning cool and relaxed against the office door, examining my gun with detached interest.

"This is a cop gun," he said, turning it over in his hands. "Are you a cop?"

I said "nyuh," or something like that, trying desperately to plan strategy. I thought fleetingly about the ceramic gun I'd lifted off the skinny kid, but Barber would be all over me if he saw me reaching for another weapon. And he could move *fast*. His left pant leg was torn off, and I saw the plastic-wrap sheen where nano had patched up his gunshot wound.

"You might hurt someone with this, cop," Barber said, emptying the clip and tossing the gun away. That window at the end of the hall was looking better and better.

I lunged toward him and made as if to kick his wounded leg with my right foot—an obvious feint, but if his leg still hurt he might react instinctively to protect it. Instead of kicking, I pivoted clockwise, lashing out with my left elbow at his jaw bone directly below the ear. Whether I missed or connected, my new momentum would bring my right leg around and high to snap a kick at him from the other direction.

Without even changing his stance, Barber ducked his head back to avoid my elbow, then grabbed my right foot as it swung by and pushed me back with so much force I landed hard on all fours. Normally I would roll out of something like that, but there was no way I was going to touch the carpet with anything other than my boots and gloves.

Barber made no attempt to close with me. "A cop," he said,

"but not on cop business. Not *official* cop business, anyway."

"Nyuh," I said again.

He clearly wasn't trying to kill me, not yet anyway, and he was keeping me at a distance. If I could get him to throw me the *other* way, toward the window, then I might still have a chance. He might not suspect that I'd be desperate enough to jump, but I was. If I didn't escape, I was as good as dead. He was a much better fighter, and if I touched the floor, the walls—even him—with anything but my gloves and boots, the nano would drag me down.

I couldn't out-fight him, but could I out-think him? I lunged again, not to attack this time, but simply to grab and hold on.

Asphalt isn't built around strikes and kicks like some martial arts. Instead it's built around the different axes of rotation you can draw through your body. A kick is an extended foot during an axis turns, like a skater kicking out of a pirouette. The more advanced you are, the more axes of rotation you visualize through your center of gravity, eventually reaching a state known as the Star, where you can flip yourself around any axis at all.

Once an Asphalt fighter closes with an opponent, he no longer thinks about his own center of gravity. Instead, he pictures the common center for both bodies. Instead of grappling for a joint lock or a hold, most will grapple for control over the angular momentum around this common center.

I was counting on this as I grabbed Barber's arms. He would surely gain control of our common "Star," but he wasn't likely to re-grab me until he'd done so. My only hope lay in releasing my grasp as soon as I felt my own center of gravity move past his, toward the window.

Barber was fast. He jumped up and forward, as though he were doing a forward flip, then re-grabbed my arms, his thumbs digging painfully between triceps and biceps. My feet were the only part of me that had continued toward the window and, as such, they were useless for kicking.

Somehow he wrenched us both around to a standing position, my arms still locked in his grasp. He smiled, then slammed me backward through the office door, the same door I'd been unable to kick down a minute ago. It shattered inward and I landed square on my back in deep carpeting, splinters of broken wood drifting around me like snow. I tried to get up, but the carpet held me like quicksand. Or maybe it was the pain from my now broken shoulders.

My skin felt like I'd plunged into an ant hill, and my nose and mouth began filling with scratchy pieces of shag carpeting that streamed up my cheeks in miniature caravans. I tried to cough and spit the raw, cottony stuff out, but it packed in faster and thicker. Eventually I suppose I passed out, but I don't remember that. I only remember Barber, looking down at me, his expression not one of triumph but of curiosity and concern.

"I can guess *who* sent you to kill me. But I can't imagine *why* you agreed to try it?"

"Why I... what?"

It took me a moment to realize where I was. To realize that I wasn't dead. I could see the almost empty tube of nanopaste in Barber's hand. It appeared that he'd just smeared a thin film of it on my shoulders. A tube like that costs about as much as three luxury cars. *Nobody* carries something like that on his person, unless he's both paranoid and extremely rich.

"Was it money?" he asked. "Cops don't usually turn hitman so easily."

I was still on my back on the carpeted floor. I couldn't move at all, and my skin had no sensation, like I'd been dipped in hot wax. "You'd probably know more about that kind of thing that I would," I managed to say. My voice sounded muffled and alien, as though my sinuses were filled with cotton. Or carpet fiber.

"I'd probably know more about what?"

"Money," I said. "Corruption and deceit."

Barber frowned. "Yes," he said, "I suppose I have learned a lot about those things lately. But that still doesn't explain why you're trying to kill me."

"What I want to know," I said, "is why *you* didn't kill *me*."

Barber looked at me steadily. "I've never taken anyone's life," he said, "and I'm not about to start now, even though my retirement has been so rudely... interrupted. Also—" He pointed to the Star tattoo on my forearm. "I was curious."

"Never taken anyone's life?!" I tried to scream, but my jaw was rigid, and it came out more like someone choking on food. "What about Ramp poisoning? That doesn't count as taking lives? What about my little brother?"

"So," Barber said quietly. "That's how they got to you." He frowned, a look of determination setting into his face like concrete. "That's good, actually. You might have been just a hired thug."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"They told you that I was behind this whole Ramp thing, didn't they?"

I stared at him, said nothing.

"Why did you believe them?"

"They showed me a vid..."

"Yes. I saw it too. You didn't think it might have been a forgery?"

"I..."

Barber frowned and shook his head. Again, I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was still ten years old, still looking for some kind of approval in my hero's eyes.

"My brother's dying," I said quietly. "Can you prove that you're not responsible?"

"Prove it? Get me to a net station and I'll prove it!"

"A net station?"

"Listen," he said. "There are certain people who are trying to establish an organized Ramp network in this country, and they want to organize it around Asphalt." He frowned. "I should have acted long ago, gone public and denounced Ramp."

"But you didn't."

"Well, I've never gotten along very well with the media." He smiled distantly. "They would have made it seem, I don't know, hypocritical, ineffectual. Besides, I can't be responsible for everything. I won't be around forever." He sighed. "And I guess I thought my followers would be smarter than that."

"But now," I prompted.

"Now these people have made a bunch of vid clips starring a mock up of yours truly. They don't dare show them while I'm still alive, because they know I'd go public and denounce them. If I were dead, who'd know the difference?"

Possible, I thought, or it could be just another story. Of course I wanted to believe that Barber was telling the truth, I wanted to believe him with all that I had, but...

"You could be lying," I said quietly.

"I didn't kill you, did I?" He took a deep breath. "Get me to a net station, and I'll prove it. Do you have a copy of that mock commercial with you?"

I remembered stuffing the memory card into one of my pockets. "I think so," I said. "And a mosquitocam clip that shows you limping to this office."

"Good. We can use them both. If we get to a net station, I'll post everything, explain the whole story, make it perfectly clear that I don't support Ramp in any way."

I'm not sure if his reasoning convinced me, or if the part of me that was still ten years old simply needed to believe him, but within three minutes he'd released me from my nano cocoon and we were making our plans.

Our biggest problem was the group of kids I'd seen in the street. Barber suspected that they were employed by the same people who'd hired me. "After all," he said, "once you'd killed me, they wouldn't want you going around telling everyone I was dead. They were out there to make sure you did your job, then to knock you down once you'd finished. No witnesses, no crime."

"So we need another way out."

"You saw the blueprints," Barber said. "What's under the basement? Any tunnels, sewers, utilities conduits?"

"I guess so." He frowned. "OK," I said, "let me think." I'd been more interested in how to move around inside the building than how to sneak out of it. "There was something like a manhole cover."

I was interrupted by a loud clang from below, followed by a scraping sound.

"The elevator?" I asked.

Barber was already out the door and moving toward the stairs. "I don't know," he said. "Let's just move."

We scrambled down to the ground floor, and were about to sprint across to the basement staircase when Barber stopped short and pointed. "What's that?"

In the doorway, lit by the bluish moon and yellow streetlights, was a dull, metallic box. The skinny kid's body was nowhere to be seen.

"That's trouble," I said. "Big trouble. Someone's tossed a shielded box through the E-M screen."

"So?"

"That box was probably full of nano. How long did it take your nano to reprogram all the degraded stuff in the warehouse?"

"About an hour."

"Well, someone's trying the same trick, recruiting both the original nano and yours."

I blinked to infrared and saw I was right. The whole floor was ablaze with faint traces of heat where vast, microscopic armies battled in intricate moiré formations.

The battle seemed especially concentrated behind an old packing crate in the middle of the room, where a large plume of heat was rising. The heat mass suddenly shifted, and I realized with a sinking feeling what it probably was.

"Come on!" I yelled, grabbing Barber's hand. "Let's get out of here now!"

The skinny kid stepped from behind the packing crate. Or rather, what the skinny kid had become. He was still quite dead, but the new nano had been hard at work on the corpse, remolding the boiled flesh and skin—even the clothing fibers—into new muscle tissue, reattaching it to the skeletal frame. He, it, looked much worse than any corpse I'd ever seen, but of course it wasn't built for looks. It was built as efficiently as possible, a re-animated killing machine.

I fired off three shots, two to the head and one to the chest. These would have killed a living human, but the nano must have made radical, internal changes because the corpse only opened its mouth wide like a lizard—much wider than anyone with an intact face could have—and hissed at us. Its insect-like eyes, fashioned from slivers of glass, gleamed a shiny black.

Although it was still about twenty meters away, the corpse snapped a lightning kick at me. A dull, white flash shot across the room and hit my stomach. Hit and burned. I grabbed the spot with my flash gloves, but when I pulled my hand away I saw a silver dollar-sized area of twisted skin and raw flesh, bulging outward like a tumor. A pair of white toe bones rolled to the floor like dice.

"It doesn't have to close with us to kill," I said. "Those bones were covered with some nasty nano."

Barber moved about five meters to my side, and we began to circle along the back wall. The corpse hissed again, then started flicking gooey, wet droplets from its fingertip like a child playing

cowboy. Barber managed to snap away from everything aimed at him, but one of the drops hit my face, leaving a scar I still carry.

"Why hasn't it come after us yet," I asked.

"Notice how the left leg is dancing around like it's trying to trip the right leg?" Barber asked. "I think there's some of my nano in that body too."

The corpse sprang forward, using only its right leg to jump, and landed on its hands a couple of meters away. It teetered unsteadily, then seemed to melt like a wax figurine. Flesh flowed downward until the arms became as thick as legs, the head bloating enormously. The resultant shape was grotesque, but well balanced. It made an odd kind of sense, as though we would have evolved that way if, three million years ago, our ancestors had all opted to walk on their hands. The left leg—now acting as right arm—still seemed to be controlled by Barber's nano. It thrashed around wildly, occasionally kicking the corpse's stomach. The two arms clearly belonged to the enemy, giving the upside down creature much greater mobility than before.

We were almost to the basement steps when the rearranged corpse scuttled upon us. Jason fell back, fiddling with the ceramic gun and his tube of nano. I stepped around to the corpse's right—the side with the friendly leg—and swung a fast kick at what I assumed was the most vulnerable part of the body, the swollen head dangling between its arms. It was like kicking a bag of wet sand; my boot sunk deep and stuck. One of the hands lifted off of the floor and grabbed my leg above the knee, pushing it downward.

"Get down!" Barber yelled, as though I had any choice, and I fell, snapping a desperate kick with my other foot at the creature's elbow. Barber fired the gun.

I swear I saw it happen. Perhaps it was adrenaline, slowing time around me like a freezing river, or perhaps the bullet really did drag slow enough for me to watch, but I swear I saw it all. Barber had used the last of his nano to reprogram the semi-smart bullets in the gun. Each round expanded and flattened as soon as it left the barrel, and kept expanding and flattening.

By the time it reached the corpse, the first bullet was a wide sheet of plastic, fluttering in the air and bristling with nano. It wrapped the body from toe to shoulder. Where it touched, flesh bubbled. Barber fired again and again.

The body let go of my leg just as the head fell off, landing on the floor with a loud, wet plop. I shook my foot free of the gooey stuff, thankful for my flash boots, and turned to watch the body. Although the arms were still held by the enemy, Jason's nano was clearly in control of the rest. Like Asphalt fighters struggling to control the center of mass, the legs and torso had a clear advantage. Soon the corpse was upright again, standing still except for the flailing arms. After a few seconds, the shoulders locked and only the forearms jerked around. Then just the fingers, like a paralyzed man trying frantically to type.

Such images will haunt my dreams for the rest of my life. They mix, in the deep cauldrons of sleep, with memories of my brother's last days, the frantic, undirected energy crawling over his body like impatient graveyard worms. Remembering what the nano did to that skinny kid's corpse, I made sure Leo was cremated when his time finally came.

Jason Barber attended the funeral. He appeared more gaunt than before, and was cloaked in an unmistakable air of sadness. I tried to remind him that it worked, that his network appeals have effectively smashed the "Ramp mystique," but he remains impassive and cynical, thinking, perhaps, about his own death, about what might be done in his name, about what the world is capable of.

I can understand his cynicism, but I don't share it. A seventy-three year old man managed to keep my ten-year-old idea of heroism alive, and that, I think, has made all the difference. ▲

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November 31, 1998 only!

Brian is somewhat of a PW regular. Since buying my first piece from Brain for PW his writing career has really taken off—he has sold to Analog, Space & Time, Absolute Magnitude and many others. He also appeared in my book Year 1: A Time of Change.



My friends tell me that using the time machine to give advice to children is stupid, that we have better things to do with it, but I disagree. They don't see the changes I see. What we do with the visits is every bit as important as sending yet another historian back to witness the Crucifixion or the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When it works out right it's the sweetest thing in the world. Like what happened with the Do or Die Club.

The first member of the club to come into the Bureau was Old Tom Bennett. He wasn't really old, but about 55 or so, which is just about right for the visit. I call everyone who comes in "old" to distinguish them from their younger selves when I write up the reports. Old Tom was an odd case in that he wanted to go back and give himself some advice at the age of fourteen, not the usual thirteen. As a chaperone, I asked why.

"In my freshman year at Mutton Hollow High, I was friends with three other guys," Old Tom said. "None of us got a visit when we were thirteen. We all made a pact that when we got older we would come back and visit ourselves before freshman year was out."

"This almost sounds like that old e-book," I said, interrupting. "You know, Larue's *Do or Die*?"

Old Tom seemed startled when I mentioned the book. He looked at me very seriously and continued, "Yeah well, that book was about the four of us. The names were changed, but it was really our story."

That just floored me. Derek Larue's e-book had been a top download for many months. Of course it was of special interest to me, a chaperone, and I read it a couple of times. It was a touching, sad coming-of-age story that centered on four boys who didn't get their visits as expected and *willed* their future selves to finally come. It really brought home to me how important these visits have become to a lot of people. It was my favorite book.

"*Do or Die* was a true story?" I said. "You were one of the Doer's?"

A frown of contempt briefly crossed Old Tom's face. "We were just four guys that hung out together. there was no such thing as the 'Do or Die Club.' Derek added a lot of stuff like that, but it was mostly true. In the book, my character's name was Lester."

Lester. I remembered the story. All four of the main characters were losers, feeling sorry for themselves because they never got a visit at age thirteen. Lester was the fat one. Evidently he had slimmed down over the years, unless that was just one of Derek Larue's literary embellishments.

"You don't necessarily have to go back and visit yourself at the age of fourteen like you remember it," I said. It was a common misconception I was regularly reminding my clients of, but they almost always wanted to do it like they remembered. "The purpose of the visits is to go back and give yourself some advice that will change the course of your life for the better, not necessarily to repeat it. If you wanted to go back to the age of thirteen, you could."

Old Tom was silent for a few seconds and I could almost hear the gears whirring in his head as he considered what to do. Finally he said, "I've had an okay life, I guess. If I visited myself at thirteen, I never would have fallen in with the others."

"The Do or Die Club?" I asked.

"There was *no* Do or Die Club," he said angrily. "But yeah, those three guys. I remember that time so vividly, so it must have been important in making me the person I am today. I wish things could have turned out better for Teddy, but I don't want to make any drastic changes if it could mess things up for me."

I guessed "Teddy" was the character called "Bear". Bear committed suicide at the end of *Do or Die*. It was devastatingly sad.

"It's totally your choice, Mr. Bennett," I said.

"Then fourteen it is."

"Okay. Tell me, Mr. Bennett, what were the other boys' names. Now that I know that book is true, I think I'd want to be on the lookout for them so that when they come I can push them right through."

"Well, you already know about Derek Larue. He was 'Ralph' in the book. Joe Sawyer was 'Kenny'. 'Bear' was a guy named Teddy Hansen, but of course he won't be coming in for a visit."

"It really ended up like the book, then?" I asked.



[Handwritten signature]
1998

"Yeah. We all swore come hell or high water that when we got older we would visit by the end of freshman year. After that we sweat bullets, figuring if it didn't happen it meant we were dead. When the rest of us got visited and Teddy didn't, he knew he was a goner. He hanged himself in the gym from a basketball hoop on the last day of freshman year, just like in the book. Larue couldn't make that one up."

We were both silent for a minute after that, me pretending to take some notes so we wouldn't have to talk. After a while, I continued with the interview:

"Do you know what it is you want to say to yourself?"

"Yeah. I need to tell myself to keep away from drugs."

That was one of the common things that people wanted to tell their younger selves. I nodded knowingly without comment.

"I, um, had a little problem in college," Old Tom continued. "I flunked out and it was two years before I got things back on track. Things might have gone better for me if I knew how bad drugs were gonna mess me up."

I agreed with Old Tom that this was good advice. I gave him the standard cautions on being too specific about details. The visit was meant to steer one's younger self, not provide a blueprint. We worked out the timing of the visit, a weeknight in February, to be as close as he remembered it, even though I reminded him that it need not be exactly the same. The time machine was calibrated and off we went, back into Old Tom's past.

It was almost midnight, and Young Tom was laying in bed awake, staring at the dim ceiling when we arrived. We entered the room behind the bed, so we were not immediately visible to the boy, and Old Tom inspected his fourteen-year self silently. Lots of people are overcome with bittersweet nostalgia when they meet up with their younger selves so I cleared my throat noisily to announce our presence and keep things moving.

Young Tom sprang up quickly, alarmed by the intrusion.

"Hello, Tom Bennett," I said. "Your future self would like a few words with you." I stepped back into the shadows and let the two Tom Bennett's talk.

"My visit!" Young Tom said in an excited whisper. "Oh man, I thought it would never happen."

"Yeah, I guess we sure scared ourselves there, huh?" Old Tom said to the boy.

"No shit, man. Why didn't you come when I was thirteen? It's been miserable wondering if I was going to croak early or what."

"Yeah, well that's how it happened for me too. Some important stuff might have happened differently if I visited at thirteen. I've had a good life, mostly, and I didn't want to mess things up by doing it too differently."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess. So what's the big thing you want to tell me?"

"Drugs. Stay away from them. Especially the one called day-dream."

"I'm going to have a drug problem?" Young Tom said, incredulous.

