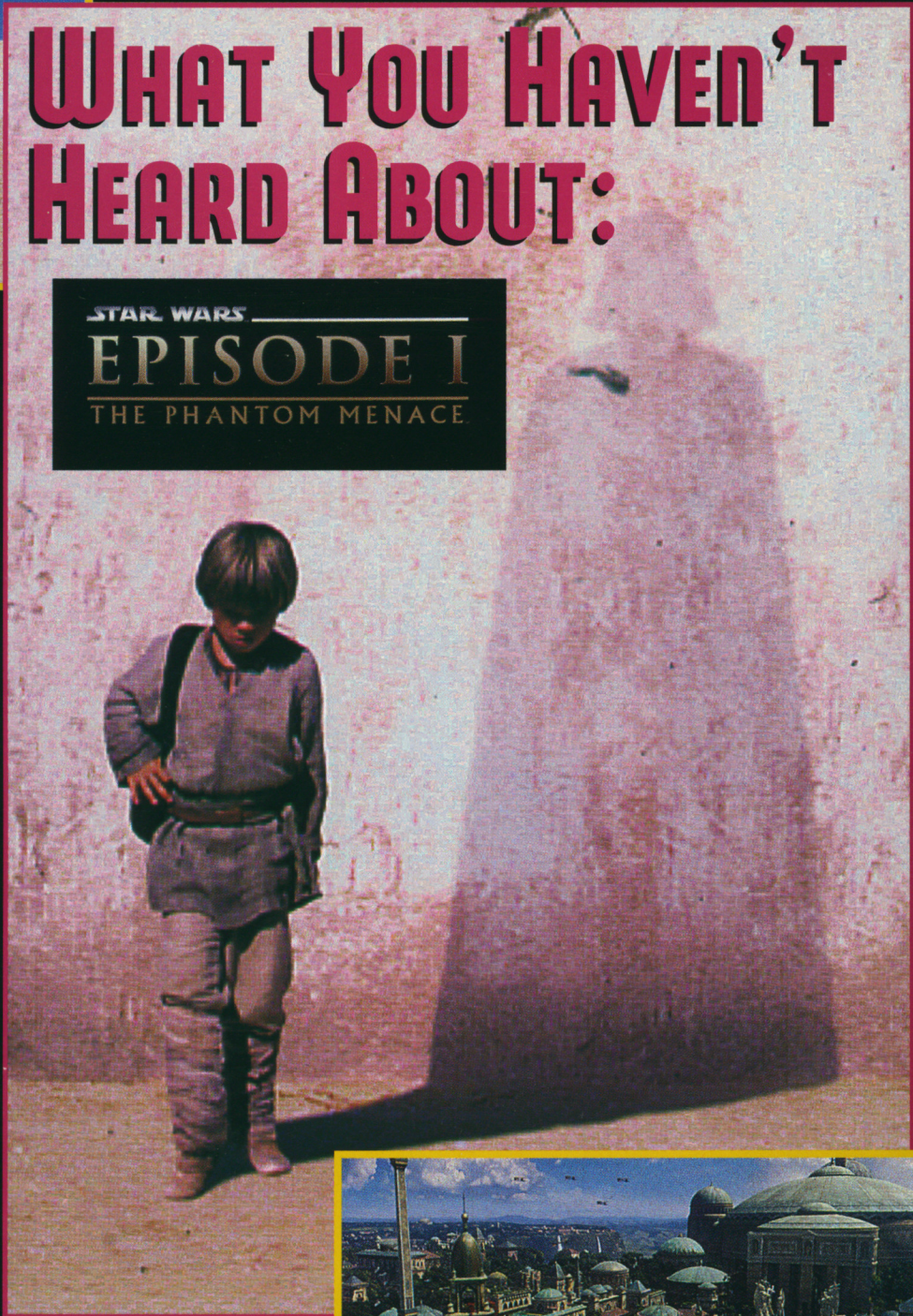
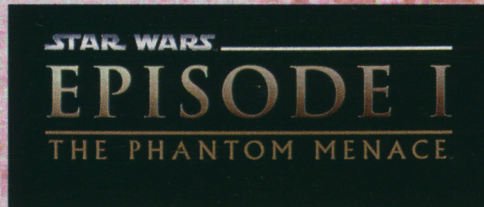


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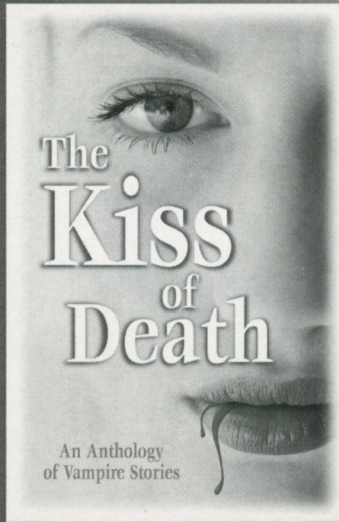
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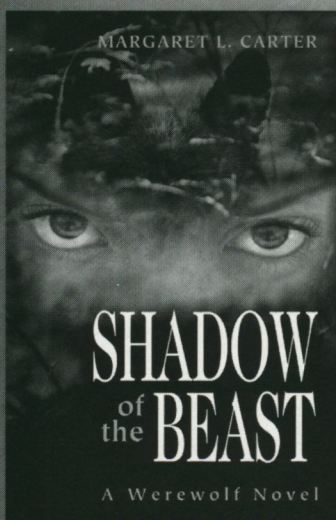


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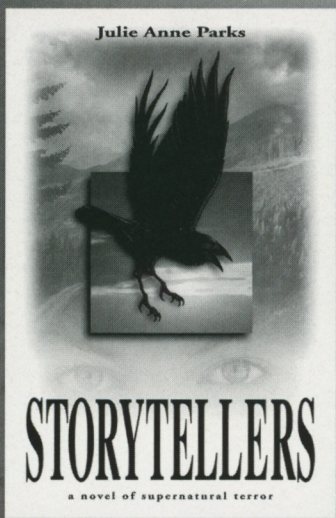


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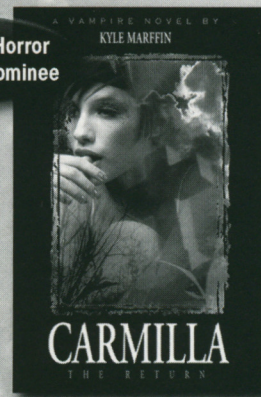
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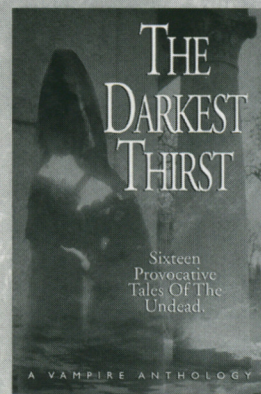


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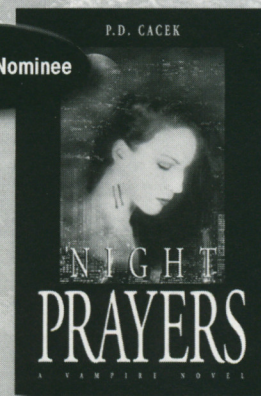
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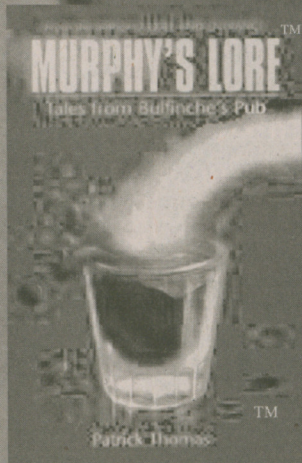
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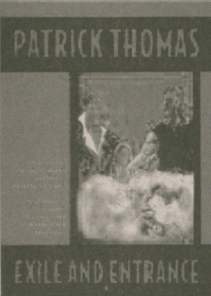
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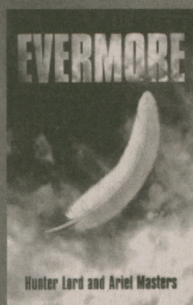
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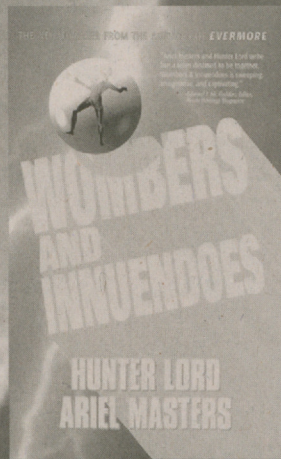
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ated by cloning; considered sub-human ser-
vants with no rights; typically divided by full
body color tattooing according to specialty: red
(sex); blue (police/military); green (menial);
orange (research);

innu*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
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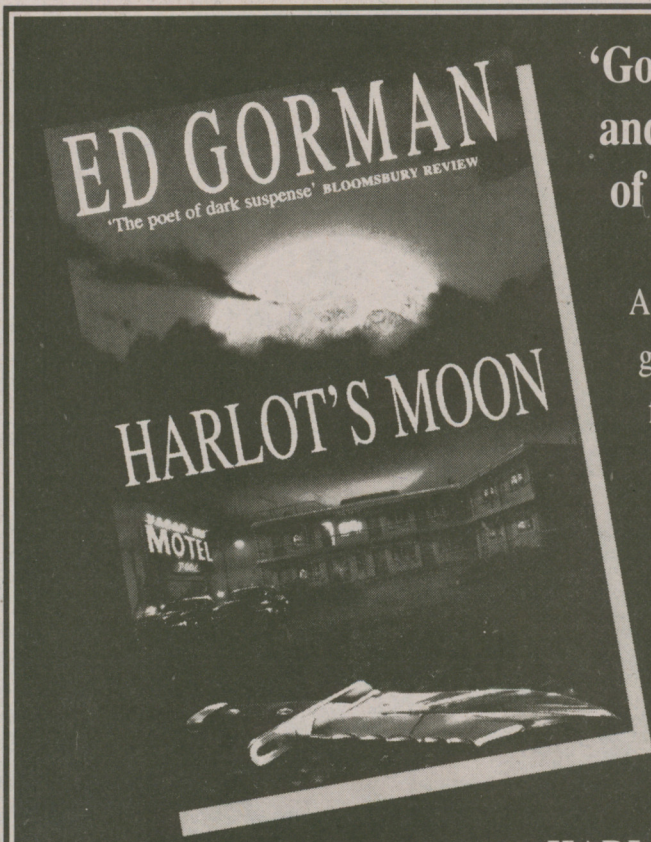