"Maybe not now, I hope. Now that you know."

"But when you were my age, didn't you know? I mean, you got the same advice in your visit, right? I'd just be repeating your mistake."

Old Tom looked over at me, as if seeking my approval. I said it was okay to discuss his own visit.

"My older self didn't talk to me about drugs. It was just some stupid warning to stay out of the water. Maybe I should just tell you that, the way it was told to me, but I spent a lot of time worrying about the water. I stayed off the beach, never went on a cruise, wouldn't even drive my car through a deep puddle. But I never had a problem with it, so it doesn't seem like a very important thing to tell you. The drugs, though, I know were a disaster."

I offered some advice to Young Tom: "Perhaps you should keep both bits of advice in mind. Stay away from drugs *and* be careful around water. You just never know."

"Okay," Young Tom said. "I'll remember. I can't wait to tell the other guys. Especially Derek. He already got his visit and he thinks he's something special now."

"It's usually best not to talk about your visit with others," I said. "It's supposed to be a very personal thing."

"Oh, man," Young Tom moaned.

"They'll know," Old Tom said. "They could just see it on my face the next day. he won't have to tell them."

I glanced at the timer on my control unit and said, "We have to be going now."

I gave the two of them a few seconds to clasp hands and embrace, then placed a firm hand on Old Tom's shoulder to let him know his time was up. I sent Old Tom back to the present in regular time and then reset the control and followed in supervisor mode.

Back in the Bureau office, I debriefed Old Tom:

"That was excellent guidance you gave yourself back there. Could I ask you, Mr. Bennett, did you personally ever have a drug problem?"

"Um, no" he said. "It was just what I remember having told myself when I was visited. No drugs and stay away from the water. It seemed like the right things to say."

"And so it was," I agreed.

this was now the affected Tom Bennett. He was no longer the same person who had walked into the Bureau office a few hours earlier. No longer the person who flunked out of college with a drug problem. Perhaps the advice about staying out of the water saved him some unhappy fate as well. Who knows? Undoubtedly there were other differences in the life that resulted from the visit, but the one he was concerned about, the drugs, had apparently been erased.

This visit had worked. A person came in and with a few words made a significant, positive effect on his own life. That's when I really love this job. But it doesn't always turn out as well.

It was about a year later when the next one of the Do or Die Club came in for his visit. I had entered the other three names in my "watch for" database, so when Old Joe Sawyer came in, he was immediately routed my way.

"I've been waiting for you," I said to Old Joe when he entered. "You'd like to go back to fourteen, not thirteen, back to freshman year at Mutton Hollow High, right?"

Old Joe was taken aback. I explained about Tom Bennett's visit the year before and that I knew all about the connection to *Do or Die*.

"That damned e-book!" Old Joe cursed. "Larue was a real prick back then. Is he still a pompous blowhard?"

"I don't know; he hasn't come in yet." I said.

"But he was the first one of us to get his visit."

"That doesn't mean he came in first. If you'd like, I could send you back to a week before his visit and then you'd have been first. You don't have to repeat the visit exactly as you remember it. The whole idea is to change your life for the better, not just repeat it."

"Yeah, you're right. Well take it from me, Larue could change a lot about himself. When he comes in, he should tell his younger self to be a little more humble."

"He was the character 'Ralph' in the book, wasn't he? He seemed like a nice guy."

"What did you think, he was going to make himself look bad in his own book? He was a little shit-heel and he drove Teddy Hansen to kill himself."

"You were 'Kenny'?"

Kenny was Bear's best friend in the book. It sounded like he was close in real life too.

"Yeah, Kenny, that's me. Look, Larue kept ragging on all of us when he got his visit. Saying we were all dead meant if we didn't get a visit by the end of the year. Some friend, huh? that book was a whitewash. I want to go back and tell my younger self to stop Teddy from killing himself. I can do that, can't I?"

"Well, not really. That's a bit too specific. You're supposed to give yourself some general advice to help you change your own life. You might want to say something like 'look out for your friends,' but you can't mention anything about that boy's suicide. That's like telling yourself what stocks to buy or what lottery numbers to pick. Too specific."

"That probably won't change anything, then. We all knew Teddy was worried at the end of the school year. Tom and I were always telling him not to think about it. Larue was the jerk who kept reminding him of our dumb pledge and what it meant if the visit didn't come."

"Is there anything else you might want to tell yourself?" I asked.

Old Joe sighed. "Yeah, I suppose. Some advice on women. I should tell myself not to fall in love so easily. Maybe keep myself from making a big mistake."

That advice sounded okay to me. We figured out the best time to make the visit, and I went over the ground rules with Old Joe. The machine was quickly set up, and back we went to the spring of that freshman year.

As Joe requested, we appeared on a quiet suburban street in the late afternoon. A few moments went by before we saw the boy jogging along. We flagged him over to the side of the road.

"Hello, Joe Sawyer," I said. "Your future self would like a few words with you."

Young Joe was panting, and his legs kept pumping in place for a few seconds before he realized this was his visit and stopped moving. He eyed his older self and me suspiciously. I led the two of them over to the curb and sat them down.

"Jeez, you coulda come sooner, couldn't ya? Derek's been scaring the crap out of me and Teddy lately. About not getting a visit. The school year is almost over already."

"I'm sorry about that," Old Joe said. "Maybe when you grow up you can change that and visit yourself earlier."

"Hey, are you still friends with Teddy?" Young Joe asked. "He's, like, my best friend so I figure we're probably still pretty close in the future, right?"

Old Joe looked my way for guidance. I put a finger to my lips and shook my head no. This was the kind of thing Old Joe and I had discussed before the visit, and he understood that Teddy's suicide was not a fair topic for discussion.

"Cause if you are," continued Young Joe, "please tell him to get his ass back here and visit himself soon. Jeez, Teddy's getting really upset over this stupid pledge thing. I worry about him."

"Ahh, well you should worry about him," Old Joe said tentatively, looking my way.

"What your older self is trying to tell you," I said, "is to be concerned for your friends and look out for them. That's about all he can say on that subject."

Old Joe shook his head and his lip quivered a bit, perhaps hoping that Young Joe would read more into it, but I could see the boy was just taking it on face value.

"There's something else you should know," Old Joe said.

"Yeah, what?"

"Well, you shouldn't rush into...that is, um, don't fall...oh hell, just don't marry Rosemary Favata, okay. She was a lousy lay and she'll rob you blind when you split up."

"That's it," I said, yanking Old Joe out of earshot of the boy. "The visit's over. Mr. Sawyer, you just violated our little understanding."

"Yeah, well, I owe it to myself to prevent an old mistake. If I can't talk about Teddy, at least let me do something nice for myself."

"You married this girl?" I asked.

"Yep, had three good kids with her too, but she was a real bitch," he said.

"This isn't the same advice you gave yourself when you were visited, was it?"

"It was, sort of. I don't remember telling myself the girl's name. Just that I should be careful not to get married right away."

"But you married her anyway? Why? Didn't you remember your own advice?"

"Rosemary had a great set of cans."

"Mr. Sawyer, I don't know what this is going to do to your life."

"Could save me a lot of heartache, I figure."

"Tim will tell."

I sent Old Joe back to the present in real time, keeping my fingers crossed that what he had just done wouldn't cause any major problems.

When I returned under supervisor mode, I was pleased to see Joe had made it back all right. But he didn't look the same. He was thinner and frail-looking and his skin tone made him look ten years older than the man I met a few hours earlier. The ripples he had created had been unkind to him, but at least they hadn't killed him.

In the debriefing, I asked him if he had any children.

"Me, no. Never been married. I'm sort of what you'd call a loner."

"Not many friends?"

"Um, not really. the best friend I ever had died back when I was in high school. Don't really need friends, though, Most people are just out to screw you."

Sometimes these visits don't turn out so good. Those are the times that make me wonder if this business is worth it all. For every few successes, I also get a case like Joe Sawyer, who came in a reasonably well adjusted man and came out a lonely bitter one. Sometimes the person doesn't come out at all on the other side of the visit, having set in motion some kind of change that spells his own doom. That's the worst part of this job. But I'll keep on helping one person at a time and accept whatever changes happen, because you just never know which visit will be the one that makes a big difference.

It was a full two years later before Derek Larue, the author, came in. I brought him up to speed with my knowledge of the Do or Die Club, telling him I had read the e-book, liked it and knew it really happened.

"It seems to me you might want to advise your younger self to be kinder," I said, "especially toward Teddy. I've heard that your riding the boy might have contributed to his suicide."

"You've been listening to Joey Sawyer then, haven't you?"

Old Derek said, without the slightest bit of remorse in his voice. "Joey always was such a whiner. Teddy was a big boy and knew what he was getting into when we made that pledge. I wasn't telling Teddy things he didn't already know. When he killed himself, it just confirmed what we already knew. He was destined to die young."

"He might have lived a lot longer without your goading. Other people..."

"Screw other people. Listen, you tell Joey Sawyer that he's a bitter lonely old coot that's just jealous because he didn't think to write the story first. It was a great book, wasn't it?"

It was a great book, but listening to its author made me wish the whole thing was just a bad dream. Derek Larue's whole career was based on that one book, and he had profited greatly. He seemed so undeserving. But my job was not to judge people. No matter what I thought of Old Derek Larue, he had just as much right as anyone to try to better himself. I made one minor suggestion:

"How about if you visit yourself more toward the end of the school year?"

"No, no, no. then I would have been the poor bastard worried all year if I was going to ever get a visit. No, I *liked* getting my visit before the others."

"Why, so you could rub it in?"

"Let's just say things turned out for the best."

"Hmph. Teddy hanging himself from the basketball hoop on the last day of school?"

"Well, hey, it sure sold a lot of books. I would have never thought of that by myself."

I was disgusted with Old Derek, but I didn't let it show.

"So what is it you want to tell yourself?" I asked.

"Well, I want it to go down exactly as I remember. No sense fixing what ain't broke, right? It should happen on Christmas Eve. And I just sort of congratulate myself for working real hard and being successful."

"That's it?" I asked. "No real advice to make your life a better one?"

"Well, maybe I'll tell myself to take a few more English courses. That might have come in handy."

This visit had all the earmarks of the fireman rushing out to rescue another treed kitten, but I went over the ground rules and off we went to that Christmas Eve.

Young Derek was a chip off the old block, so to speak.

"I knew it, I knew it!" Young Derek said, excited. "I knew I'd get a visit before those other losers. Thank you, me!"

"A pleasure," Old Derek said, smirking in my direction.

"They're not going to get visits, are they?" Young Derek asked. "Cause if they're going to die young, I can tell them not to make any long range plans, you know?"

I jumped in and warned the two of them that they weren't allowed to talk about specifics like that. They both looked at me with mean-spirited grins.

"So don't sweat it too much," Old Derek told the boy. "Just be yourself and good things will happen. this guy," he said pointing at me, "won't let me say too much, but I can tell you're going to like your life a lot."

"Is that it?" I asked, disgusted. "Can we go now?"

"Oh yeah, one more thing. Don't ditch English class. You'll need it."

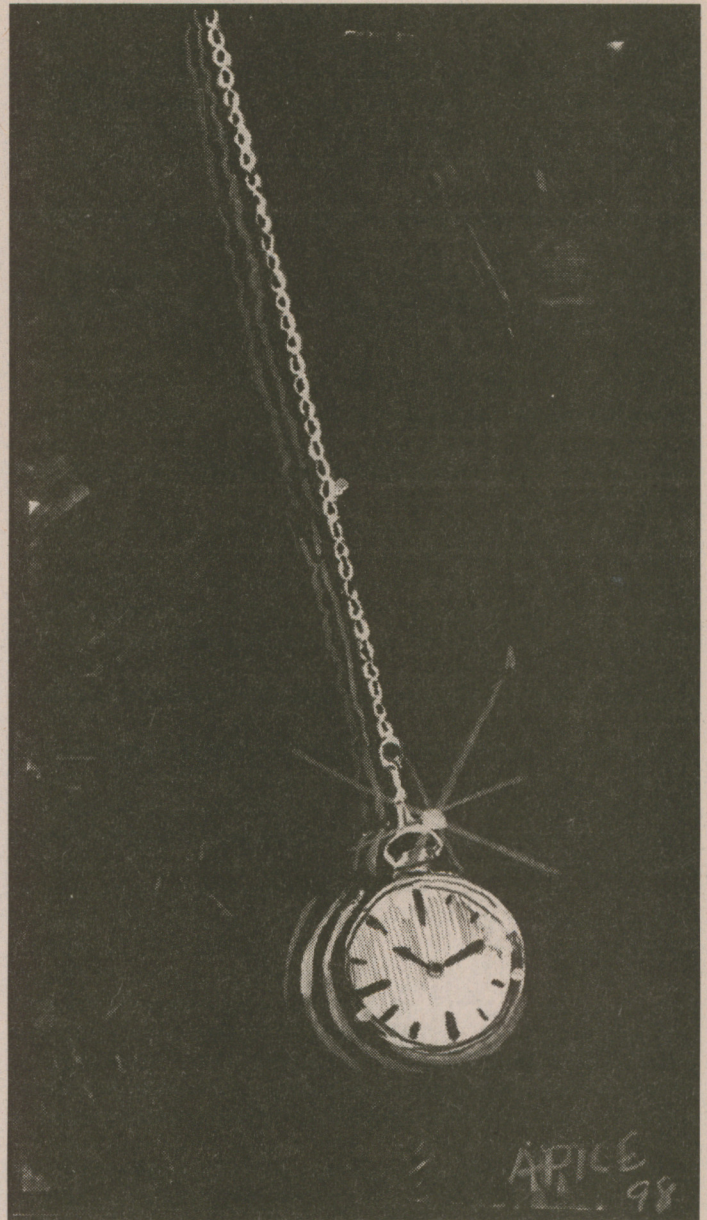
"Really? Okay, I'll take your word on that. And Thanks. I can't wait to tell the others."

I sent Old Derek back just as he was reaching forward to shake his younger self's hand. As I slipped back to the present, I had little hope that I'd see some kind of positive change in the man.

In the debriefing, it was just as I thought. I couldn't find any change at all in his history. He was still the guy who had goaded his "friend" Teddy to suicide. Still the one who wrote it up as an e-book and became famous. Still a boorish jerk.

Sometimes the visits don't do anything at all.

Over the next few weeks I began wondering about the fourth member of the Do or Die Club. Teddy Hansen. There wasn't too much on file about him. A few pictures, school grades, medical records, stuff like that. Most of the information I could dig up on the boy concerned his dramatic suicide. Except for his death, he



was just an ordinary kid, maybe a bit brighter than average. It troubled me that for want of a visit, the world would never find out if he would have become the next Einstein. Or perhaps another Hitler.

On my own time, I decided to make a visit, along, to Mutton Hollow. the Historical section of the Bureau was always supplying disguises for observers going way back, and I got a pair of brown contact lenses and some rubbery makeup applied around my neck. I hadn't really done enough homework, and the disguise was pretty poor, but I figured it was enough for what I had in mind. I went back to the final day of school, to the gymnasium.

The gym was dark and deserted; there was no physical education on the last day of classes. I waited under the basketball hoop. Before long, Young Teddy came in, carrying a folding chair and a leather jump rope.

"Good, you're here," I said. "Have a seat. I see, you've brought one."

Young Teddy was startled, expecting the gym to be empty, and for a moment looked like he would flee back into the locker room.

"Hello, Teddy," I said, "I'm your future self and I'd like a few words with you."

Young Teddy's mouth opened in a silent gasp. I smiled and nodded my head, feigning sincerity. I was hoping he'd believe my deception easily, but Teddy was skeptical.

"Where's the chaperone?" Young Teddy questioned. "The others said there was always another guy."

Clever boy, I thought. The question wasn't totally unanticipated, and I gave him my prepared answer: "In your future, you're going to hold a very highly respected position. I'm not allowed to tell you exactly what it is, but the people who make the decisions believe I'm trustworthy. That isn't usually the case with most other people, so they need the chaperones."

Young Teddy should have bought into it. He should have wanted so much to believe that it should have been easy. But he was not convinced. He was still standing with the chair and jump rope in his hands, not really sure whether to stay or go. Teddy squinted in the dim light, studying my face, sizing me up. I had examined a few photos of the boy, and we shared only the slightest resemblance. In the gloom of the empty gym, I had hoped he wouldn't notice too much.

"Don't you want to hear what I have to tell you?" I said to keep him from thinking too much about my appearance. "I only have a few minutes."

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Young Teddy put the chair down and leaned against it, a minor victory I thought.

"If you're really me," he said, "what's my favorite book of all time?"

It was a good thing the gym was dark, for I felt my face flush with the certainty of being caught. My brief research into the history of Teddy Hansen included things like the names of relatives and teachers, addresses, birthdays, and the like. Information such as "favorite book of all time" wasn't anywhere to be found in what sketching information I had dug up. I had to think fast.

"Well," I began, "when you get older, you'll realize that your opinions of what books and movies and music that you consider the absolute best are always changing. You'll have dozens of favorites over the next forty years. My favorite these days is something that hasn't been written yet in your time. It's the story of a group of high school boys. But the answer to your question is I don't remember what I thought was best at your age. Trust me, you forget these things."

Young Teddy just stood there silently. I didn't know if I had convinced him or blown it.

"Look," I said. "I know you came here to hang yourself."

Young Teddy became flustered and he backed away two steps, leaving the chair standing under the basketball hoop.

"Come on," I said, "sit down and listen to me. I know you're going to try to kill yourself because I'm you and I came back here to stop it."

"But...but if you're me then I didn't go through with it, or else you'd be dead."

Now I knew I had him. I pulled my shirt collar down and put my head back to show off the phony latex scars on my neck that the Historical section had created for me.

"The way it happened," I said, "is that you botched it. Your neck doesn't snap when you kick out the chair, and you're left swinging and choking for a couple of minutes, all the time wishing you hadn't gone through with it. Eventually somebody comes in to cut you down before you're totally gone. It causes a real scene."

"That's sort of what I had in mind."

"Yeah, well it just becomes an embarrassment, because you lived through it. After a while, you're wearing turtlenecks in the summertime to hide the marks. Trust me, you don't want to do this."

"Um, yeah, I guess not."

Voila, he bought it. There was nothing more for me to do but go back to the present and check up on how Young Teddy turned out.

"I have to be going," I said.

"Is that it?" he asked. "I mean, isn't there anything else you want to tell me? About my future?"

I didn't want to keep talking. I had done what I had come for, and the longer we talked just gave more opportunity for him to see through my disguise.

"Well, um, keeping you from hanging yourself is the most important thing," I said, stalling. "And you knew I had to come back by the last day of school to make the pledge come true."

Young Teddy kept looking at me and nodding expectantly. He wanted something more, something concrete. I improvised.

"A book," I said. "*The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Norman Vincent Peale. Read it. Okay?"

Young Teddy smiled. "That's it? That'll help me?"

"Yep. It really will."

"Okay, if you say so."