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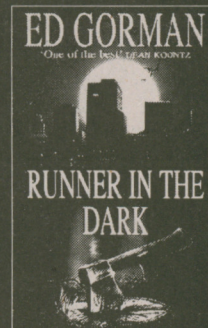
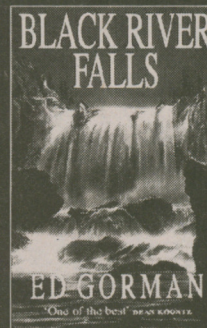
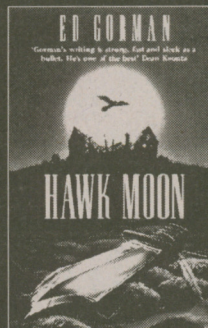
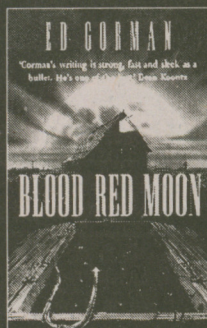


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From the Editor's Desk

First, it's my fault this issue is late. Warren (DNA Publications) has been moving forward at a wonderful pace. *PW* now has about 20% more subscribers since Warren took over six months ago...and so we get stronger. This issue could have been out on time, but I was late and due to advertising schedules (Yup, can you believe Warren and I now have to follow an advertising schedule...well excuse me) *PW*#18 is the Summer issue, not the Spring issue. I offer, however, a few good excuses: 1. May is my worst month at work. All these kids becoming adults and graduating. 2. Warm weather finds me veering to the best ocean break for some surf kayaking. 3. I had to layout this issue. Yeah, enough said. 4. And, yes, I was a little negligent.

I will not be late ever...I'll try harder.

I feel I must say something about *Star Wars*—yes, this issues cover was my idea. I wanted to like this movie so bad...but I'm going to say it, the words some of you can't bring yourselves to say, it sucked. Well, it was a major disappointment...it didn't totally suck. Like many, I can't totally rag on something that is such a memorable part of my past. So here are the things I thought were cool:

- The beginning. When the music came-up and the *Star Wars* logo flashed across the screen...it brought me back.

-More on page 4-

PIRATE WRITINGS

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction

FICTION

Long Ride Back by <i>Ed Gorman</i>	7
The Last of the Bad Forty-Seven by <i>Randy Michael Signor</i> ..	10
One Man's Castle by <i>J. Michael Major</i>	27
Krieger by <i>Frank O. Dodge</i>	37
Short-Short Section.....	46
-Tag by <i>David Kablack</i>	
-The Redemption of Tyler Jack by <i>John Weagly</i>	
-The End Justifies the Means by <i>Laura Elvin</i>	
-The Tempter In the Shadows by <i>Kevin Doyle</i>	
Stepping Out of the Chinese Room by <i>E. Jay O'Connell</i> .	53
Not For Thee The Glow by <i>Sarah A. Hoyt</i>	58

POETRY

Dark Garden by <i>Michelle Scalise</i>	9
Avenging Dream by <i>Linda Addison</i>	19
Flavor by <i>Marsha Gordon</i>	41

DEPARTMENTS

Interview with <i>Joe Lansdale</i> by <i>Trey Barker</i>	21
This Planet Sucks by <i>TRUTHXFREE</i>	34
Surreal World by <i>Kevin M. Carr</i>	42
Count Dreck by <i>Joseph Mayhew</i>	51
Reviews - Dead Man's Chest by <i>Steve Sawicki</i>	62

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- When R2D2 met C3P0. Call me a wimp, it moved me.
- Young Anakin. There were scenes that succeeded in making me shutter at what the innocence in the boy would become. George hit's you over the head with it, but it's a powerful message.
- Obi-wan Kenobi coming through at the end with a small promise of the future. I left saying, "OK, the next one might be good."
- You got to see, for about three minutes, what bad-asses the Jedi were.
- I had something to do Saturday night.
- The new sweet tarts were good.

That's about all that was good. Weren't the special effects good? No, there were to many of them. Weren't the actors great? No, they had no script. You didn't think Darth Maul was cool? Who is Darth Maul? You had to think Jar Jar Binks was funny, right? He was worse then a small boy piloting a star ship. You didn't cry when Qui-Gon Jinn was killed? I couldn't, even with an effort, have cared less. What makes you so special, everyone else liked it? I guess I want things the way they were... isn't that always the way?

Send me some letters. I have not gotten any cool mail and I'm starting to feel like I'm losing touch with you, the readers. Yell, tell me you love the magazine, tell me you want to invest \$20,000 in DNA Publications, tell me you believe the magazine should continue... come on, stroke me folks!

And as promised, yes, the word "hand" was edited from the Drew Carey Show. Do I need to explain why? It was so innocent and well written I was offended by the edit... here endith the lesson...