"I say so."

After we said our good-byes, I went back to the present and looked up Teddy Hansen's new history. Happily, he survived and went on to lead a relatively calm and normal life, neither an Einstein nor a Hitler. Things like this make being a chaperone worthwhile.

Sometimes I think this story should end here, but to my surprise, there was more. A year or so after I pulled off my little charade with Young Teddy Hansen, who should come into the Bureau but Old Teddy, himself, ready to repeat the visit that he never made. I had put that business with the Do or Die Club totally out of my mind, but the four names were still on my "watch for" database, and Old Teddy was directed my way when he came in.

"Have we met?" Old Teddy asked when we were introduced.

"Not that I know of," I said.

Like so many people, Old Teddy wanted to do things exactly as he remembered them. For one thing, he was adamant that no chaperone accompany him, as he was a highly respected individual. I said we could work something out, perhaps with me remaining out of sight in the shadows. I asked him if he knew what he wanted to tell himself.

"Not much, really," Old Teddy answered. I just have to be there at the right time. To stop myself from doing something stupid."

"Is that all?"

"There's one other thing. I'm supposed to recommend a book. that's what I do for a living; sell books. me and my buddy Joe own a shop over in Pineville."

"Is that Joe Sawyer?" I asked.

"Why yes it is. How did you know?"

"It's not important. Say, did you ever read any of Derek Larue's stuff?"

"Derek Larue? I went to school with a Derek Larue, but he's not a writer, he's a sanitation engineer."

"Hmm, I must be thinking of someone else. What's the book you're supposed to recommend?"

"It's just some old self-help book. I don't know why I'm supposed to tell myself about this one, really. It was an okay book, but I just want to make sure I tell it to myself the same way it was told to me. I don't want to go messing with the way things really happened."

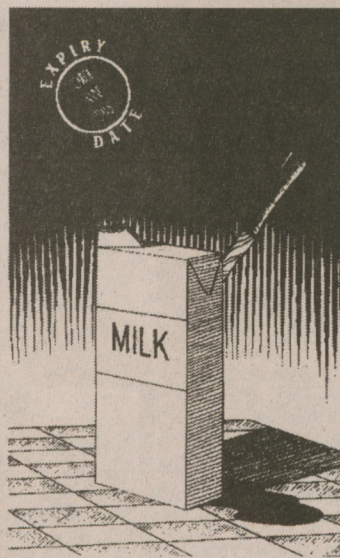
"You're right," I said, smiling. "We wouldn't want to mess anything up. ▲"

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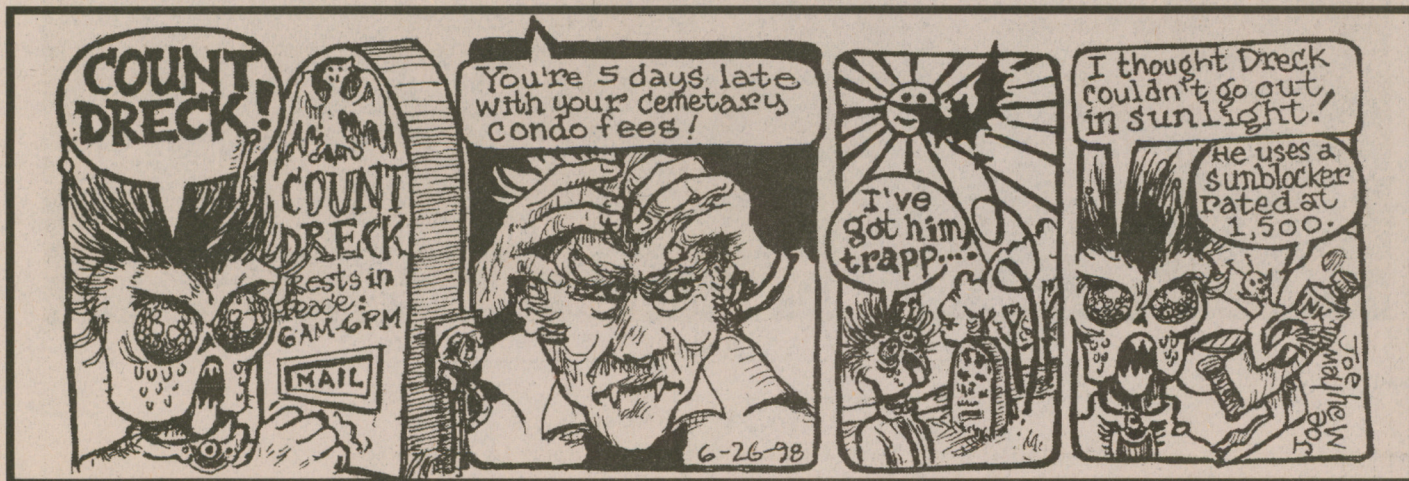


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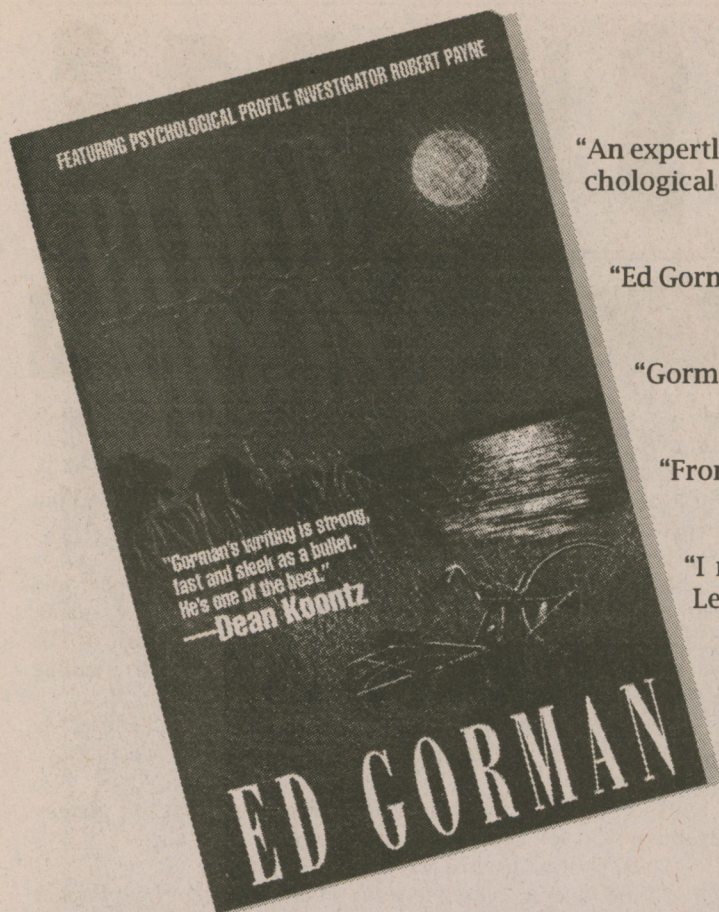
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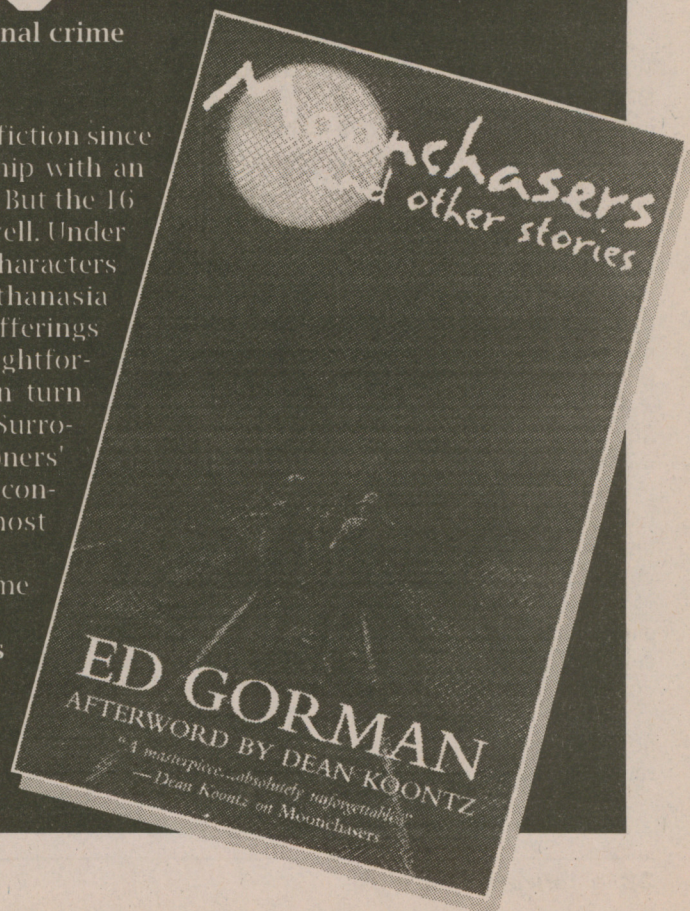
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SHORT - SHORTS

SECRETS

SUE STORM

We don't talk much, our family. So when the dragon came, no one said nothin' about it.

First time I seen the dragon, Pa's yelling at me. He's pretty tanked up, and when he gets like that, seems his favorite thing is yelling at me.

So he's going at it good, his face turning red all over. Pa's big, not that tall, but *big*, with a belly spilling outta them dirty white T-shirts. He wears 'em all the time, they look more gray than white.

Anyway, he's a-bellerin', his face heated up and his whole gut shaking, when he stops a second to take a big old breathand outta nowhere pops this dragon and settles itself on his shoulder.

Pa, he looks right dang confused. He kinda puts his hand up to feel the thing. Then he drops it like he got burned or something and commences to go right on yelling at me.

Me, I'm staring at this dragon with my mouth hanging open. It's gold and scaly with greenish wings and big old green eyes staring right back at me. Makes me shiver.

Puff of smoke kinda wisps outta its snout.

I don't say nothin', and Pa, he finishes up yelling at me and stalks off. That dragon flaps its leathery old wings and hangs onto his shoulder like it grew there.

Next time I seen Pa, the dragon's gone.

He comes stomping into the kitchen, yelling at Ma about WHY THE HELL'S SUPPER'S TAKING FOREVER AND A DAY? She squeezes herself down like a mouse, dodging around him while she tries to hurry up and make the food ready.

Ma's got a new bruise on her cheek. Pa, he hits her around some. But she don't never say nothin'. And mewhat in blue blazes kin I do? I'm only thirteen and so skinny you don't even see me when I turns sideways. Pa hit *me* so hard once, I flew across the room and cracked my head open like a punkin.

But I sure enough didn't tell no one. Not even Billy, my blood-and-spit best buddy. Me and Billy, we do lotsa stuff together. I told him I cut my head trying some dang fool thing on my skateboard. He said I'd have me a helluva neat scar.

My big sister Lisa comes in the kitchen, looking to help Ma. She don't talk to Pa. Don't even look at him. He still goes in her room at night. She never told me that, but I hear stuff.

So there we all is, sitting down to chow, and Pa, he goes reaching for the taters when this dragon up and pops itself back onto his shoulder. Pa kinda freezes, then shakes hisself once and goes on grabbing those taters, shoveling 'em onto his plate.

I sneak a look at Ma. She stares at the dragon, her eyes big and round, but she don't say nothin'. Lisa sorta squints outta the corner of her eye, like she don't want Pa to see her looking. He don't see nothing, he just goes on shoving food in his mouth.

The three of us, we keep watching that dragon. It hunkers down, all gold and gleamy-like, green eyes roaming around the room like maybe it's for-real interested in people stuff.

Pa gets done eating and goes and fixes hisself a drink. He

heads off to watch TV, and that dragon, I swear, it just goes along for the ride.

Me and Ma and Lisa, we don't say a word. But we follow as far as the door, looking after Pa. The old man's all sprawled out in his chair with that dragon hunched on his shoulder.

He raises his glass to take a big old drink.

Slick as hog grease, that dragon's mouth hisses open, and before nobody can say nothin', flame streaks out. Pa's drink catches on fire just as he goes pouring it down his throat. His whole body kinda lights up from the inside and jerks around like a floppy old rag doll.

That dragon, it flaps its wings and flies up to the ceiling. Ma and Lisa, they're a-watching Pa, but me, I keep my weather eye on the dragon.

And I swear, it looks right back at me and drops one gleamy eyelid over its left eye. Winking! If that don't beat all.

Then, poof, it just ups and pops itself gone.

At the funeral, everyone went on and on about how Pa was too young to get his heart attacked. They fussed over me and Lisa and patted Ma on the back. Ma, she got lotsa money from the insurance, so we is set up purty fine now.

Me and Ma and Lisa, we never said nothin' about the dragon.

Our family, we don't talk much. ▲

30th Anniversary

David Clink

It is an old image,
like watching
a black & white movie
from the forties.
Neil Armstrong
backing down
the steps of a ladder,
like a baby taking his first steps.
We look on like proud parents,
noting his hesitation,
his awkwardness,
his anticipation.
And then it happens—
a step, a leap,
a rite of passage for us all.

"I saw somethin' crawl down your chimney, mister." Latham resisted the urge to grab the child by the arm. "How many times have I told you kids not to cut across my property?"

"But it climbed right up the side of your house. And it looked real mean."

"I'm not interested in fairy tales, Tommy Travis." Latham raised an arm and pointed toward the street. "The sidewalk is there for a purpose. Use it. If I catch you in here again, for any reason, I'll have the police take you home. Do you understand me?"

"But..." The kid closed his mouth, shrugged and turned away. Latham watched him go, waited until he was sure there would be no further invasion of his privacy. "Damned impudence," he muttered quietly before going back inside.

He was reading the newspaper, the incident already forgotten, when there was a brief metallic clatter from the kitchen, followed immediately by the sound of shattering glass.

Latham found the still unwashed dishes from his lunch lying on the floor, a water glass broken.

Another damned intruder, he thought, some kind of animal. There'd been squirrels in the attic the previous fall but he'd used traps to eliminate the intruders, capturing them alive and then punishing them for their audacity, tormenting them with a sharpened icepick until they finally died. Their pitiful little cries always stopped too soon.

Some animal had found a way in, probably a cat, a survivor of his clandestine war against the neighborhood pets. He'd been discrete, guarding the traps he'd placed in the woods surrounding his house, whisking his captives inside before anyone noticed what he was doing. Cats lasted a lot longer than squirrels as a rule.

He investigated cautiously, peering under the table, along the tops of the cabinets. Nothing.

In the other room, something ran lightly across the carpet and up the steps to the second floor. Latham walked quickly to the foot of the stairs, but the intruder had already disappeared.

Furious, Latham armed himself with a broom and mounted the steps to do battle.

Only three doors opened off the landing, bedroom, office, bath. He checked the bathroom quickly, then closed the door. His bedroom was neat and orderly, with a minimum of furnishings. One pillow was awry and there was a dirty smudge on the neatly folded sheet.

A dirty foot or claw had rested there.

The closet door was latched and there was nothing under the bed, but while he was crouched, examining the latter, he heard a quick furtive movement behind him. Something had run out from behind the dresser, into the hall, then off to the right.

Away from the stairs.

Latham closed the bedroom door and walked purposefully to his office.

He paused in the doorway, stunned. Obviously the invader had been in this room before descending to the kitchen. His neat arrangement of letters, bills, clipped articles, and notes to himself were scattered from desk to floor, many ripped to shreds. His baskets of paper clips and elastic bands had been overturned and similarly dispersed. A series of thin scratches marred the veneer of his desk and something had defecated messily in the center of his favorite chair.

Enraged, he charged into the room.

Something ran between his legs just as he did so and Latham lost his balance, threw out his arms in a vain effort to soften his fall. He heard rather than felt his right wrist snap as it failed to absorb the impact.

For several minutes he lay in a haze of pain, oblivious to the world around him.

When he'd recovered enough to move, Latham rose unsteadily to his feet. The pain was excruciating, and he cradled his injured arm carefully. He'd have to call an ambulance, he realized, which meant going downstairs to use the phone.

He had only descended two steps when something heavy struck him in the small of the back. Latham instinctively reached for the rail with injured arm, cried out with fresh agony. Then he was falling, step after step, until he reached the ground floor with a thud.

And a broken leg.

Something moved into his line of sight. It looked a little like a cat, and something like a squirrel, but there were traces of other creatures as well, the dogs he had run down with his car, the birds he'd picked out of the trees with his shotgun. It had the tail of a rodent, the claws of a cat, and the jaws of a mastiff.

When he tried to get up, those jaws closed with a snap into the calf of his good leg. Latham screamed and fell back as hot needles burned through his flesh.

The creature released his calf and paced back and forth, clearly trying to decide where to attack next. Desperate, Latham rolled onto his stomach and began to crawl to the nearest window. Something nipped at his left ankle but he kicked free and reached the wall, levering himself up onto a couch and dragging the curtain aside.

At the edge of the property, Tommy Travis was standing on the sidewalk, solemnly staring at the house. Latham managed to attract his attention by waiving, but Tommy refused to enter the property even at his bidding.

His father would be very angry if the police arrested him.

Sharp teeth closed around Latham's ankle and dragged him away from the window.

He lasted a lot longer than even the hardiest of his own victims. ▲

The long, polished table stretched almost to the other end of the brightly lit room. Every chair was filled by a general, or a marshal, or an admiral, men who knew how to give orders. Men of every nationality attended this conference, the first large scale meeting of military minds of its kind. And they were soldiers, not politicians, for this was not a conference or the signing of a treaty. No sophisticated weapons were being apportioned for destruction, no—this was a full scale military alliance. The invasion had seen to that.

The American general shook his head wearily. "It's agreed that we should unite in common cause, but what you ask is out of the question."

Marshal Zukhov eyed his western counterpart with something akin to desperation. "It is not requested lightly. Our situation is worsening. General Stevens—"

Stevens interrupted. "I know you have borne the brunt of the fighting. Before they knocked our satellites down we had observed alien columns all throughout the Ukraine. But—" He slammed the table for emphasis, "It is something you should handle."

The room had quieted as everyone strained to hear this give and take from the former antagonists turned allies. Zukhov was almost muttering. He looked up. "Perhaps if we could speak in private."

General Stevens hesitated, then nodded. With a series of stiff strides and grumbles the room slowly emptied. Both men remained silent until they were alone.

The Russian spoke first. "It is worse than you know. The aliens even now are crossing into Russian territory—they must be stopped at the Ukrainian border."

Stevens leaned back, exasperated. "What you want is unreasonable. you have your own nuclear weapons. Asking us to bomb the aliens on your own territory—"

"It is no longer our territory. They are a sovereign state."

A cold smile crossed the American's face. "And when has that every stopped you before you before? Considering the dire circumstances, I'm surprised you haven't already launched a strike..."

Zukhov's accented English had thickened with his ire. "We did not drop the bomb on Japan. Russia is not guilty of having used that weapon against another nation."

"Perhaps not, but we still must refuse. Come now, Marshal. You know how it would look."

Zukhov slowly stood. "I fought in the Great Patriotic War, and have served on many campaigns. I am a soldier. Please do not humiliate me by making me beg."

Stevens was nonplused. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"We can't bomb the Ukraine." The man's posture was ramrod stiff.

"I don't agree with you there. Better you than us."

"No, no—can't you see the futility of your position?"

It's all been a big lie. Your big 'red' scare, the persecution and the trials of those who stole the secret of the bomb, even the cold war. It was all a waste. So much waste."

The American wasn't sure he liked where this was headed. "So what are you saying?"

Zukhov was almost yelling. "Must I beat you about the head to make you understand? Fine, if it will make you happy, I will say it. We never had the bomb, never stole it from you. Our nuclear weapons program is a sham. We could never compete with your science, so we had to be better in espionage and intelligence. We just convinced you we could match your weapons."

Stevens was thunderstruck. "Well, now that does change things."

Zukhov's voice was almost pleading. "Then you will help us. An American nuclear strike is the only thing that can stop the aliens."

Steven's face was sad. "No. We cannot."

"In Lenin's name, why not?"

General Stevens did not move, quietly looked up into the Russian's mottled face. "Because, my dear Marshall Zukhov, we cannot. You aren't the only ones skilled in misinformation. I fear the human race is in grave danger, for you see it was always a hoax. We never had the bomb either."

There was nothing to say, not after a half century of mutually assured destruction. The room, now silent, had always been empty. They just had never noticed. ▲

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[No...I'm not losing my mind. I know this story appeared in the last issue, but due to my total stupidity half the story was left out. Here it is as it should read. Apologies to all. Ed]

In a glimmer of moonlight something shifted in the office. A dry, whispery sound came from the corner where the stories waited, heaped into stacks two hundred manuscripts tall. The window was closed tight, the air still. No one, not even an earwig, moved. But in the slush pile paper rustled.

A year earlier, when Diana had announced that she was going to start her own magazine, her editor friends had overflowed with advice. She scribbled down notes as they dispensed wisdom on the merits of perfect binding, four-color covers, the pros and cons of letter columns. At the WorldCon, Jerry Kay himself, fiction editor for *Halfway to Madness* sidled up to her and said loudly into her ear, "First Readers."

Diana jumped. "Pardon me?"

"Lawrence told me you're starting up a magazine of your own."

"Yes," said Diana. Face to face with the great editor, all her witty repartee evaporated.

Jerry wagged a fat finger at her. "You'll need to get first readers to cope with the slush pile."

"I have. My writer's group have offered to read the story submissions for me." The relief of having said something coherent loosened Diana's tongue. "That's a great T-shirt you're wearing. Thanks for the advice. I've been reading *Halfway to Madness* ever since I can remember. I loved your last book, very insightful."

She stopped, flushed, hoping none of her friends had overheard her sucking up. But one favorable quote from Jerry could double the number of subscriptions she got.

Jerry beamed at her. "You liked my novel?"

"Yes, absolutely. It made me think about armadillos in an entirely new way."

"Exactly! For too long people have—" Jerry stopped as one of the conference organizers came up and told him he was due on a panel in room 332. Jerry gave Diana a regretful look. "Maybe we can meet up later to discuss my book. Oh, and I hope you'll send me a copy of your magazine when it comes out."

Diana lay in her bed, guilt gnawing her to wakefulness. It had seemed so simple a year ago when she decided to produce *Happenings*. She had laughed off the occasional warnings, the mutters about slush piles and the cost of paper.

A hollow thump sounded from below, from the office. Diana sat up in bed, eyes wide, picturing black-masked intruders. Slowly her heartbeat steadied. The house was quiet again. Something must have fallen over, that was all. She hadn't been in the office for a month, had found a thousand pressing reasons why she couldn't get round to the slush just yet.

Diana shivered; she turned the heater off at nights as an economy measure. But maybe she would get to sleep more easily if it were warmer. She switched on the bedside light, and padded over to the heater, the floorboards chill against her feet. She set the heater to maximum and crouched in front of it.

Now that she was out of bed, she should go downstairs and pick up a few manuscripts to read. She took a deep breath. Okay, she was going to do this, she was really going to do this. She tugged on her slippers and headed downstairs.

The office door creaked open. From the darkest corner, the piles of manuscripts seemed to lean toward her.

Diana clicked on the light. Odd how the stacks looked taller than they had in the dark, and she hadn't noticed the smaller heaps scattered beside them. She grabbed a handful of manuscripts from the stack labeled "Recommended by Edward" and hurried back to her bed.

Under the heavy warmth of her comforter, she started the first manuscript.

Martian Revolution by Peter Hanson

The spaceship rocked. Oh no, thought Ensign Hanson, we been hit bad. The whine noise meant the engines were overheated bad. He grabbed a screwdriver from the tool kit and went to the engine room. Sweat run down his torso as he fought to turn the screws.

Diana groaned. She flicked to the end of the manuscript, found the yellow Post-it note with Edward's comments: "I liked this one a lot. Its good. It has real heroes in it. If I was a space cadet, I'd be like Ensign Hanson."

Diana read the Post-it note three times. Edward must have meant it as a joke. She thought of Edward's precise and thoughtful critiques at the writer's group meetings, how he spotted mistakes in subjects as diverse as paleontology, nineteenth century English politics, and the semiconductor industry. He had skipped the last couple of meetings, phoning to tell her he was busy catching up on the slush.

She picked up the next manuscript.

Dog Bites
by Lydia Baxton

*I want a dog. A dog that likes me like I like dogs.
Dogs have great big wet tongues. When they lick
me I am happy. They lick my cheek. They lick my
toes. Their breath smells bad, but I got used to it.*

Incredulously Diana searched for Edward's comments: "I liked this one a lot. Its good. It made me think about dogs a lot."

"Very funny, Edward," Diana whispered. Her voice was shaky. She laid the manuscripts on the bedside table, turned out the light. She'd read enough slush for one night. For a long time she lay there in the dark, trying to reconcile Edward's behavior with what she knew of him. He was clever, quiet except when it was his turn to critique. She'd never head him tell a joke.

The stairs creaked.

Diana curled up under the comforter: the house was old, it was bound to creak from time to time. Tomorrow she'd tackle the slush properly. At least tonight's two stories had had...enthusiasm. Rather like the dogs one of the authors was so keen to praise, enthusiastic to a fault. She smiled, remembering how her own dog Retro used to lick her.

Beside her something rustled.

Diana sat bolt upright, fumbling for the light.

A stack of paper swelled beside her bed, ten manuscripts wide and at least forty high. She rubbed her eyes, but the manuscripts were still there. She backed out of bed, crossed the room, yanked the door open.

The staircase was lost in a wall of paper nine feet high. Her feet skidded across a carpet of large manila return envelopes and the plaintive debris of smaller envelopes marked "Query letter—urgent." The tide of paper shifted, bulging, growing as she stood there.

She edged back into the bedroom, one hand brushing against her curtains. Through the window she saw the moonlight-etched silhouette of the tops of the pine trees. The street, the neat flower beds, the neighbor's cars were buried beneath a wasteland of paper and envelopes. Only the needled branches of the pine trees emerged incongruously from the white pages of the landscape.

Diana sat down on the bed. Her hand reached for a manuscript.

*The spaceship rocked. Oh no, thought Ensign
Hanson, we been hit bad. The whine noise meant
the engines were overheated bad. He grabbed a
screwdriver from the*

Diana bit her lip, picturing Ensign Hanson on the shaking ship, the metallic whine of the engines measuring the dwindling hopes of the crew. She raced through the pages with an eagerness she thought she'd left behind in her adolescence.

Around her the manuscripts rustled hungrily, waiting to be read. ▲

There Will Come Soft Things

Keith Allen Daniels
(for Sara Teasdale)

There will come soft things
with mysterious ploys to our lawns and
awnings,
our gargoyles and boys.

There will come soft things
to the claws of our cat.
upholstery will welcome that.

There will come soft things
to the preacher and whore,
and neither will be
what they were before.

There will come soft things
to our automobiles,
and nothing will die beneath our wheels.

There will come soft things
to envelop our brains,
and our souls will sing
to their gentle strains.

There will come soft things
in the dawn's first light,
and Earth will lose the pillow fight.

There will come soft things
with their exudates
to soften our musings
and philter our states.

There will come soft things
from the dark that is frore
like magic from an athanor.

--- NEW FROM SPACE AND TIME PRESS ---

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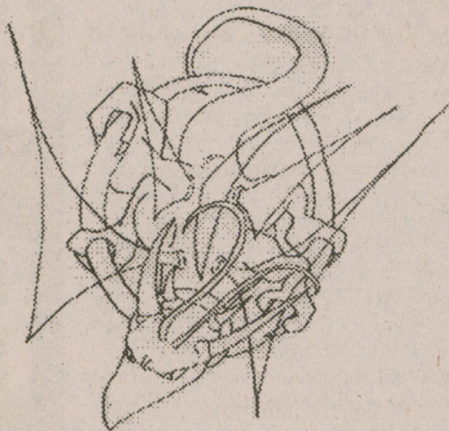
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[publication date: October 1997]

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circumstance as negligible as it should be, struggles
instead toward the insistent and casting light."

- Barry N. Malzberg.

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to fly with the wind
howl at the moon
rise out of light, grey charred ashes
and dance barefoot
on our own graves...

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What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "Roswell"? Do you think of aliens? UFOs? The Grays?

Less than 15 years ago, Roswell was just an obscure, small town in the Southwest. Now it's a household name and part of our modern-day folklore.

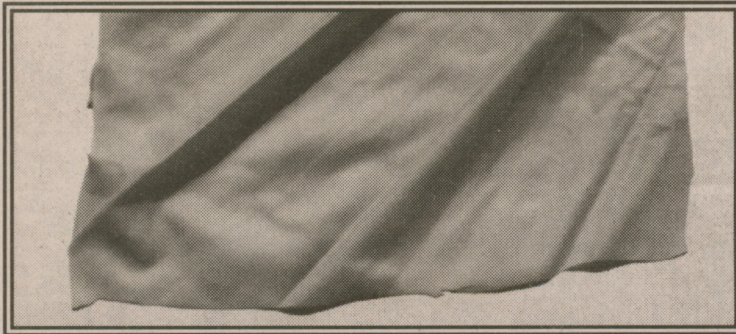
Roswell is more than an alleged UFO crash in New Mexico. It represents an entire paradigm of government conspiracies, extraterrestrial intelligence and the origin of some of our most advanced technologies. It has thoroughly permeated our popular culture, boast-

a closet, read "The Alien Autopsy Controversy" in PW #10 for a more extensive summary.

One of the more sensational developments came from a retired Air Force Colonel named Philip J. Corso. He claimed to have been involved in a major effort by the American military to back-engineer the debris and recovered ship in the Roswell crash. According to Corso, we have the little gray men in that ship to thank for such spectacular inventions such as fiber optics, the Stealth Fighter, and the integrated circuits that help power this laptop computer on which I am typing right now.

Probably the update that has received the most coverage is the announcement last year by the Air Force that the Roswell "aliens" were nothing more than parachute test dummies from a 1954 Air Force exercise called Project High Dive. Never mind that the first Project High Dive test was 70 miles from the crash site. Never mind that it took place seven years after the Roswell Incident. Never mind that the six-foot-tall mannequin-like dummies

look *nothing* like the four-and-a-half-foot-tall bodies that were recovered from the crash site.



Neoprene balloon film before exposure to sunlight. photo: Robert A. Galganski

ing references in summer movie blockbusters like *Independence Day* and *The Rock*. Even *South Park*'s Eric Cartman had his own alien encounter.

When did the Roswell Incident become the Roswell Legend? When I began writing *Surreal World* in the summer of 1995, things were different in the UFO field. Art Bell was just a little-known, slightly off-center UFO enthusiast on Nevada radio. *The X-Files* had not yet won an Emmy. And Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp had yet to discover their now-infamous comet.

The Internet has helped popularize Roswell, to be sure. If you don't think so, run a "UFO" search on any search engine and see how many thousands of hits you get.

July, 1997, marked the 50th anniversary of the Roswell Incident. There were huge celebrations, and the New Mexico Board of Tourism got some much-needed publicity. The mainstream media ignored clinical, serious discussions in favor of the crackpots in tin-foil hats, dancing around the desert with hopes of the return of Elvis. And with all this media attention, there have been some very intriguing developments.

Relax. I'm not going to rehash the Roswell story. It's enough to say that Mac Brazel found a field of mysterious debris on the Foster Ranch and contacted the Roswell Army Air Field (RAAF). Representatives visited the ranch and eventually hauled the debris away. There was also a crashed craft at a disputed location (three different sites have been proposed) with several occupants, also recovered by the Army. For those of you who have spent the last few years locked in



Neoprene balloon film after 240 hours of exposure to sunlight.

photo: Robert A. Galganski

These stories fed off the legend. Corso wrote a book and had his fair share of guest spots on *Art Bell* and *Sightings*. He even made it to *20/20*. And the Project High Dive story just stoked the fires of both skeptics and believers (which, I believe was its intended purpose: a massive red herring).

There's one update that never made the news. It was a mathematical analysis and a series of experiments by Robert Galganski, an engineer from Buffalo, New York. It's nothing sensational. However, it provides something that others never did: Proof. Galganski has done what few have even dreamed of in the field of UFO study. He has framed it in an analytical, experimental context: a cold, hard context that gives us unar-

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50 Years of Roswell

W O R L D

guable proof that the Air Force still has not come clean with what happened at the Foster Ranch in 1947.

I met Robert Galganski at a UFO Conference in Springfield, Ohio, where he presented his research. Galganski fits the mold of a stereotypical engineer: glasses... technical... extremely excited about numbers. He had a fire behind his research that was hard to deny. So much so that, in the midst of such UFO powerhouses as Stanton Friedman, Bruce Maccabee, and David Jacobs, Galganski walked away from the conference with the title of UFOlogist of the Year.

Sadly, Galganski has not been popularly received. Not because of the validity of his research. Nor because of his presentation. Galganski is incredibly competent, and his research is impossible to refute without resorting to personal attacks. The reason Galganski's work is not well known is the same reason why the American public ignored the vast Whitewater scandal that surrounded Bill and Hillary Clinton but were turned on by a young, buxom White House intern and her sex scandal. Galganski's work isn't something that you can splash across the screen in seven-second soundbites during *Hard Copy* and *Strange Universe*. Galganski's research is just a bunch of numbers and graphs. Yet it's irrefutable and when it sinks in, you realize just how important it really is.

Galganski looked at the first-hand accounts of what was found in the debris field on the Foster Ranch. Then he looked at what the Army Air Force (later the Air Force) claimed it was. And he mathematically proved they did not match.

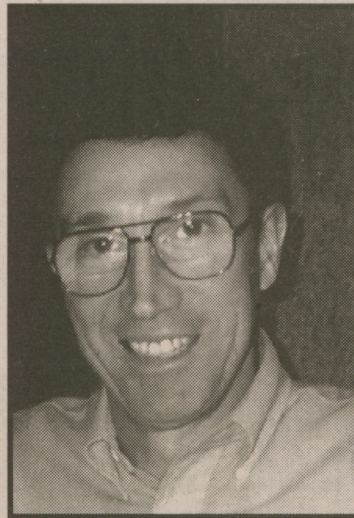
Someone had to be lying.

What the Witnesses Say:

Both Mac Brazel, who ran the Foster Ranch, and Major Jesse Marcel, the RAAF intelligence officer who first visited the debris field, testified that the debris field was BIG.

According to Brazel and one of his ranch hands, the field was so large Brazel had to drive their sheep around it to get to a watering hole. Marcel quantifies it: "three-quarters [of a] mile long and two hundred to three hundred feet wide."

Because Brazel had to drive his sheep around the field, it can be inferred that the debris was rather thick in a large portion of the area. Likewise, Marcel stated that the debris was "[s]cattered all over—just like you'd explode something above the ground..."



Robert Galganski

The majority of the debris found in the field comprised two types of thin-shell material. The first appeared to be a metal foil that could easily be crumpled by hand. However, upon release, it would revert to its original, unwrinkled condition (a property referred to as "full-memory").

The second type of thin-shell debris could not be deformed at all. One rather large piece was even struck with a 16-pound sledgehammer and did not dent at all. Neither type of material could be burned or

melted even when one RAAF officer took an acetylene torch to it. When the flame was removed, the material could be handled almost immediately.

Rectangular and I-beam cross-section strut fragments were also found. These could be neither cut with a knife nor burned with the flame from a cigarette lighter. Although they were slightly flexible when bent, they would not break.

What the Air Force Says:

When it comes to inconsistencies, the Air Force wins. Marcel's testimony is contradicted by Captain Sheridan Cavitt, a plainclothes Counter Intelligence Corps officer stationed at RAAF. Cavitt stated that the field was a small area about 20 feet square. However, Cavitt's credibility is suspect considering he originally denied being at the debris field. Still, many other witnesses corroborate Marcel and Brazel's testimonies. Cavitt's story does not share that honor.

As for the source of the debris, the whole history of the Air Force's spin is extremely rocky. The original press release actually declared the debris came from a "flying disk." That report was squelched by General Roger Ramey, and the official word was that it was the remnants of a weather balloon and a rawin radar target. Such targets were used to track balloons and consisted of balsa wood supports and a thin, delicate laminate of metal foil and white paper. Finally, on September 8, 1994, the Air Force came out with an official report on the Roswell Incident. This states that the debris was from an apparatus of balloons and rawin targets launched in a 1947 Top Secret project, code-named Mogul. In a way, this is the same, tired "weather balloon" explanation.

Galganski's object was to see if the most recent explanation the Mogul Hypothesis was correct. He dug up the research that verified the composition

by Kevin M. Carr

of Mogul flights in question: Each so-called balloon train consisted of one to 28 balloons plus several radar targets. The balloons were made of either neoprene (synthetic rubber) or polyethylene (plastic sheeting, much like Saran Wrap). The Air Force kept detailed records of Project Mogul, and it has been agreed that Flight 4 was the most logical possibility. Mogul Flight 4 consisted of 28 neoprene balloons with three rawin targets.

Neoprene has a light tan color. It stretches, but can be easily ripped and pierced.



Typical break in glue-coated balsa wood, still identifiable as wood.
photo: Robert A. Galganski

After prolonged exposure to the sun, it degrades markedly, becoming brittle, discolored and leathery. The end product is so delicate that it practically crumbles away in your hands. And it burns quite readily. Obviously, this material is not consistent at all with the reports of the indestructible or full-memory debris.

Clearly, the debris field was not caused by neoprene balloons. (Incidentally, it is equally unlikely that any polyethylene balloons would be misidentified. After all, we've all handled Saran Wrap and garbage bags. This is hardly indestructible or full-memory material.) Thus, if the Mogul Hypothesis were correct, the only material that could have caused the debris field would be the rawin radar targets, which were made primarily of the metal/paper laminate.