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ISSN 1073-7758

Publisher:

DNA Publications
 P.O. Box 2988
 Radford, VA 24143

Editorial Address:

Pirate Writings Magazine
 P.O. Box 329
 Brightwaters, NY 11718

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E-Mail Address

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WWW Site Address

<http://www.horror.net.com/pwmag.html>

Design & Layout

Fat Cat Design

P.O. Box 540298

Orlando, FL 32854-0298

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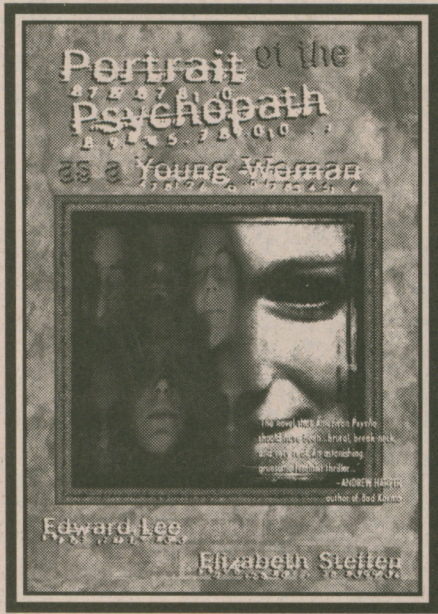
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Ed Gorman has been a PW supporter for sometime now. His stories have been published in PW numerous times—his tale Yesterday and the Day Before appeared in The Best of Pirate Writings. I have a new tale in inventory from Ed called The Broker which will appear later this year. Ed is a premier mystery author who has written scores of books; The First Lady, The Authumn Dead, Blood Moon, Hawk Moon, Black River Falls, A Cry of Shadows and many others.

LONG RIDE BACK

by Ed Gorman

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

Soon as I sneaked into his campsite, and kicked him in the leg so he'd jerk up from his blanket, I brought down the stock of my single-shot .40-90 Sharps and did some real damage to his teeth.

He was swearing and crying all the time I got him in handcuffs, spraying blood that looked black in the dawn flames of the fading campfire.

In the dewy grass, in the hard frosty cold of the September morning, the white birches just now starting to gleam in the early sunlight, I got the Kid's roan saddled and then went back for the

hick sheriff capturin' him all by hisself. What a hero."

This time I didn't ask him.

I leaned over and backhanded him so hard, he started to slide off his saddle. Through his pain and blood, he started calling me names again.

It went like that most of the morning, him starting up with his ugly tongue and me quieting him down with the back of my hand.

At least the countryside was pretty, autumn blazing on the hills surrounding this dusty valley, chickenhawks arcing against the soft blue sky.

Then he said, "You going' to be there when they hang me?"

I shrugged.

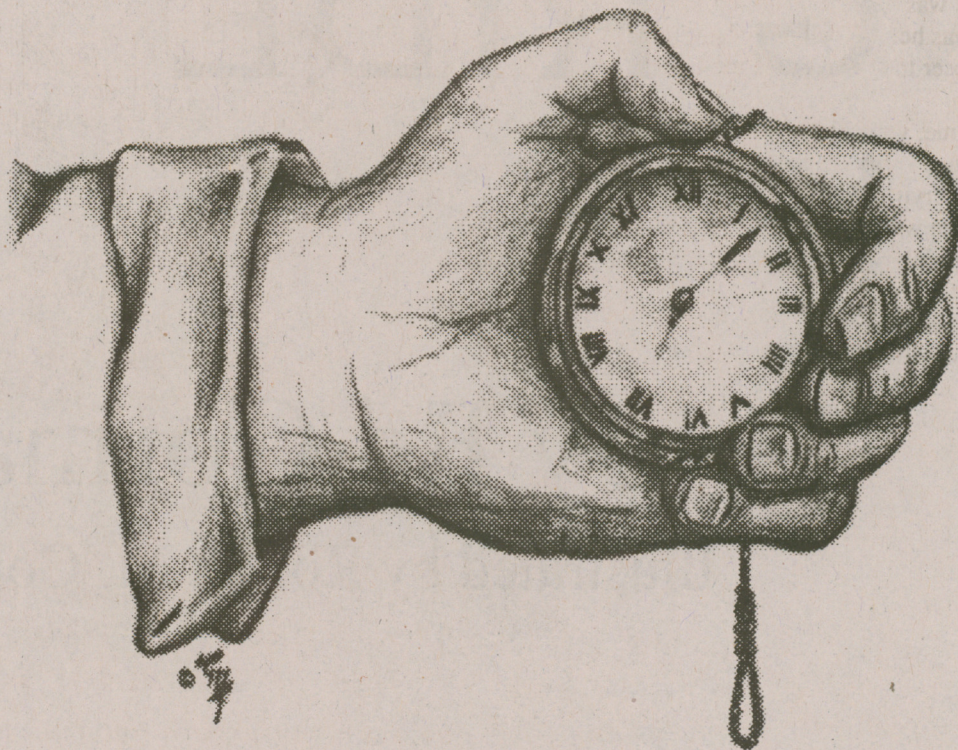
"When they put the rope around my neck and the hood over my face and give the nod to the hangman?"

I said nothing. I rode. Nice and steady. Nice and easy.

"Oh, you're a fine one, you are," the Kid said. "A fine one."

Around noon, the sun very high and hot, I stopped at a fast blue creek and gave the horses water and me and the Kid some jerky.

I ate mine. The Kid



Kid himself.

"I ain't scared of you," he said, talking around his busted teeth and bloody tongue.

"Well, that makes us even I ain't scared of you either."

I dragged him over to the horse, got him on the saddle, then took a two-foot piece of rawhide and lashed him to the horn.

"You sonofabitch," the Kid said. He said that a lot. Then I was up on my own saddle and we headed back to town. It was a long day's ride.

"They'll be braggin' about ya, I suppose over to the saloon, I mean," the Kid said a little later as we moved steadily along the stage road.

"I don't pay attention to stuff like that."

"How the big brave sheriff went out and captured the Kid all by his lonesome."

"Why don't you be quiet for a while."

"Yessir. All by his lonesome. And you know how many murder counts are on the Kid's head? Why, three of them in Nebraska alone. And two more right here in Kansas. Why, even the James Boys walked wide of the Kid—and then here's this

spit his out. Right in my face.

Then we were up and riding again.

"You sonofabitch." The Kid said. There was so much anger in him, it never seemed to wane at all.

I sighed. "There's nothing to say, Kid."

"There's plenty to say and you know it."

"In three years you killed six people, two of them women, and all so you could get yourself some easy money from banks. There's not one goddamned thing to add to that. Not one goddamned thing." Now it was me who was angry.

"You sonofabitch." He said, "I'm your son. Don't that mean anything?"

"Yeah, Karl, it means plenty. It means I had to watch your mother die a slow death of shame and heartbreak. And it means you put me in a position I didn't ask for—you shot a man in cold blood in my jurisdiction. So I had to come after you. I didn't want to—I prayed you'd be smart enough to get out of my territory before I found you. But you weren't smart at all. You figured I'd let you go." I looked down at the silver star on my leather vest. "But I couldn't, Karl, I just couldn't."

He started crying, then, and I wanted to say something or do something to comfort him but I didn't know what.

I just listened to the owls in the woods, and rode on, with my own son next to me in handcuffs, toward the town that a hanging judge named Coughlin visited seven times a year, a town where the citizens turned hangings into civic events, complete with parades and picnics after.

"You really gonna let 'em hang me, Pa?" Karl said after a while, still crying, and sounding young and scared now. "You really gonna let 'em hang me?"

I didn't say anything. There was just the southing wind.

"Ma would let me go if she was here. You know she would."

I just rode on, closer, ever closer to town. Three more hours. To make my mind up to be sure.

"Pa, you can't let 'em hang me, you can't". He was crying again.

And then I realized that I was crying too as we rode on closer and closer and closer to where men with singing saws and blunt hard hammers and silver shining nails waited for another life to place on the altar of the scaffold.

"You gotta let me go, Pa, you just gotta," Karl said.

Three more hours and one way or another, it would all be over. Maybe I would change my mind, maybe not.

We rode on toward the dusty autumn hills.

PW

DARK GARDEN

Moonlight slow-motion surrenders
Gasping in tortured fragrance and ecstasy
Long before its ancient vows
Can gold-flake the shadow's end
Suffering sweet as a child's lullaby
Broken in the agony of your dark garden
Aphrodite's mangled in a lush baby's breath
Of madness twined though my bleeding thigh
Swallowing sanctity like unending torment;
Casting poison lip-stained in red wine
And choking in a hush agile whisper
Depravity creeps the blackened earth;
Orchids thrive in midnight's soil
And profuse grows the thorns with no rose.

- Michelle Scalise



"I've been waiting for you!"

You have this fantasy, I know. You'd like to escape the mundane world of regimented work weeks, pre packaged vacations, overbearing in-laws and government restrictions. You dream of distant worlds of high adventure where naked women satisfy your every desire. Come to my world. I'll make your fantasy real!"

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TANDRA
Double Exposure

A graphic album from Hanthercraft

Randy hails from the windy city of Chicago. He has published widely in the small press and holds an English degree from the University of Kansas (where he studied under James Gunn) and an MFA from Bowling Green State University of Ohio.

The Last of the Bad Forty- Seven

By Randy Michael Signor
Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

I am the last of the bad forty-seven. Samurai without a home. Ronin. The last of the doomed, the last with half a chance to dodge craps and avenge the Shogun's chicken-hearted murder of our master, Lord Oto, the Shogun's own brother.

But I'm in some kind of lousy mess, up against the kind of odds that makes a Yokohoma bookie drool into his tea.

My back's against the

wall, my sword in one hand, my guts in the other, my best girl ready to die for me.

It's been one of those days.

Except this screwed-up day started twenty-five years ago. Let me tell you about it, I've got a couple minutes before they're all used up.

Maybe you've heard our story. Rumors swirl, tales get told. How twenty-five years ago Lord Oto was murdered in his sleep by assassins.

How his faithful samurai were then banished from the royal castle in Osaka, doomed to wander masterless, to beg for work, for shelter and food.

One day we're the court favorites, the next we're bums on the street. The fates. Bad karma to the max.

But we were no run-of-the-mill ronin. We knew the truth. We, the loyal forty-seven, vowed righteous revenge. We wouldn't be getting much of a job reference, letting our lord get his intes-



tines handed to him like that. Our honor was at stake.

That's how our legend started, in blood. But sometimes a legend is just a lie that gets good press. And we've had some mixed reviews over the last quarter century. Some good years, a whole lot of bad years.

Our legend came at a steep cost. Most ronin just wander off, unhappy about their new status, but resigned to it. More of that stupid karma stuff. But our youthful stubbornness wouldn't let us accept our fate quite so easily. The whole thing just rubbed us the wrong damn way. Our vow, which we swore publicly, earned us the Shogun's hatred and fear. Soon we each carried a price, premium rates paid in gold for our heads, delivered in a wicker basket to the royal castle. Discounted if the head was too badly damaged.