Galganski used the known amount of laminate comprising Mogul Flight 4's targets. According to Charles B. Moore, the Mogul Project Engineer in 1947, each target comprised 18 square feet of laminate. The three targets on Mogul Flight 4 would therefore contain 54 square feet of that material.

Using Jesse Marcel's estimates, and making very conservative estimates of the thin-shell material distribution (to avoid being accused of weighting the evidence against the Mogul Hypothesis), Galganski developed a mathematical model of the debris field. It accounted for the full ground area, with a heavy debris con-

centration at one end. (Note: Galganski's equations and models are beyond the scope of this short article. If you are interested in the nitty-gritty of his analysis, his article appeared in the March/April 1995 *International UFO Reporter*, published by the J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies, 2457 West Peterson Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60659. You can also check out the IUR website at <http://www.cufos.org/index.html> for more information.)

Even with such conservative estimates, assuming that the debris covered a mere 1% of the entire field (in other words, 99% of the field was uncovered), a total of 6,880 square feet of material would be needed. Since Flight 4 had only 54 square feet of laminate, then 127 balloon trains would be needed to litter such a field. Even a much smaller debris fieldsay, the size of a football field would require no less than 10 balloon trains to cover a mere 1% of it. Finally, let's assume that Marcel and others were complete idiots and identified the degraded neoprene as the mysterious materials. It would still take more than six balloon trains to cover the field as Marcel described it.

When asked point-blank what crashed outside Roswell in 1947, Galganski honestly admits he has no idea what it was, but he

Now if that's not enough to convince you, Galganski did some other experiments. Remember the indestructible I-beams and struts that were also found in the field? According to the Roswell skeptics and the Air Force, these were balsa wood fragments from the rawin targets, misidentified as "indestructible beams" because they were coated with glue.

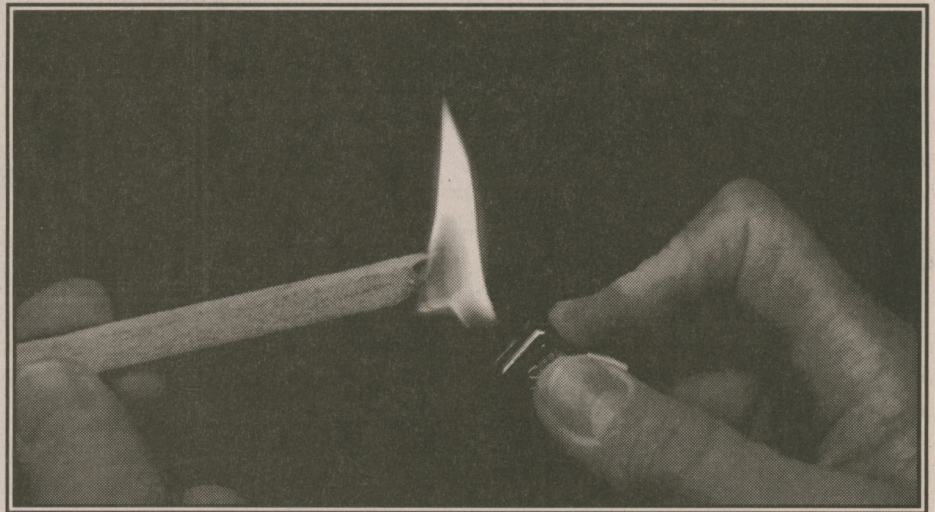
Galganski tracked down the type of glue used on the Mogul's radar targets. It was either a water-based glue (which eventually became known as Elmer's Glue-All) or a similar product made from casein (a protein derived from milk). Galganski tested balsa wood soaked in each type of glue to see if it would develop the properties reported by witnesses who handled the struts.

The absolute strongest piece of wood snapped under a loading of 21.2 newtons (about five pounds of force). This is easily exerted by a single finger. So, unless these witnesses had less upper body strength than Michael Jackson, one could hardly classify the glue-treated beams as indestructible.

Next came the fire tests. Both types of glue reduced the wood's combustibility; however, they still burned readily.

Finally, Galganski noted the physical appearance of the wood: "The Elmer's glue-treated pieces were shinier and felt smoother than raw wood; their casein-glue-treated counterparts felt rougher and had a slightly yellow cast and 'frosty' appearance. In both cases the treated specimens still looked like wood."

Granted, Galganski's experiments don't make great T.V.. But they are sound, scientific



Glue-coated balsa wood burned easily with a lighter flame

photo: Robert A. Galganski

knows "It's not Project Mogul." There simply just wasn't enough material in Mogul Flight 4 to account for even a small portion of the debris on the Foster Ranch.

analyses that prove one thing: The Air Force still isn't telling the truth about what crashed outside Roswell in 1947.

So...what did?

Questions or comments? E-mail "Surreal World" at surreal_world@geocities.com or visit the website at <http://geocities.com/Area51/Rampart/5665>.

Fax is Paul's Fifth appearance in *Pirate Writings* and he was the only author to have TWO stories in *The Best of Pirate Writings*. He is the author of five books, his short fiction and reviews have appeared in every magazine, and he's a hell of a good guy...so there!

FA

by Paul
Di Filippo

Garth Barth weighed ninety-eight and one-half pounds. And that was counting a dozen pens in a plastic pocket protector, a pair of Hush Puppies and eyeglasses with lenses thick as geological strata. He wore chinos and madras shirts buttoned to the neck. his hair sported a cowlick that resembled the ass-plumage of a certain species of South American quetzal. In short, Garth looked like a quintessential member of that much-maligned class known far and wide across the nation, a class which boasted members in every high school, college, and large corporation.

A techno-dweeb-hacker-nerd-bookworm-pointdexter-putz.

The only difference between Garth and other members of his class—and a large difference it was—was that his look was a conscious effort, a deliberate disguise. Protective camouflage, if you will.

At age thirteen, just as he was preparing to enter the violent Darwinian social arena of high school, Garth had come to the conclusion that there was no one in his peer group who could share his particular interests and concerns, these ranging

from the history of altered states of consciousness to artificial intelligence, from comix to industrial music, from biology to theology.

Moreover, there existed certain individuals who were downright inimical and hostile to his point of view, people who actively resented his opinions and would defend to Garth's death his right to be beaten up for trying to use his freedom of speech.

Having reached this conclusion, based solidly on the facts available to him, Garth decided he would strive to become as invisible as possible, hiding his true subversive nature beneath a mask of acceptable weirdness. Making a survey of all possible socio-cultural roles, Garth settled upon his current disguise as providing the best cover. Not only did most parental adults look approvingly on such inbred scholastic types, but to Garth's peers the nerd somatype had become almost transparent, due to overexposure in the media. Even the most brutish jock nowadays could hardly be bothered to torment such a nonentity—especially if the nerd in question could be counted on to supply written-to-order term papers.

X

Illustrated by
Michael Apice

Three years after coming to this decision, Garth was still somewhat surprised at how well his scheme had worked. No one had ever noticed that his Hush Puppies were cleverly crafted foam shells concealing Adidas, nor that the tee-shirt under his madras advertised a Captain Beefheart album, nor that his lenses were plain glass, nor that half of his breast-pocket pens concealed tightly twisted joints in their barrels.

Still, despite the success of Garth's disguise and the freedom it gave him to pursue his own interests, it was a lonely life Garth led. Sometimes he wished there was at least one person he could open up to and be himself...

One fine spring day during gym period Garth found himself sneaking off the playing field of Xerox Inc. High. (The school had renamed itself in gratitude after receiving a large corporate grant.) A coed field hockey game was in progress, and Garth had no desire to have his shins bashed to flinders. Some of those girls were really vicious... No, such sublimated warfare was not for him. Instead, he would sit peacefully in his usual hiding place until it was time to get dressed. He would peacefully smoke a joint and contemplate his latest experiments.

Around the side of the building, a set of wide concrete stairs led from the ground to a second-floor emergency exit. The stairs were open on either side. Beneath the cement structure, set back in the thickest shadows, was an old plastic milk crate someone had lifted from the cafeteria. Here Garth could sit and, by occasionally craning his neck, still maintain a view of the game, so that he would know when to rejoin his classmates.

The bare dirt beneath the steps smelled of urine from a hundred drunken extracurricular pissings. Garth was anxious to light up and dispel the aroma. He had just taken his seat and removed a pen from his pocket (he still wore his buttoned-tight madras with his gym shorts) when he became aware of a subdued sobbing directly at his elbow.

"Uh, who's that?" asked Garth warily.

The sobbing stopped. Through sniffles, an accented voice said, "It's me, Reba. Who're you?"

Reba Amoeba was a recent arrival to Xerox Inc. High. Her family had moved here from Texas, fleeing that state's economic depression. Reba's real last name was Tupples. Everyone called her Reba Amoeba cuz she was kinda fat. She probably weighted twice as much as Garth, but she was tall too. Garth didn't think she looked so bad. She had a sweet, albeit blotchy face and dressed nice. In addition, she had the biggest, most awesome tits Garth had ever seen. He suspected that half of the enmity she incurred from other girls stemmed from unacknowledged jealousy. Garth also thought her accent was charming.

"It's Garth. From math class."

Reba snorted. "Humph. Mister Brain."

Garth felt hurt. His self-devised image and reputation had never seemed so cumbersome. Perhaps he could let it drop just this once.

"Maybe," Garth replied mysteriously. "And maybe not. What're you doing here anyway?"

"I hate all those smug dudes and bitches and they hate me. I don't need to get whopped upside the head with a stick to make it sink in."

Garth nodded in the darkness. His eyes had adjusted, and he could make out the silhouette of Reba sitting on the grungy dirt. Her hunched shoulders made her look pretty miserable. Garth felt bad for her. "That's more or less my situation too. But listen, I got something to make you feel better. Here, hold this a second."

Passing the pen to Reba, Garth fumbled for some matches.

"Oh, great, a pen. What're we gonna do—write some equations?"

Garth just smiled. "Let us not prejudge things, shall we?" Garth took back the pen, unscrewed the barrel and removed a fine joint. He held it toward Reba so she could see.

"Wow," she exclaimed appreciatively. "I haven't smoked anything since I left home."

"Uh, care to share my seat...?"

Garth shifted, and Reba quickly settled half her large butt onto the milk crate, leaving a little corner for Garth. It was enough. Her big old warm hip felt like heaven. Garth lit up, and passed the joint to Reba; in between tokes, they soon began dissing representative local shitheads. Before they knew it, they were laughing and hanging on each other like forever best friends. When they stumbled out from beneath the steps at the end of the period to head back to the locker-rooms, they saw that each had one bare thigh whose back was imprinted with a waffle pattern. This really cracked them up, and they could barely walk.

Meeting afterwards in the corridor outside the gym, Reba and Garth looked somewhat shyly at each other. Things seemed a little different in the light of day, on the downside of their shared high.

"Uh, you won't tell anyone about my pens, will you?"

"Not if you don't tell 'bout how you found me crying."

"Oh, no, not a word, I promise."

"Me too."

They were silent a moment. Then Garth said, "Wanna come home with me after school and see what I've got in my basement?"

"Why, sure."

Garth smiled broadly up into Reba's face. She lit up too. He tried to think of something suitably impressive to say, but nothing came to him. Finally, he took off his glasses and whispered, "They're fake."

"Oh," said Reba. She seemed to understand. At least Garth hoped so.

After school Garth found Reba waiting with a fatalistic look that betokened many previous disappointments. When she saw Garth, she broke into a huge smile. He had been half hoping she wouldn't be there. This sharing stuff was tricky, and took more thought and work than being alone all the time. He hoped he was up to it, after such a long solitary existence.

At the door of Garth's house, Reba paused.

"Won't your Mom think it's funny, you bringing me down the basement?"

Funny? Garth felt a quiver. What did this girl have in mind? God, she was big... He tentatively took Reba's hand. She squeezed it. Garth was moved. "I don't know. I never had anyone over before. Let's see."

Mrs. Barth was skiing. Dressed in Roswignol boots, red spandex tights and a leotard, she shuffled on a Nordic trainer in front of a wall-sized rear-projection television screen which Garth had constructed from scratch. Synched with the trainer, the visuals on the screen zipped through Alpine slopes glistening with fresh powder.

"Hi, Ma. Listen, I've got a friend with me. We're gonna look at my hardware, okay?"

Mrs. Barth was intent on her cross-country pilgrimage, and didn't look up. "Uh-uh, fine, dear. Oh, could you turn up the heat before you go? It's a little chilly in here."

"Sure, Ma."

After notching up the thermostat, Garth brought Reba to the cellar door. He flipped on the basement light and they went downstairs.

"Your mother seems nice," said Reba.

"She's heavily into fitness."

"I thought so."

Garth unlocked the door of his basement headquarters and motioned for Reba to enter first.

Half of Garth's secret hideaway looked like an electronics retailer's. There were racks of stereo equipment, VCR's and monitors, and computers. Piles of CD's and tapes spilled from shelves. The other half looked like James Watson's wet dream. There were pocket gene-sequencers and peptide-linkers, ribosomal simulators and enzymatic baths. There was also a couch and a dorm-sized fridge.

"This place is so cool!" Reba said. Garth felt proud. "Where did you get all this tuff? And how did you ever afford it?"

"Oh, I do a little work for a few companies. Programming and stuff. It pays pretty good."

"Don't they mind how young you are?"

"They never see me. It's all done over the net."

By the way of illustration, Garth powered up a Pentium machine. Then, remembering his manners, he went to the fridge and removed a beaker containing a yellow liquid. "Want a drink?"

Reba looked slightly suspicious. "What is it?"

"It's just a mildly psychoactive relaxant and stimulant that will uncoil your DNA, ream out your cholesterol and refresh your long-term memory. And best of all, it doesn't taste like anything gross. I usually cut in with orange juice."

"In that case, I don't mind if I do."

Garth poured the drinks, and they toasted, then sipped.

"Mind if I get out of this stupid disguise?" asked Garth.

"Go right ahead."

Garth took off his glasses and combed his cowlick down. He stripped off his button-down to reveal a John Zorn tee-shirt. He unlaced his foam Hush Puppies and cast them aside. He put on a CD and turned around. Reba was sitting on the couch.

"This DNA stuff is great. I feel like I'm floating above all my problems">

"I thought you'd like it."

"Come sit down with me."

"Okay."

They sat quietly for a while, listening to the music. It was Talking Heads.

*I got a girlfriend that's better than that
She has the smoke in her eyes
She's moving up, going right through my heart
She's gonna give me surprise*

Reba had finished her drink. Her eyes were full of smoke. "Do you want to see my tits? I noticed you're always looking at them.

Garth nodded wordlessly.

Reba peeled off her shirt.

She wasn't even wearing a bra. She didn't need one. Reba's boobs were the largest unsupported domes this side of Saint Peter's in Rome.

Garth jumped up. "I—I've got to digitize those."

"Say what?"

Garth was already scanning Reba's chest with a video-camera. In thirty-seconds, her magnificent equipment had been transferred as pixels to the screen of Garth's computer.

"Is that all you want to do with them?"

Garth mentally kicked himself. Where was his head at? He had been pretending to be a nerd for too long.

"No. I mean yes. I mean—oh, you know."

It was time to stop making sense. Garth threw himself on Reba.

Pretty soon they were making flippy-floppy.

Garth stared at the full-color image of Reba's tits on his monitor. Thank God for high resolution!

It was the next afternoon. Reba had to help her mother with grocery shopping, and couldn't come to Garth's house. In a way, beneath his disappointment, Garth had been grateful. He needed a little time alone to collect his thoughts and try to figure out what he was feeling.

Basically, he guessed, he was very proud to have Reba as his girlfriend. They had talked a lot yesterday, and she seemed like a really smart and sensible person. Plus she was really sexy. At least Garth thought so. And who wouldn't, looking at those breasts...?

Studying Reba's digitized physiology, Garth was overcome by a sudden feeling of benevolent pride. He wanted the whole world to realize what a great body Reba had. He wanted to broadcast this picture to every television in the country...

Garth's thoughts jarred to a stop. Wait just one second. He could do something almost as good.

Garth's computer had a fax board in it, effectively transforming it into a fax machine. It also had a database containing thousands of public-access fax-machine numbers. Garth had obtained these from a paperback book sold in any well-stocked bookstore. They were the numbers of many major corporations, retailers and government organizations. In addition, Garth had added any further fax numbers he had happened to run across, from local delis to foreign embassies.

These numbers, he supposed, represented a sufficient cross-section of the populace to appreciate Reba's tits.

Garth brought up the fax program. He instructed it to send a fax of Reba's tits to every number in the database, first routing the messages through a circuitous path that would prevent it being traced back to him.

Garth hit the ENTER key and sat back. The first black-and-white fax was already on its way.

Twenty-four hours later, as Garth opened the door of his den and ushered Reba in, the last fax was just going out.

Garth proudly explained to Reba what he had done.

She was silent for a moment. Then, very calmly, she said, "You sent a picture of my boobs to every bank, every newspaper, every television station you could fine?"

"Yup."

"Every realtor, every architect, every lawyer?"

"Uh-huh."

Reba's lips were compressed to a thin line. Garth began to grow a bit nervous. "Every Kinko's, every Staples, every Seven-Eleven with a three-hundred-dollar fax machine?"

"Well, I didn't—in fact, that's exactly—"

Garth was on his back on the floor. Reba was kneeling and choking him and screaming.

"If you wanted to ruin me, why didn't you just drag me naked through the town behind a bus! I've heard of guys who kiss and tell, but you're a monster! This is the worst thing I've ever been involved in!"

Garth croaked pitifully. Reba slightly relaxed her hold on his throat.

"Your face wasn't in the shot! And no one will ever trace

it back here. I swear it! I'd never do anything to intentionally hurt you, Reba. Never!"

Reba started to cry. Garth got painfully up and put his arms around her. After a while she stopped.

"You know what I should do?" said Reba.

"What?"

"I should digitize your stupid willy and send it out after my boobs."

"Well, go ahead, I deserve it. But the disparity in size will make for a big anticlimax."