The last quarter century was one long bad dream. At night, when I shut my eyes, it isn't visions of sugar plums I see; it's all-nighters crammed with black shadowed images, sweaty fear, slink dancing through fields of razor-sharp bamboo, days spent sleeping in shit holes or wrapped around some scaly branch forty feet up some rotted-out tree, working the kinds of jobs not even a smelly, round-eyed barbarian would take. Maintaining a low profile.

Twenty-five years of long, restless, not-getting-any nights. Makes for deeply cranky behavior.

And while I'm scooting around in the shadows, ducking in and out of one dump after another, the Shogun's pinhead soldiers sat in taverns and knocked back sake and root beer and made bad jokes about the once-honored samurai they'd killed. Make that murdered, and most likely in their sleep. None of those skinny bundles of rags could cut the stuffing out of a practice dummy, even if the dummy was tied down, diagrammed, and labeled with instructions: cut along the dotted line.

One thing kept us going: The image in our mind of the punk Shogun's fat head on a pole in the central courtyard in Osaka.

But year by year, season by season, we died. And it wasn't any flu epidemic, either, unless you call knives and swords and spears a form of severe chest cold.

One brother froze in a rice field working as a simple farmer. Don't ask. He clearly screwed the pooch one way or another, but that isn't the point; he wouldn't be out there, turning six shades of ice blue, teeth chattering like a crazed monkey, if we hadn't been hunted men, had better alternatives.

Another was drawn into an elaborate trap and ambushed by a troop of Royal horsemen. At least one hundred, maybe more. I heard he killed thirty or so before dying under the blade himself. But he fought to the very end, fought back with no legs, one arm gone, and took plenty of those weasels with him. That's legendary.

Another was betrayed by his live-in girlfriend, who, it turned out, was pregnant, by the region's garrison commander. She snitched him out for maternity benefits. Poor guy got screwed every which way. He never did have any luck with women, except the bad kind. One night she slipped a dagger into his side. The garrison commander's minions then swarmed into the sleeping room and reduced them both to stew meat. At least she got her just desserts.

Me, I caught wind of all this and split, smuggled myself out on a boat, and sailed away, hid out in China the whole time. Sneaked around little fishing villages, picked up some bad Chinese habits, did what I had to do to get by. Scrounged, like I said.

And all the while I kept my ears open. The grapevine, even half a continent away, carried stories about each brother samurai's death. Our number was getting smaller all the time, our odds longer.

But my commitment never wavered: I would kill the murdering Shogun all by myself it came down to that.

I dreamed about it, all the ways I could kill him: Chop him up into sushi and feed him to his whores; make him swallow a

couple gallons of fire ants; tie him up naked in a room with a hundred feral cats and slather him in a honey and catnip mixture.

I noticed a certain food theme. It was a long, hungry twenty-five years.

It was something to do, all those years, hiding under rocks, up in trees, in a strange country, think up things. Had some sick thoughts, some unmentionable ideas. I could hardly wait to implement them.

Sometimes, at night, I worried about my soul. Knew it wasn't good karma to treasure these thoughts the way I did. But boredom and anger and bitterness make a powerful, demented magic, and it kept me in focus.

What else was I trained to do? Raise rabbits? Sell rugs? Open a restaurant?

The Ferry

A rumor came down the pike. The kind of rumor I'd been waiting for. I was, at the time, on the southeast coast of China, working as an impoverished fisherman's go-fer. Made me so far down on the pole even the house pets had more status. Ate better, too.

So when I heard the news, I didn't have a crisis of conscience. My career had advanced as far as it would go in that profession. I handed over my fish knife and was out of sight before the fisherman had a good grip on it.

From China I hitched a ride on another boat—read self-smuggled, again—and sneaked back into Japan on a cloudless night at the beginning of spring.

I had to get from where I'd landed to the River Providence where I last heard a brother samurai worked as a stonemason. Probably kept him in shape, got some nifty tools.

It was rumored that he was in line for some government work, a patch job at the castle in Osaka. We were to convene at the mason's hideout, sign on as his work crew. I had no idea how many of us were left; I admit to having lost count of our dead.

That night I dreamed. I dipped the Shogun into a vat of plaster, then hauled him out, let him dry into a round, lumpy statue the pigeons could all take dumps on.

I awoke happy and ready to roll.

During most of my trip I traveled freely along the back roads, through villages, staying away from the major trafficways and populated areas where I might be recognized. You never knew who still knew what. The shogun had spies everywhere. Paranoia was my friend. I skirted cities at night, cutting across the surrounding fields. I was sneaky. It was one of the first things they taught you in samurai school, stealth.

I made amazing progress. I was a man possessed. I walked nights, jogged days, slept rarely. I saw, finally, an end to it all.

Then I came to a great river, the River of Rose Petals. I have no idea where these names come from. Some brain-dead court poet with more ink than sense.

This was one big, ugly river. Stopped me cold.

And the only way across the River of Rose Petals in the spring was by ferry, and that meant sharing the ferry with a crowd, very possibly with government punks, chicken-livered soldiers, tax thieves, others who could turn me in or expose me.

I thought, Later for this, I'll go some other way. But, natch, with the spring rains there was no other way. It was the ferry or nothing.

Nothing had a certain appeal, looking at the river, the waiting crowd, but I really had no choice.

The spring rains, always heavy, were that year the worst in the memory of even the oldest. The river tumbled and roiled high in its banks. At that time of year, the River of Rose Petals was often called the River of Fat Peasants because of all the bod-

ies that floated by. I stood on the banks and counted five or six bloated farmers and urchin types just in the time it took to drop a dump there. It was karma that fools and dumb animals drowned in spring rivers. All kinds of other debris—limbs, whole trees, parts of shacks, furniture, livestock—shot by at an incredible fucking speed, too quickly to identify half the time, let alone rescue.

I did wonder how stupid you had to be to end up in the river in the first place. Guess that's why they were peasants, I told myself.

I dressed myself as a simple-minded farmer since I was in a region known for its produce, and farmers, like flies, were abundant. Another more or less wouldn't be noticed. My clothing was soiled, I smelled—plenty of cow dung along the roadside—I was decently tanned—true enough, my life on the lam aided my efforts to hide among the rabble; I was dark and weathered and aged beyond my true years. I even wore a floppy hat, hiding my face. I felt safe as a single turd in a field of fertilizer.

Shortly after the dawn had settled into a bright yellow-orange, I left my resting place—a warm stack of fresh hay—and rejoined the road toward the ferry landing. I could have used some strong green tea, give my heart a wake-up jolt, but I'd gotten almost used to drawing my strength from the fiery sunrises, which so far, at least, were still free. Just the right price for an out of work ronin.

The ferry itself was little more than a flat barge hooked to a fat hemp rope suspended over the river. A couple of squat peasants propelled the barge with long stout poles. As many crowded board as could, but even so it held barely a dozen, and those along the outside had only a single rope railing of sorts to keep them aboard as the ferry tossed and rolled during the crossing.

This was going to be downright sporty. Maybe I was looking at the answer to my question about the source of the drowned peasants. Something to think about.

To add to the mix, the occasional log or massive tree or bloated peasant made navigating a matter of timing and luck and karma.

I considered the karma of two peasants whose career was transporting farmers and livestock across swollen rivers. I decided it was not such a good idea to consider this very long; only unhappiness would result.

While I considered the odds of a safe trip, I watched the crossing a few times. And the action on the river bank. A warrior is prepared. Besides the crowd wanting to use the ferry, quite a thriving collection of food booths and small inns of sorts had sprung up, more fruit of spring. I could get drunk, gamble, get laid, borrow money, find work, obtain temporary lodging and food. The more I watched, the better the place looked. I could stay there, settle in, die a fat and happy old man. Sure. I was pretty confident I was right about the dying part. Where there was this much action, there would be thieves, con men, whores, and, finally, police.

And the police worked for you-know-who.

Few soldiers were around this day, I remember that clearly, and how lucky I felt. A few oxen and carts. Farmers, some with their noisy families, most alone or in small groups of twos or threes. Most kept to themselves. Farmers were, by nature, loners.

"Want a date, big guy? Looking for a good time? My fingers are supple."

I turned when I heard the voice, expecting to see one of the worn and pathetic street sluts that haunted these ferryside rest areas. A swift knock on the head would send her along, but I was stopped when I saw the voice's source. Although I did not know this babe, the instant I saw her eyes and the way she stood, I knew that she knew a lot more than what to do with her fingers. And since I had clearly whirled around to smack somebody, and had not, she knew that I knew. But only she knew if she was my friend or one of my many enemies. I could hope.

"Sure," I said. "I'd welcome such talented company while I wait."

"Oh, you have no idea of my talents, big guy."

"I have an overactive imagination," I said.

She tilted her head and one corner of her mouth mirrored the angle. It was not quite a smile, but it was something to see.

"I'm putting together some interesting ideas right now, in fact," I said.

"What do you see?"

"Those hands," I said. "You ask me, they look a little too supple, maybe even a little dangerous. Am I getting warm?"

I did my best to make my mouth pull off the same funny angle. What's a little fun among friends.

"Close," she said. There wasn't a lot of humor in her voice. Maybe my charm had gotten as dusty as my clothing.

"Maybe we should talk somewhere more private, more out of the way," she said.

"I bet," I said. "Find a nice dark alley? Go behind some stink-hut?"

"A bar. A drink. Some talk, that's all," she said. "I promise to keep my hands to myself."

"Darn," I said. "Did I say the wrong thing?"

She was taller than average, but not heavy boned; in fact, if I hadn't seen what I'd seen, I could have been convinced that she was brought up in court. Perhaps she had been, although it was rare for any woman to be given any martial arts training at all, and a lady of the court, well, up to now it'd been unheard of. One thing, if she was samurai then she deserved my respect, and, by rights I should confess to her my ronin status since talking to me as an equal could shame her, and then, of course, she would be compelled to kill me.

This was making my head hurt. I only wanted to get across the river and join my friends in Osaka. Okay, getting laid was an idea too.

"You're a little wound up," she said. "You've got nothing to worry about from me. You've got my word, Gon-san."

My name. If I hadn't been on-guard before, I sure as hellfire was now.

She flashed a grin, winked, and pivoted away, her left hand trailing like a dancer's, briefly brushing my arm with her long fingers. I understood. I followed.

I had no idea who she was, and many questions buzzed inside my head, but she had not so far threatened me, and so I followed her along the street, although it was in fact no more than a dirt—or mud—path grown gradually wider with traffic.

She led me through groups of farmers, peasants, wily looking merchants, gamblers, no accounts, thieves. We wove our way along increasingly narrow paths, and I had the sensation of getting both away from something and deeper into it.

She moved economically and powerfully. I watched her cut and dart, all under control, balanced, ready to spring elsewhere at the slightest notice. Few samurai I'd known and fought with moved so well. Nice butt, too.