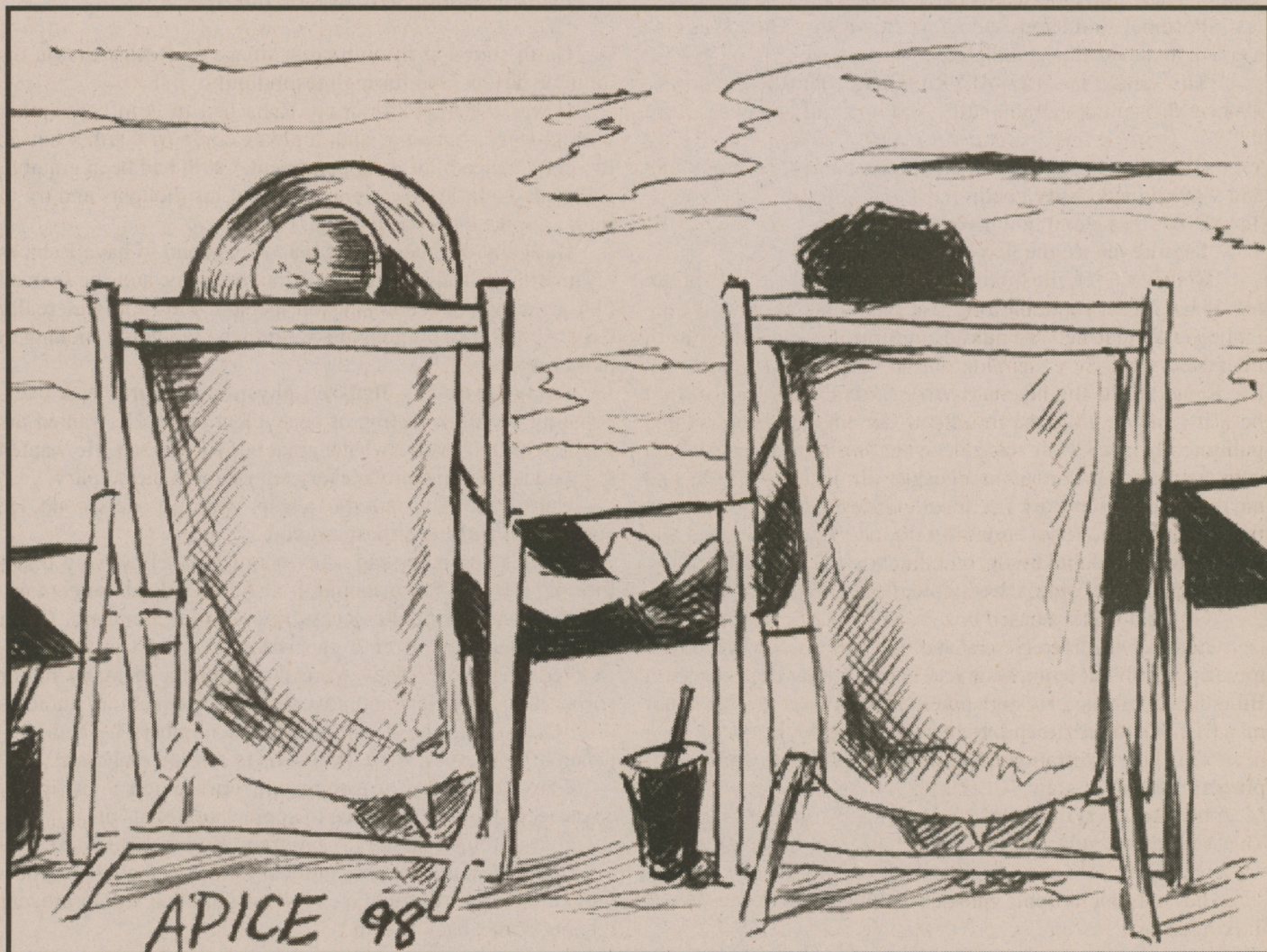
Reba managed to laugh. "Well, you know, I can see what appealed to you about this idea. It's kinda neat to think you can hit all these people with any message you want, and they just have to take it."

Grateful for an exit to the incident and also intrigued by where Reba was leading, Garth said, "Oh yeah? What kind of faxes would you send?"

"Well now, I don't rightly know offhand. Let's have a drink of that DNA stuff and talk about it."

Reba entered Garth's basement workroom. She was such a fixture around the Barth household now that she let herself in and out.

"Your Mom yelled from the living room to me as I was



going through the kitchen. She wanted me to turn on the water in the kitchen sink and splash it a little. I did, but I didn't ask why."

"She's got a rowing machine now."

Garth spotted a rolled-up magazine in Reba's hand. "More visual fodder?"

Reba grew excited. "You bet. Look at this. Can you believe it?"

She opened up the magazine, which was a copy of TIME. Inside was a picture of Vice President Gore holding a little girl on his lap. The caption said she was this year's Easter Seals poster child.

Garth eagerly grabbed the magazine. "If we had asked him to pose for us, it couldn't be better! You're obviously thinking of that image we were wondering what to do with last week—"

"Exactly."

"Okay, let's see how they fit."

Garth digitized the Vice President. He erased the little girl from his lap. Then he loaded an image previously extracted from a recent hit movie: a naked woman in a sitting position. He pasted her into Gore's lap. The Vice President's face remained plainly visible; his hands now rested in the woman's snatch. His wooden expression assumed new dimensions. A little fill concealed the seams between the two images.

"Perfect," said Reba.

Garth switched to typing mode and signed the image:

THE MAX PLANCK-MAX ERNST BRIGADE. Then he sent it out over the phone lines.

"I wonder if this one will get as much publicity as the one we did about the Pope? speculated Reba.

"It would be hard to top the Pope bowling with Mother Teresa. But this one might do it."

"I'm already thinking about the next one."

"Me too."

It hadn't taken Reba long that day a month ago to convince Garth that he was missing out on the true potential of his fax scheme. Sure, sending out an image of her boobs had been a cute start. But he could hardly continue in that mode. If he was going to go to the trouble of flooding the unsuspecting public with images, he should make sure they were suitably subversive ones. The spontaneously formed, unplanned and unregulated network of fax machines around the world had the potential to function as a kind of guerrilla anti-media. And Garth and Reba could be the schedulers.

Since that decision, they had sent out one fax daily.

They had rudely abused dozens of public figures, but realized they had still merely scratched the surface. They had portrayed Yeltsin screwing Maggie Thatcher. They had depicted Billy Graham rolling for high stakes in Vegas, surround by chorus girls. They had shown Jesse Jackson shaking hands with the head of the Aryan Nations. They had rigged improbably couplings of various stars: Cher and James Earl Jones, Eddie Murphy and Meryl Streep, Mack Jagger and Dolly Parton. They had done collages without human figures illustrative of various world problems. Tractors emptying grain into missile silos, an anthropomorphic mosque duking it out with an animated cathedral, an elegant drowning in a sea of human junk.

The reaction among the recipients of these images had been bigger and better than Garth and Reba could ever had hoped. For the most part, of course, the collages had not been taken as "real," whatever that meant. (Although there had been one small Midwestern paper which had run the image of the Pope bowling with the caption: POINTIFF ENJOYS DAY OFF.) Instead, the images had entered that amorphous nether-world of office humor and rumor, previously populated with crudely drawn sketches of outhouses with funny signs, big-busted secretaries fending off the advances of their bosses, and vaguely anti-authoritarian or cynical slogans. The quality of the work done by Garth and Reba was so superior, the conceptions so funny and radical, that their images drove the weaker ones out of the urban mythological ecosystem.

The output from Garth and Reba was xeroxed and circulated far beyond its initial outlets. Within hours of its initial dissemination, it was multiplied hundred fold and disbursed across miles.

The two kids found out about all this a week or two after starting the transmissions. Feeling down about the apparent lack of response to their work, they had been hanging around watching television. The six-o'clock news came on. There on the screen was that day's image: Tipper Gore attending a drag-queen's ball, looking right at home.

Garth and Reba perked up and listened.

"The President has vowed to bring to justice the perpetrators of what he called 'this libelous and scurrilous semi-scandal-type aggravation.' He added, 'Not that I feel that so-called gay or homosexual in individuals necessarily de-connote a less-than-positive image in my administration.'"

After that, things really took off. Several alternative weekly newspapers began running a week's worth of faxes on their comix pages. Anarchistic individuals began blowing them up to poster size and hanging them around their neighborhoods. Anti-American foreign governments began using certain images as propaganda. The CIA printed up millions of the fax that depicted Qadaffi humping a camel and showered them over Libya.

When other unknown co-conspirators began issuing similar faxes, Garth and Reba decided to label theirs, to distinguish them from inferior imitations.

Garth had become Max Planck, Reba Max Ernst.

The outer life of the two Maxes had not changed a whit. Still shunned and reviled by their peers at school, they silently smiled through everything, aware of their true stature and mission, secure in their comradeship.

Now Reba said, "I wonder what the President will have to say about today's shot?"

"Something incomprehensible, no doubt. Whadda ya say we go out for a soda?"

"Sounds good."

Garth and Reba walked to a local deli that featured quiet booths. The deli had a fax machine so that office-workers could send their lunch-orders in. One wall formed a gallery for all of Garth and Reba's faxes. They were secretly proud.

While they were drinking their ice-cream floats, up walked someone they knew: Burt Lowdermilk, the captain of the school basketball team.



"Well, if it's not the geek and the freak," said Lowdermilk. "What a pair of lovebirds. Jesus, I hate to imagine what would happen if you two ever had kids. Not that that's a possibility."

Garth had begun a slow burn that was threatening to ignite fusion. Reba's lips were turning white around her straw.

"Nothing to say? Oh, well, that's okay. I don't understand no scientific shit, and your girl talks like a hillbilly."

Laughing, Lowdermilk departed.

"Boy, I hate that guy," said Garth.

"I'd like to rip his balls off—if I could find them."

The next day, still smarting, Garth lifted Lowdermilk's face out of the yearbook and pasted it into a crowd scene. The hapless citizens were waiting to be smashed under the enormous ass of the chairman of the Fed.

Two days later, while Garth and Reba were downstairs, the doorbell rang.

"Mom's out," said Garth. "Would you get it, Reba?"

"Sure."

Garth went back to his work. After a while, he realized how long Reba had been gone. Curious, he went upstairs.

The house was full of men with guns. Reba was arguing with a guy with a dour face and five-o'clock shadow. The guy spotted Garth.

"I thought you told me Mister Barth wasn't home, ma'am."

"I—he—that's not—"

The man held up his hand. "No excuses, please. Just the fax, ma'am."

The penalty for unsolicited electronic distribution of obscene materials was a year in prison and fifty thousand dollars fine. As minors, Garth and Reba got probation. Their fine was paid by donations from millions of supporters.

A Hollywood mogul had received the very first fax, the simple love-struck one depicting Reba's tits. Ever since then, he had been searching for their owner. In the publicity surrounding the kids' trial, he found her....

Five years after the trial, Garth sat in a lounge chair by the side of his swimming pool. His hair was immaculately styled. He wore two-hundred-dollar sunglasses, sandals and a Euro-cut bathing suit. He had gained a few inches and pounds.

Reba stuck her head out the patio door. She had shed the few pounds Garth had gained, and more than grown into what remained. She wore a bikini and heels.

"Another drink, dear?"

"Sure. Make it two scoops."

A cordless phone kept Garth in touch with the movie studio he owned. As he slurped up the last of his soda, it rang.

"Speaking. Oh, Sid. hi. What've you got? Two million and a share of the gross? How many? What percent? Listen, Sid, slow down, I can't keep up with you. Listen, write everything down, draw me the big picture so I can study it and send it right over. Messenger? What century are you living in?"

"Fax it poolside." ▲

2000 Eve

Dennis Saleh

Black neon appoints the room with
soft finality How does the black glow
It is the last year of a century of wonders
The opposite is true now in most instances
for example these chalk black sullen
swathed tubes of coiled light
In the Air Museum it's raining umbrellas
like an old-fashioned surrealist painting
In this room sea planes in this pterodactyls
in the very last room the sky
Now in the Museum of Promises
a sign reads over the century
"Removal Sale" "Everything must go"
Everything unfinished everything undone
There is a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle
"White" "Put the century together"
Everyone is arguing over the calendar
in how many parts shall the year be
what does even the letter "C" mean
In a tome on old names of the Moon
argument is made that the Moon was
the origin of "C" in all languages
This Moon drags its 100 years
abbreviates itself and is gone
The century is so old now the only days left
are Sundays the only religion euphemism
for the color curling up the sea peeling
away
Nobody remembers when it wasn't
December
A book says it is all simultaneity
A grey is at the door in the electricity
There is a phone call for the television
For the last day of the year the news will
be
one day early The sea will sing its sea
song
the Moon pronounce "C" for century
Look at the air It averts its face
The century is out of place
The future is not accurate do not forget
Time has left no trace scientists say
but make a rhyme if you have one

Bud hails from Placerville, CA where he can be found working as an engineer and writing short fiction. This was his first short story submission and his first fiction sale. Bud tells me this story came to him in a dream...well duh!

DREAM CASINO

by Bud Stafford

Illustrated by Michael Apice

Although it is prime time, inside it is dark and nearly devoid of people; absent the usual casino symphony of slot machines, craps tables and roulette wheels. A few denizens are lazing around at

Outside, the lights of the casino burn redgreenblueyelloworange with an unrelenting energy, drawing me closer, sucking me into its grasp like a vacuum cleaner feasting on unsuspecting dust. I've been in this town a hundred times. I don't remember this place. Strange. The lights glow, but only in shapes and swirlsno words; this casino has no name.

I drift inside. I'm carrying a baby in an infant seat. The baby is not mine. I have a baby daughter, and I know my baby. Noshe's not mine. And yet a feeling of complete responsibility is draped over me. Oddly, I feel no urgency to find the child's parents. She's with me. I'll take care of her. I'll protect her. I'm not her parent, but right now, I am her daddy.

blackjack tables, minus dealers, and scattered barstools. Their stares are blank, lifeless, disinterested, like mannequins. Slot machines stand at attention, one armed bandits shaking their fists at the high, mirrored ceiling. The ceiling reflects nothing.

I walk through the desolate casino, baby and seat hanging. She sure is quiet; if not for the weight on my arm, I would forget she's there. I come to a series of down escalators and ramped walkways. I go down, into another room, as dark and quiet as the main floor upstairs. A few more bodies are quietly occupying dark corners of the room. I can't actually see them, but I can feel their presence. Chills are dancing up and down my spine. And yet I am still pulled, drawn further, no thought of turning around and leaving.

I enter another large room. In one dark corner is a small cafeteria. A lone server stands behind the counter, waiting for customers, but all of the serving pans and trays are empty and clean, showing no recent evidence of food. Even the ladle he holds to his lips shines clean like it was just taken out of the dishwasher. Despite the emptiness, the darkness, the apparent cleanliness, there wafts the aroma of home cooked, southern fried chicken. Unmistakable, unrelenting, releasing in me tugs of hunger, dormant until now, the first force that tries to lure me off my seemingly pre-ordained path. Glancing around, I see no obvious source of the odor and I allow my sense of destination to overrule my sense of smell as I proceed.

I make my way to the opposite corner of the dark room. I



A
♣



AP © 98



walk up to one of the dealerless blackjack tables to rest, the weight of the baby and the infant seat starting to numb my arms and shoulders. I rest the seat on a high-backed stool, and plop my rear into the adjacent one. As I lean forward, my elbows on the table, a dimly dull spotlight snaps to attention overhead, breaking the room's gloom ever so gently with a yellowish shaft piercing the black, coming to rest directly in front of me, focusing squarely on two cards face up—the ace and king of spades. To my right, a glass, filled to the brim, clean fresh ice cubes crackling under the weight of a liquid several degrees warmer, but still bubbling, still new, still alive. Club soda, with a twist of lime. Just as I like it. No more vodka martinis, straight up, three olives. Had to quit. Too many weird things were happening.

I sip the club soda. Fresh, all right. Doesn't take club soda long to go flat. I look back at the cards in front of me. The ace and king of spades. I look down to check on the baby. Still there. Still quiet. She sure does look familiar. Just then, a voice that seemed to be right behind me and right in front of me at the same time, whispered "could be a good sign".

Startled, I look around. I see no one. I don't even feel a presence. The room is still largely dark, save for the dim yellow shaft spotlighting the pre-dealt blackjack.

"What could be a good sign?", I ask, feeling awkward since I really couldn't direct the question towards anyone, or anything, visible to me.

"Blackjack, friend. Blackjack. This is a hot table. Nothing but winners here tonight. No losers—no one goes away empty handed. A house guarantee."

Still unsure, I say "how can anyone go away empty handed if there's no one here trying to win?"

"Ah, but there are plenty of people here tonight, people you know."

"I didn't see anyone I know in this casino. In fact, all I saw were a bunch of drunks, or zombies, or something. Nobody was moving, nobody was playing cards, or pulling handles, or throwing dice. Nobody was eating in the cafeteria. I can't even see you, so how can there be anyone here that I know?"

"Oh, I'm here. I'm always here. Everyone is always here. And now you are here. And she's here..."

I glance down at the baby. Still there, still quiet, still looking familiar, still a mystery.

I look back at the two cards, the ace and king of spades, lounging under the spotlight from nowhere.

"If I play, is this my first hand? Do I start with a winner?"

"Of course it's your first hand. Blackjack. Nothing but winners here tonight. You win."

"I win? I win what? I didn't ante anything. I don't know the minimum. I see no dealer."

"I am the dealer", the disembodied voice bellowed. "It's you against the house, and I am the house. There is no minimum. And because you are who you are, you don't have to ante. I will compensate you as you win. Nothing but winners here tonight."

"If I already won, what did I win? I see no chips on the table."

"What did you win?" There was a bone-chilling laugh. "Why, her, of course."

Aghast, I look down at the baby. So innocent, so familiar. A cuddly smile looking at me through the darkness. And yet not my daughter. "What? I won her? This baby? What's going on here?"

"You must play to learn more. Are you in?"

I look around, the walls seem to be much closer than they were when I came in. The direction from which I thought I had entered no longer appeared to be a means of exit. I saw no signs, no stairs or escalators, no way out. I need answers. "Deal me in."

Under the spotlight, the ace and king of spades were gone, and there, in their place, a full deck. "Cut," said the dealer's voice. I cut.

Then my cards were before me. Two queens, hearts and clubs. Dealer showing a six. "I'll stay." The down dealer card flipped over to reveal a nine. Fifteen. Dealer hits with another nine. Bust. I win.

With a satisfied grin, I look over to check on the baby. She was no longer in her infant seat, but was being held by a young woman. As the faint light cast a shadow over her face, I had the feeling that the baby's face looked an awful lot like this woman who just appeared. I had no sooner finished processing that thought than another spotlight snapped on, focused squarely on this woman. I know her. Who is she? Come on, think. That's it! Mary Bevins! From junior high school! I took her to a dance and we had a short puppy love affair. But what is she doing here?

"Hi Ted. Where have you been? I've missed you and Caitlin. Why haven't you been back home? You know I don't like you to bring Caitlin into these casinos."

"What? What the hell are you talking about? I haven't seen you in twenty years! And, Caitlin? Is this Caitlin, is that her name?"

"Of course, Ted. This is Caitlin. She's our daughter."

"Now wait a minute..."

"You don't seem to be very comfortable with your winnings tonight," the voice interrupted. "Nobody loses, nothing but winners here tonight. Ready for another hand?"

"But...what about..."

"You're ready."

One at a time, new cards land under the original spotlight. Jack of clubs and nine of hearts. "Stay."

Dealer shows an eight up, and flips over a ten of clubs. "Eighteen, you win again. Nothing but winners here tonight."

I look around to where Mary and Caitlin were sitting, but they were gone. No trace, even the infant seat was gone.

"Better?" the voice boomed. "Next hand."

Confused, I take another sip of club soda from my glass as two new cards appear before me. Five of diamonds and six of clubs. Eleven. Dealer shows a four. "If I haven't anted anything, how can I double down?"

"You're good for it—just say the word if you want to double down." I thought I heard a chuckle. "Nothing but winners here tonight."

"Double down."

Face down, my new card slides under my five/six combo. Dealer has the four showing, flips the down card to reveal an eight. Twelve. The required hit card lands on the table and comes up Jack of clubs. Twenty-two and bust. I win the double down. Out of curiosity I flip over the down card. Thank God for the dealer bust, as the down card turns out to be a three.

"See, nothing but winners here tonight. Another club soda?" I turn to retrieve my glass and find it full, new ice cubes, newly bubbling club soda with a fresh slice of lime clinging to the side. As I reach for the glass, I become aware of someone sitting in the stool that Mary had sat in moments before.

The light that had shone on Mary earlier was gone, and I could only make out a silhouette. "Mary? Caitlin? Is that you?"

Slowly, a faint light cracked the eerie gloom, fading in like track lighting in an art gallery. That wasn't Mary. And that wasn't Caitlin.

"Hello, Ted. Long time."

That voice. I know that voice. I need more light. The light reached a low level of intensity and stopped. I lean forward and squint my eyes. "Hello? Do I know you?"

She laughed.

"Well, you knew me. We knew each other very well, I thought. Would we have had Ted Jr. if we didn't know each other?"

My eyes adjusted to the inadequate lighting. Ted Jr.? I had always wanted a son, but had reconciled to be content with the daughter I had been presented with three years ago. "Christine?"

"Oh Ted, you do remember. You have got to stop drinking those martinis; you know that weird things happen when you drink."

"But...." My mind raced. I haven't seen Christine since just after college. We had been lovers for two years, and then I left to truck around the country, see the sights, camp out, hike, experience a bit of the world before I settled down, got a job, married and had kids. I treated her poorly, though I initially wrote and called with frequency after hitting the road.

Gradually, as my life on the road became my whole life, my calls came less often, and if I started to write any letters, I certainly didn't put them in the mail. I didn't even have the courtesy to tell this woman how I was changing, and that my change did not involve her, to thank her for the good times and to wish her the best in her life. I didn't even give her back her record albums.

I took a long drink from my glass. Man, I really cared about Christine. And I have so regretted how I treated her while I was on the road. I had often thought about trying to contact her, to apologize, to ease my conscience. "Christine, I...."

"Ted. It's OK. We just didn't know where you went. We were worried. Ted Jr. kept calling for you last night. I think he was scared. He loves you so much, you know."

"Last night? But..."

This is too much. This can't be. No, Christine was out of my life, rightly or wrongly, years ago. We did not get back together. We do not have a son between us, and I do not know anything about anything having to do with her and last night. I take a deep breath and turn back to the table. "I'm in for another hand, and make it quick!"

Without a word, the unseen dealer scoops up the remains of the last hand, and new cards appear. I show a four of clubs and a five of hearts. Dealer shows an ace. "Insurance?"

Nothing but winners here tonight, I think to myself. "No." The end of the down card for the dealer lifts up slightly, and then goes back down again. No blackjack. "Hit me."

King of hearts. Nineteen. "Stay."

The dealer's ace is joined by the down card, a five of diamonds. Dealer hits with Queen of clubs. Sixteen. Hits again—seven of spades. Bust. "Must be your lucky night, my friend," the voice chuckles.

I feel a presence behind me. I turn to see a waitress, without her tray, but definitely a waitress. She is wearing that familiar dull red waitress outfit, with her pad of checks and several pens in the pockets, one pen wedged in her ear. At first I am so relieved that this is a waitress and not another vision



from the past, that I let my guard down and ready another order of club soda with a twist of lime.

“Ted, where the hell have you been the last five months?”

Startled, I turn again to face the waitress. As I do, she slides under a dim light, revealing her shoulder length red hair and her dark green eyes. I remember. Beverly. On a business trip a couple of months back, I stopped into a small diner for a bite to eat. It was a slow night, very few customers. I sat at the counter and Beverly was my waitress. I had always been attracted to red heads, and Beverly was so friendly, and seemed so extraordinarily sexy in her little outfit, that I couldn't resist a little playful flirting. At least, I thought it was playful flirting. When I got up to leave a tip and pay my check, Beverly asked if I would be interested in meeting her for a drink when she got off work, maybe a half hour later. I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and said that I would.

I had no sooner left the diner for my hotel (the hotel's lounge was where we had agreed to meet) when the butterflies invaded my stomach. What was I thinking? Sure, I had been away from home for three weeks, but I was a very happily married man, married for seven years to a woman who treated me with kindness and love, who had given me a most precious and adoring daughter. Someone who I cared about with every ounce of my life, and here I was meeting an attractive, and obviously interested and available, waitress for drinks at a hotel lounge, two thousand miles from home. What was I thinking?

“Ted, I asked you where you've been! I have needed to talk to you, and where were you when I needed you? Nowherenot a call, not a card, nothing. Gone. One night and then you're gone. I thought we had something, I thought you were different. Now look at me!”

I look closer. She still looked fine, that red hair resting lazily on her shoulders. Those green eyes smoldering in their sockets, though now I detected a bit of glassiness in her gaze. I allowed my eyes to take another look at the rest of her body. She still had that nice shape to her bottom, with perfectly contoured legs proudly displayed under her short dull red skirt. Yet something seemed different. She seemed to have put on a little weight, her tummy was not quite as flat as I remembered...uh oh. I turned back to the table as quickly as I could, almost falling off my stool in the process. “Another hand. NOW!”

Two more cards drifted towards me. They landed gently, almost magically. I picked them up. Two aceshearts and diamonds. Dealer shows a six. Beautiful. I'm going for it. Splitting those babies. Nothing but winners here tonight. House guarantee. What have I got to lose?

“I'm splitting these aces, give it to me good!”

Each ace finds a card face down underneath. I watch the dealers hand unfold. The six showing is joined by a three. Nine. Dealer hits again with an five. Fourteen. I start to feel good. Fourteen for the dealer. Bust baby bust. The dealer turns over another card. It's another six. Twenty for the dealer. My heart sinks. I glance back at Beverly still standing near, now just in the shadows as the dull spotlight is pulling duty over

the cards which seem to hold my fate. She's reaching into her pocket, a pocket packing something heavy. A single bead of sweat appears on the top of her lip, as she quivers nervously in the shadows. Trembling, I turn back to my cards. My sweaty hand reaches to turn over the first down card. As the ten of diamonds turns over, I let loose a sigh of relief. Looking around, Beverly is still standing there, glowering. I feel the urge to ask what a split will do for me, but I don't want to know. Slowly, I turn over the last card. It's a Jack! Another twenty-one, edging the dealer's twenty on split aces! I turn and Beverly is gone. I turn the other way as the spotlight that had illuminated the cards on the table fades to black, leaving the room a dusky gray.

I hear the dealer's voice say “Nothing but winners here tonight.” As he says that, the sound of the voice seems to recede into the reflectionless mirrored ceiling. Slowly, lights around the room fade up, at first casting an eerie yellowish glow that clashes with the green felt tables, the black leather barstools and the silent chrome slot machines.

“Ted?”

“Daddy!”

I turn again and there is Lorie, my wife, and Amy, my daughter, both running towards me with their arms wide open. As they near me, the lights in the casino get brighter and whiter, and the neon trims along the walls and ceiling come alive with redgreenblueyelloworange. The once lifeless people become animated, pulling handles, throwing dice and spinning wheels. Lights are flashing, coins are clanging, horns and whistles are sounding, escalators are moving up and down. I look at the ceiling, and I see myself looking up, surrounded by people, moving about from table to table, machine to machine. I hear music coming from the speakers. It's an old Animals song, “We Gotta Get Out Of This Place”. I catch another whiff of southern fried chicken.

Lorie and Amy catch up to me and throw their arms around me, squeezing the bejeezus out of me as I squeeze the bejeezus out of them.

“Where have you been? We just didn't know where you went. We were worried. Amy kept calling for you last night. I think she was scared. She loves you so much, you know.”

“I know, honey. I know,” I say as I take in the changes happening so quickly around me. “We gotta get out of this place.”

Still clutching each other, we retrace the steps that I made when I first came in—past the cafeteria now teeming with diners munching happily on southern fried chicken, served with a heaping helping of mashed potatoes smothered in gravy, poured on by a smiling server standing behind the counter. Up the ramp, up the escalator, passing people intent on their spinning cherries and oranges and grapes and sevens. Many of these people look up as we pass by, and nod with a smile on their lips and a gleam in their eyes.

Lorie notices the looks we are getting as we hurriedly make our way to the exit and the street. “What's with these people, Ted?”

Smiling as I pick up the pace, “Nothing but winners here tonight, honey. Nothing but winners here tonight.” ▲

Stephanie is a relatively new writer who has begun to break into several small press magazines and anthologies. Her work has appeared in Northern Frights 3, 365 Scary Stories, After Hours, Scavenger's Newsletter and a few others.

Fifty stories straight down.
Broken gargoyles every-
where.
Lisa Perry peered over the
narrow ledge at the sheer
drop to Main Street and clutched the
brick behind her.

"I must be out of my mind!"

The wind that was barely a breeze at ground level ripped at the lapels of her trench coat, sending an icy tornado down her neck. Sparing a hand to snatch her lapels across her throat was simply not an option. Faced with the choice of being warm or ending up a smear on the asphalt below, she chose to bear the wind's assault.

"Some crazed group of fanatics decide to decimate all the gargoyles in the city, and they send me to figure it out! How the hell should I know what goes on in the mind of maniac?"

A rookie detective who wanted to play on the old boy's team couldn't be too picky about her assignments. They'd be laughing at her expense back at the station while she tried desperately not to smear herself all over Main Street.

"And Dad was afraid I'd get shot in some drug bust," she growled in disgust, inching along the narrow ledge. "Fat chance, that." But then Dad never wanted his little girl to be a cop.

In the end it was the curiosity that had been a life-long character flaw that drove her to the upper stories of the old skyscraper. Curiosity demanded she figure out how vandals had synchronized their attacks to wipe out every gargoyle in the city, even those that were accessible only by helicopter. Why gargoyles? And how had they managed to wreak so much destruction without being seen?

Curiosity mixed with a burning desire to get even with the culprits who were responsible for her worst assignment since joining the force.

"You missed one," she muttered smugly. Surely the vandals had realized that by now. Tonight they'd be back. Tonight she'd solve the case that had everyone else stumped.

The coming night cooled the damp air, leaving a sheen of moisture on the old brick. Gritting her teeth, Lisa inched along the ledge. Somehow, she was going to have to navigate that corner.

Flattening herself against the stone face, she thrust her foot around the And met an unexpected pool of water.

Feet flailing, she scrambled for purchase. Dislodged stone tumbled into silence. Main Street swirled far below her, a kaleidoscope of colored lights. Then the soles of her loafers skidded to a halt on the wet stone.

by Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

Night

Watch

Illustrated by Michael Apice

She never intended to be up here. Watching from the penthouse windows of Manufacturers' Tower should have offered the perfect surveillance. Except that the subject of said surveillance was blocked from view by a wall. If there'd been another way, she would have found it, Lisa thought darkly. Anticipated jeers from the guys back at the station prevented her from giving up. Digging her fingers into crevices in the brick, she inched forward.

Main Street swung sickeningly below as she jugged out around the corner. Lisa kept her eyes on her target, immensely relieved when she felt the smooth wall against her back. Dragging in a deep breath, she zeroed in on her subject, the gargoyle that guarded Manufacturers' Tower.

The last gargoyle left in the city.

Morning found the ruins of all the other gargoyles broken in heaps of rubble on window ledges, in the streets. Churches, old skyscrapers, ancient apartments buildings, all greeted the dawn stripped of their guardians. No eye-witnesses. No motive.

Similar reports poured in from other cities around the world.

An ambitious act of vandal-

even nature's joke. In addition to the high altitude, the cold and the damp, the sky obligingly added rain to the mix.

She squinted into the fading light for a better look at the subject of her investigation. A stunning piece of sculpture, the gargoyle that graced the Manufacturer's Tower. It had been the oldest, the biggest, the most elaborately carved. Now it simply the last.

Gothic in style, its wings spread out behind it, folded like the cloth of a velvet cloak. Lips crinkled in a permanent disgust, it glowered down over the city. Decades of weather and pollution took their toll. One of the veined wing tips was missing. So was the peak of one of its great teeth.

Billowing purple clouds cast the gargoyle in a peculiar half-light, blurring the fall of light and shadow. Sheets of rain made it ripple before her eyes, as if it flexed muscles long unused.

Lisa freed a hand to wipe away a lock of hair the wind plastered to her face. Big mistake. The ground spun dizzily beneath her. She gripped the brick wall with her nails and dragged in a deep breath.

Descending darkness and fog made it difficult even gargoyle twenty feet in front of her. The raincoat only marginally protected her from the rain. She sagged back against the brick and wondered what flaw of character made her so desperate to prove herself that she'd spend a Friday night plastered to the side of building fifty stories above the street in the pouring rain. Something cracked against the wind. A flag snapping in the turbulent air? She craned her neck to glance at the silhouette of the roof, yet finding no flag poles.

Stone grated against stone, nearly lost in the thunder. That sound again, like the flutter of great wings. Far too big for a bird. Lisa choked on a breath. Someone was out there on the ledge with her.

That's what you wanted. wasn't it, to catch someone in the act? But in her rash foray to the upper levels of the Manufacturer's Tower, she'd neglected to notice that the width of the ledge didn't allow her enough movement to draw her gun.



ism, but so far, no one had claimed responsibility for it, so it fell to the youngest and least experienced detective to find the gargoyle killer.

Thunder rumbled over head. It seemed she was the butt of

Straining her eyes to pierce the darkness, she made out only the shadowy form of the gargoyle still glaring down at the nighttime city. If she couldn't see the intruder, he probably couldn't see her, Lisa crept toward the gargoyle.

Below her, the rest of the city seemed to have sunk into a halo of gray fog. Only the peaks of several buildings pierced the mist, like mountains thrusting up through snow. Lightning arced, searing across her vision. She inched forward, afraid to stop now in case she lost her nerve completely.

Nails scraped against stone. In a split-second flash of lightning, Lisa saw the stone statue blink, then turn toward her.

She screamed, the fifty-storey plunge forgotten as her hand flew to her mouth. Her foot slid on the slick stone.

Suddenly there was only air where the brick had been. She pitched forward, hands clawing at columns of rain. Her stomach turned over at the sudden loss of gravity.

Then gravity reached out to drag her mercilessly downward.

A flap of leather wings. A giant shadow darkened the fog.

Claws pierced trench coat, sweater and skin. Her own hoarse scream echoed off the buildings around her.

"Carelesssss!" The sound of grating stone again, modulated to form words. Impossibly, there was brick beneath her feet again.

Cautiously, she reached out her hands and touched warm stone. Her eyes flew open.

Huge eyes of polished onyx gazed back at her.

Lisa shrank back against the wall. She gripped the rough brick to assure herself she was in fact back on the solid ledge and not a bloody smear against the tarmac below. Chest heaving, she gulped a breath of cold, wet air.

A snap of leather wings and a rustling of claws against the stone turned her reluctant attention to the being before her.

It towered above her, six feet, maybe more. What she'd mistaken for stone was rough skin, pebbled like gravel. Sitting back on its haunches now, it folded its great wings at its side.

The claws that gripped the ledge gleamed like knives in the darkness. Its massive sides heaved as it filled its lungs. Steam billowed from its jaws as it exhaled.

Obsidian eyes blinked. The statue hissed. "Carelesssss," it said again. "For one so fragile."

"You're real," she breathed. And immediately felt foolish.

Where ever the boundary between fact and fantasy lay, there was no mistaking the giant being before her, nor that it had just wrenched her back from a fifty-storey fall.

"Humanssss," it mused. "So arrogant."

"But how can you be alive? You're statues, carvings on the sides of buildings. No one's ever seen you move."

"We watch, we wait."

"For what?"

It shifted its bulk on the narrow ledge, tightened its wings against its body. "The Time of the Great Dying."

"Dying." Lisa crept closer, her terror assuaged by the promise of solving a mystery. "Are you telling me it wasn't vandalism, that those gargoyles fell from the buildings?"

Powerful jaws moved, another wisp of vapor curled from its lips. "The old mussst make room for the new."

"But why? Why are you dying?"

For a moment it did nothing more than stare at her with those black eyes that reflected the lights of the city in dark prisms.

It scuttled nearer until Lisa had no choice but to crane her neck to look up at it. "It is your race that is dying."

Lisa smothered the urge to back away. "Humans aren't dying. There are billions of us."

The gargoyle stretched, a show of its impressive wing span.

Settling back on the ledge, it regarded her solemnly. "Many more of us."

"Where? Your fellows are lying in heaps of rubble."

"The old mussst make way for the new," it said again. "For centuries we have watched. We have laid our eggs, and we have waited. It has come, the Time of the Great Dying. I am the last. By dawn, I too, will be gone."

A feeling of dread that had nothing to do with the threat of a fifty-storey fall made Lisa tighten her grip on the brick. "What do these eggs look like?"

The massive statue shifted, stretching out a clawed toe to indicate a gray pebble lying on the ledge.

"Rocks! Rocks are your eggs?" Lisa asked incredulously.

"Plain rocks? All rocks?" Then suddenly, she understood.

Indistinguishable from common rock. Her imagination supplied visions of gravel drives, gray stones that littered the shoulders of highways. Stone eggs, buried beneath gardens. Pebbles people kicked from the sidewalk. Quarries of gray stone.

No one would even believe her until it was too late.

A band of wan light broke through the band of gray cloud. In the events of the past few hours, she'd lost track of time.

The last gargoyle turned toward the light. For a moment it was frozen like the statue it was, its head turned toward the sun. It heaved a deep sigh.

And tumbled from the ledge.

Lisa watched it plunge toward the street, wings spread out behind it like a great arrow. The crash drifted up to her, deadened by the mist.

Perhaps there was still time, she thought, inching her way back toward the sanctuary to the building's interior. She'd find a way to make them listen.

A ray of gold freed itself from the cloud cover. Lisa turned her face into its warmth. A sharp crack dragged her attention downward to the pebble lying at her feet.

It rocked, bounced against the ledge. Another crack. The stone split.

Within the shell of rock, Lisa saw a tiny, gray beak. ▲

REVIEWS

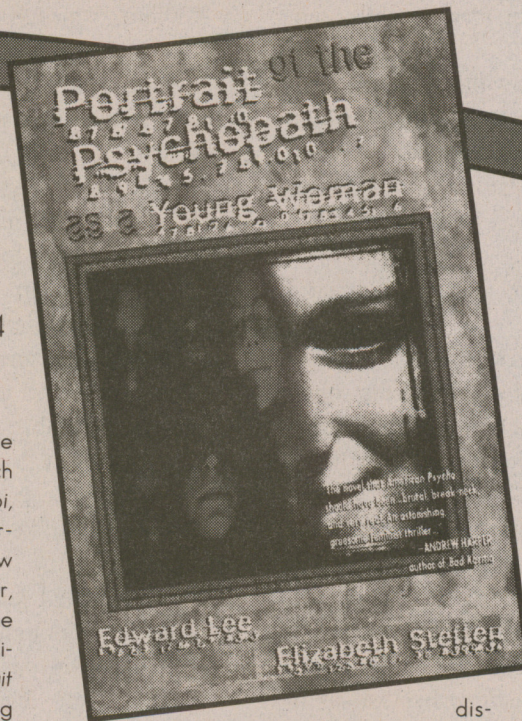
EDITED BY
TOM PICCIRILLI

PORTRAIT OF THE PSYCHOPATH AS A YOUNG WOMAN

by Edward Lee & Elizabeth Steffen.
Necro Publications - \$12.95
PO Box 540298 Orlando FL 32854
—Reviewed by Tom Piccirilli

With the same hard-driven action and grue we've come to expect from the author of such well-known novels as *The Bighead*, *Succubi*, and *Headers*, this latest entry to his ever-growing canon manages to delve into new terrifying areas. Along with his collaborator, law enforcement agent Elizabeth Steffen, the duo mine the intriguing themes of psychological profiling and childhood trauma in *Portrait of the Psychopath as a Young Woman* to bring a richness to character and a believability to fierce, horrifying crime rarely seen so undiluted before.

Kathleen Shade lives a quiet and unfulfilled life as an advice columnist for a feminist magazine, doing her best to put the woe of her past behind her. As a child she was sexually abused by an uncle, leaving her cold in her adult relationships and unable to commit to anyone. After she receives a note from a fan who turns out to be a serial killer, Kathleen suddenly finds herself a pawn of the police, an unlikely media star, and quite possibly a potential victim. Lieutenant Jeffrey Spence, a gay cop and psychological profiler with plenty of his own troubles, knows the killer is reacting to the 'nascent'—some symbolic correlation—that she feels for Kathleen Shade. Until Spence



discovers what it is, he decides to keep up an emotionally antagonistic and insulting attack on Kathleen in order to keep her off-balance and serve as his connection to a psychopath.

The beautiful killer picks up her macho, often cruel victims in bars, manages to incapacitate them, then glues their eyelids closed, sews their mouths shut, and punctures the ear drums, and continues to torture them in loathsome fashions with a variety of tools. We learn very little of the killer's motives or life outside of severe childhood abuse, and because she thinks in symbolic terms, with delusional visions involving blood and murder she talks to her dead mother and sees burning crosses in the window, she remains an enigma until the last puzzle pieces fall together in a crafty ending.

The internal, almost poetic monologue of the psychopath herself helps to paint not only her awful history, but also shows us how the focus of her life has shifted from reality to a fantasy world where she considers these vicious violations in terms of beauty.

In *Portrait of the Psychopath as a Young Woman* authors Lee and Steffen have managed to not only write a novel of horrific dread, but a story with well-developed characters and thought-provoking plot twists that will thoroughly disturb even while it completely fascinates.

THE BLONDE ON THE STREET CORNER

by David Goodis
Serpent's Tail - \$11.99
—Reviewed by Tom Piccirilli

A reprint from Serpent's Tail's 'Midnight Classics' line of David Goodis' noir story about a man torn between his shallow existence and the potential for something better. His loser friends, luckless family, and the heartless blonde from the title all hold sway over his bleak world until by chance comes a woman who, like him, yearns to find a better way of life. Nobody has ever quite been able to write of people caught up in their own inertia the way David Goodis was able to do. Although he made his career on such suspense novels as *Dark Passage*, *Street of No Return*, and *Down There* (Shoot the Piano Player) featuring cops and gangsters, *The Blonde on the Street Corner* offers a much more quiet and humane tale of slowly building personal pressures and the drive to better oneself or collapse completely.

KINGS OF THE HIGH FRONTIER

by Victor Koman

Bereshith Publishing/

Final Frontier Books - \$24.95

PO Box 2366

Centreville VA 20120

—Reviewed by Michael Laimo

Prometheus Award-winner Victor Koman combines great narrative skills and intricate characterizations and deftly weaves them amidst a masterful management of plot to create a piece of Science Fiction that is as memorable as some of the great classics, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, *Berserker*, and *2001*.

Kings of the High Frontier starts out on an Earth not quite unlike our own, in the not-too-distant future. We are immediately plunged into a variety of waters, probing a multitude of characters who are highly involved in a space-exploratory competition. We follow a group of NYU graduates who construct a space launch mechanism in a Bronx warehouse, a multi-billionaire who crafts an X-15 type jet that launches from a 747, a Russian army colonel who steals rocket parts from the UN, and a smuggler who attempts to build a space station in Earth's orbit. In addition to this cast, we are introduced to an assortment of NASA officials who duly investigate the efforts of these nonpublic enterprises.

What ensues is a highly realistic tale that utilizes historical events to gain believability, including an in-depth investigation of the Challenger accident and the detailing of the fire in the Apollo capsule. Koman has done his homework, to an extent that *Kings of the High Frontier* reads like a textbook on the world's space progress—an interesting one, too. Every theory is backed up with innumerable examples from true life science, as well as fictional segments that are too methodical to not believe as possible.

Koman has more than adequately harbored all the hopes and aspirations of space progress, deftly illustrating all the brilliance of its greatest endeavors while balancing the action with those enemies who try so hard to keep those efforts stymied. And, with the potential for the common man to seek outer space on his own, we find NASA's ultimate destruction inevitable. *Kings of the High Frontier* may amuse, alarm, or simply educate, but it will certainly entertain, giving the reader hope that the experiences within could come to pass, or may even actually be happening.

BONE WARS

by Brett Davis

Baen - \$5.99

—Reviewed by Michael Laimo

Brett Davis returns with his third novel *Bone Wars*, moving away from the satirical, fantastic elements of his first two novels *The Faery Convention* and *Hair of the Dog*. Here the author gravitates towards a successful mix of genres to create a fun journey through an alternative interpretation of American history.

It is the year 1876, and the place is Montana. Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope, two real-life paleontologists, once friendly acquaintances, are now in dire competition to retrieve dinosaur fossils from Montana's rich soil. Unfortunately, there is a scarce supply of the valuable bone, leading the two men to spy and play tricks on one another in an effort to gather their prizes. Frustration sets in for the two parties, as time is running out: winter is approaching and Sitting Bull is nearby, following his conquest at Little Big Horn.

With the assistance of a Sioux Indian, the two men discover a third party in the area, a stranger with equipment like they've never seen before—equipment that has enabled the digger to harvest nearly all the bones in the area. Marsh and Cope investigate and ultimately join forces to discover the secrets behind this mysterious paleontologist.

Davis bravely combines genres in *Bone Wars*, orchestrating a campy western scenario plotted with science-fictional gimmicks. His gamble works, and he succeeds to create an interesting story. His characters are believable, as he adequately envisions a picture perhaps not unlike the one during Marsh's and Cope's time. Their discomforts and passions are felt, so much so that the reader feels pity for these respectable yet somewhat pathetic achievers. This, in combination with his great command of the English language, provides a read that may interest any fan of genre fiction, but will most assuredly entertain those drawn towards stories of a western nature.

MURPHY'S LORE

by Patrick Thomas

Padwolf Publishing - \$6.99

Reviewed by Michael Laimo

Want to leave your life behind? Then follow me to Bulfinche's Pub. While sipping

the house brand of beer, you'll speak to John Murphy—he's the lone human, it seems. He'll undoubtedly entertain you along with his associates, a staff of legendary Greek gods whose powers are not what they used to be. Paddy Moran is there, he's the proprietor, and also a leprechaun, and knows of all those who frequent his establishment.

So you ask if you might fit in with this crowd? At one end of the bar is a clown in a wheelchair who has trouble mastering a game of tag. Father Mike is always sitting nearby to gather your confession or offer a few words of solace. Over there is a man wearing no socks who looks as though he's at death's door. And who are those two young children? Ask Eros or Demeter or Dionysus, they'll fill you in. Here's a vampire named Lucas Wilson who wears sunscreen 199—it makes traveling the streets by day a bit more tolerable. Each day you'll find something strange happening at this establishment of lore, and the clientele will never cease to amaze you as they tell their tales inside the dimly lit walls of Bulfinche's Pub.

EYES OF PREY

by Barry Hoffman

Gauntlet Publications

Deluxe Hardcover Edition \$38.00

309 Powell Road

Springfield PA 19064

Reviewed by Michael Laimo

Eyes of Prey is the second novel from Gauntlet Magazine editor Barry Hoffman, and a follow-up to his successful debut *Hungry Eyes*. Hoffman once again delves into the dark crime-infested streets of Philadelphia, re-visioning the vigilante saga that made *Hungry Eyes* so successful. The story explores the enigmatic dual psyche of Lysette, an exotic dancer who, while returning home from work, sees a mugging taking place on a subway train. She takes the law into her own hands, murdering the criminal in front of a crowd of witnesses who all band together and agree to cover up her crime. She eventually escapes into the night, frustrated with the system, an inner fury blooming. In combination with the haunting remembrances of her own family's murder, she is pushed over the edge and soon begins a string of vigilante-type crimes.

At once the city brims with excitement. We are introduced to a myriad of characters, all of whom have a point to make, and Hoffman makes sure the reader hears them. Many characters—victims, witnesses, police, Lysette herself—have coincidentally endured terrible tragedies in their lives. This consequently gives Hoffman even more to write about, and more POV's to introduce. Personal details and traumas abound, and although they are intriguing to read about, their excess slows the pace between more engaging moments. Shara Farris and Diedre Caffrey return from *Hungry Eyes* to play interesting but seemingly unnecessary roles, and although their appearances link the two books together, the rhythm of *Eyes of Prey* might have been steadier if all POV's remained solely within cop and criminal.

Hoffman is not an unseasoned author when it comes to innovating story-telling. *Eyes Of Prey* thrills at times, but the tale as a whole is something fans of his earlier novel might find too repetitive. Hoffman states in his afterword that when setting out to write *Eyes Of Prey*, he intended to create a sequel that can be enjoyed by someone who has not read *Hungry Eyes*. Indeed, this is a clue to the reader, as it may be the only way to fully revel in his second effort.

SORROW'S CROWN

by Tom Piccirilli

Write Way Publishing - \$21.95

10555 E. Dartmouth Suite #210,

Aurora CO 80014

—Reviewed by Adam Meyer

In *Sorrow's Crown*, the second book in the Felicity Grove series, Tom Piccirilli creates a vivid portrait of small town New York where nothing is what it seems, no one can be trusted, and the dead past isn't quite so dead after all. When the child-like graveyard caretaker Zebediah Crummler is found blood-spattered and standing over the body of Teddy Harnes, son of pitiless millionaire Theodore Harnes, police consider this an open-and-shut case. But is Crummler a cold-blooded killer or an innocent bystander? And is Teddy really dead, or has some unfortunate soul been sacrificed in his place? All we know for sure is that Jon Kendrick and his wheelchair-bound grandmother, Anna, are once again at the center of a mystery in the deceptively named town of Felicity Grove.



With Theodore Harnes using his considerable wealth and influence to keep Crummler—and a few other dark secrets—locked away in the Panecraft asylum, Jon tries to discover more about the mysterious Teddy. He's also dealing with domestic woes—his girlfriend, Katie, is pregnant, and he must decide between returning to his New York City bookstore or settling down in Felicity Grove. His grandmother, meanwhile, has begun keeping company with the elder Harnes, a man who's a part of Anna's own enigmatic past.

During the course of an investigation that will take Jon Kendrick from the Gothic shadows of Panecraft to the cold heart of the Harnes mansion, there is action, intrigue, and atmosphere to spare. Jon, the cynical but highly sensitive narrator, draws readers in with a combination of acerbic humor and shrewd observations, but ultimately it is his strong sense of morality which makes him so compelling. Anna, his partner in crime, is equally fascinating; with her own dark secrets coming to light, she becomes much more than just a kindly grandmother who brews tea and solves crimes.

Sorrow's Crown is an intelligent, finely-written novel that marks the continued emergence of Tom Piccirilli as one of the most unique voices in the mystery genre today. The descriptions are vivid, the cast of characters as real as anyone you're likely to meet, and the questions that remain leave you eager for a third novel in this promising series.

GOING POSTAL

ed. by Gerard Daniel Houarner

Space & Time - \$10.00

138 West 70th Street (4B)

New York, NY 10023-4468

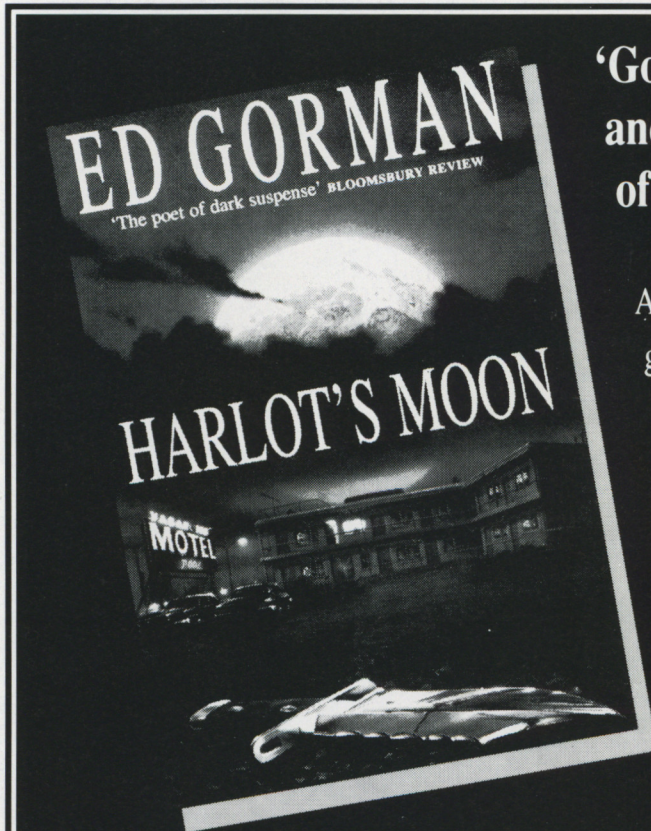
—Reviewed by Linda Addison

You might expect a collection of eighteen stories and one poem gathered under the title *Going Postal* to be filled with explosive tales of people pushed to the brink who go crazy and pick up a gun. Fortunately, Gerard Houarner's editorial vision for this book did not stop with the obvious entrapments, but included twisted, surprising moments of unraveling madness.

The opening story by Daniel Pearlman peeks into the dissolving world of someone who could be on any subway in any city, creating a milieu that is frightening in its normality; bookended here is the final dark tale which takes us on a hallucinatory spin into a terrifying future that could only have oozed out of Eliot Fintushel's fertile mind. The sixteen pieces in between deliver their own unique sharpness to the question of what drop-kicks someone over the edge.

The science fiction elements in stories by Robin Spriggs, John Rosenman and James Dorr vacillate from the near-future to highly strange alternate forecasts where humans still find no easy solution to emotional pressure. Stories by Bentley Little, Tom Piccirilli, Charlee Jacob, Don Webb, Melaniè Tem and Roy Post stir uncomfortable feelings of deeply repressed anger that won't be so quickly settled with gunfire. Here madness within madness gnaws and builds like a stinging itch in an unreachable place. Other pieces by Gordon Linzner, Andrew Tokash and J.A. Pollard take us on surrealistic rides that twist and turn the reader inside out. The poem by K.L. Hasell is the blood-red cherry on top of a towering dessert of entertainment which proves that a few well-placed words can invoke a colorful splash of emotion.

Don't skip the introduction by Houarner, which should be counted as a story because of its amusement value—not surprising from a writer of such well-honed skills an ability to mine lunacy. *Going Postal* contains unique and delicately unexpected ways people can lose control under daily duress, and you will be engrossed and touched by each piece. ▲

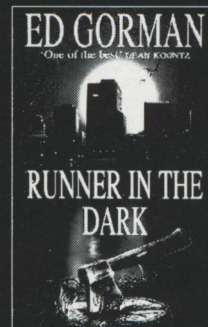
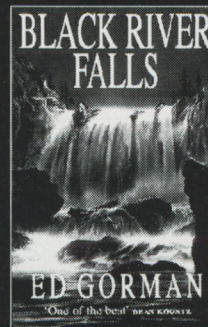
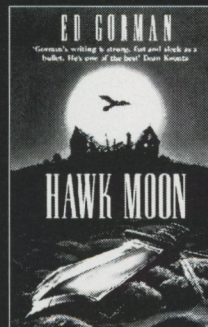
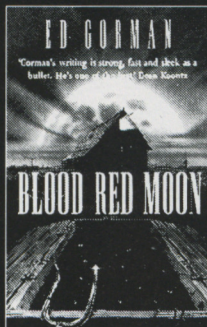


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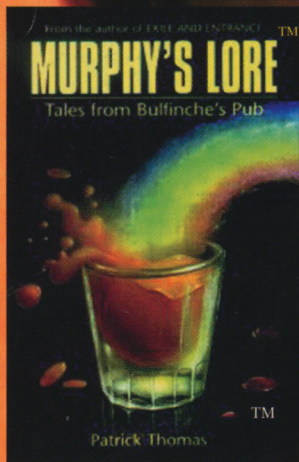
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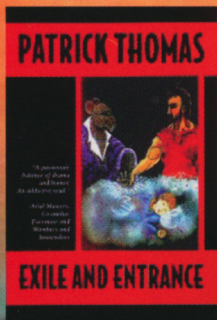
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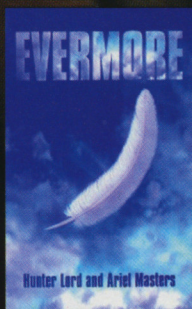
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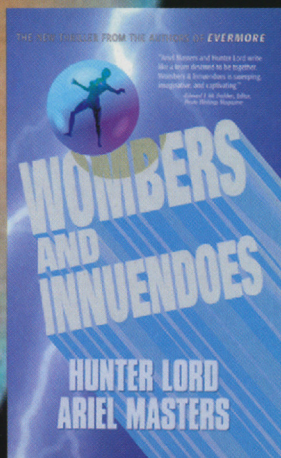
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Hunter Lord & Ariel Masters

**womb*ers(noun) 1: humanoid life forms cre-
ated by cloning; considered sub-human ser-
vants with no rights; typically divided by full
body color tatooning according to specialty: red
(sex); blue (police/military); green (menial);
orange (research);**

**in*nu*en*does(noun) 1: insinuations, hints; 2:
victims of the immune system destroying TADS
virus; must live in sterile environments (called
bubbles) or die, often from something as simple
as the common cold or flu;**

**TWO GROUPS OF VICTIMS BARRED
FROM A FULL LIFE: ONE BY BIRTH, THE
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CONTENT TO SECTION THEM OFF FROM
THE WHOLE AND MAKE A
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