She cut abruptly right, into a sad variation of the many tent-like taverns and brothels and gambling dens that comprised an outer ring surrounding the main core of boarding hostels, eating placed, and produce merchants.

We walked to the back and sat down, after jostling for the seats—neither one of us wanted to sit with our back to the entrance, so we compromised; we each sat against the canvas wall, facing the entrance. We looked at each other out of the corners of our eyes, our heads pointed toward the doorway, some distance away.

We were brought a large bottle of beer and two drinking mugs. She didn't seem surprised; maybe they knew her here. Maybe

something else was going on.

"It's taken care of," she said. "My treat."

I nodded my head once, held my tongue.

"We had to get away from the river," she said. "The Shogun's spies are everywhere. They don't all wear signs around their necks, Gon-san. The government has spent an outrageous sum for knowledge of your whereabouts with a promise of twice again more when you are captured. Or killed."

I must have looked puzzled.

"What do you think, that you heard about the work in the castle, all the way in China, and no one here did?" Her voice was close to scolding.

I felt stupid and old. I had been too hungry for revenge to believe out network had held up over the years.

Her face softened. She lowered her eyes, very briefly, then raised them, looked toward the doorway, then to me.

"Your friend, the stonemason, is dead," she said gently. "He was found by his wife with about a thousand arrows in him. I'm sorry."

"She sure she didn't just stumble onto a porcupine," I said. "That's overkill."

"Yes," she said. "I think it qualifies as a message."

"Like the last twenty-five freaking years were, what, greeting cards?" My voice rose. A couple new ways to kill the Shogun came to mind. Not easy when that's all you've thought about for all those years. Shows what renewed focus and proximity can do.

"How long were you there, hanging around the ferry, before I spoke to you?" she said.

"How long did you watch me?"

"When I got there, you were already there," she said. "An hour. Maybe more."

I looked around the tent, because of its hidden depth, larger than it looked from the front. Where we sat in the back was cast in dark shadow, somewhat because the doorway was so far away, but also because the tent's roof sagged badly. I'm sure that from the front all that could be seen of us would be our legs. Possibly, because of the dark, not even that. It was an excellent place to talk.

"Since about eight at the landing," I said.

"I'm afraid I found you too late," she said. "A snitch probably saw you. You're in a pinch, Gon-san."

My simple arrogance stunned me. On the lookout for professionals—soldiers, government officials, hired thugs, court spies—I'd overlooked the common snitch. I had no idea I was so well-known. Was there a description? A drawing? How was I identified? And who was this babe, who knew so much, who seemed sent to help?

"Two questions, please," I said. "Maybe three."

She nodded, but her eyes held caution.

"Who are you, and how did you know my name?"

"How many is that?"

"Two."

"You can count," she said. "There's hope after all."

I guess I'd deserved that but I gave her a look to let her know I didn't much like it.

"I know your name because my father told me."

That changed my look. I reeled through the faces of the other forty-six, matching what I remembered with what I saw before me.

"It's my sworn duty to keep an eye on you and help any way that I can."

Her stature, her cool, measuring eyes, and the way she moved started to click into place. I understood now what I had merely sensed earlier—the way she wove through the crowd, the way she set herself—I recognized something in her. The lessons that as a young man I'd absorbed like a sea sponge, the ones that had

made me what I am, that so thoroughly altered everything about me that it marked me forever: a student of the great Shi Ru.

But Shi Ru was dead, and had been from the earliest days. I knew because I'd been there, caught in the same ambush where he'd died, though before the legendary swordsman and boxer fell, he'd killed or maimed more than three dozen of the Shogun's mercenaries. Shi Ru had covered our escape with his sacrifice. We'd all seen his massive wounds. He was our best, and the first of us to die.

Who was this woman, then? Her every movement embodied Shi Ru's style. One solution was that she was Shi Ru's student, but since she was too young for that, she must then be a student of a student.

It came to me.

"You are Big Head's daughter," I said. "Damn, I can see that now."

He didn't really have a big head; he'd earned his nickname because he constantly yapped about his big plans for himself. But it was all bluster—it was clear to all of us that his first loyalty was to his master and then to his companions.

"And he is dead," I said quietly. His death was one of those I hadn't known about for sure.

"Yes, my honorable father, your old friend, was killed by ninja hired by the Shogun, that dishonorable son-of-a-dog."

"How was he discovered?"

"Who knows for sure," she said. "I believe that he was betrayed by someone he trusted. He was very careful, and few knew his history, and none, as far as I knew, knew where we lived."

Big Head's consort—they never married—had died in childbirth and he had raised the daughter himself. I had not seen him since before he went into hiding as a peasant farmer in a remote western village. That he had died at the hands of ninja saddened and infuriated me. Skilled beyond earthly belief, the ninja was still nothing more than an assassin who killed without a thought to honor. I had no doubts Big Head had been killed in his sleep or poisoned or shot in the back with an arrow. Ninja are no more than back-stabbers and sneak-thieves of souls.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I have missed him many times."

She nodded her head curtly.

"I have another question," I said.

She nodded.

"How many of us are left? Of the forty-seven?"

She turned her head and looked at me square on.

"You are the last," she said, her voice even quieter, but her eyes were locked on mine.

"Shit," I said. A mix of emotions raged in me. A confirmation of what I feared, renewed anger over the deaths of so many good men, frustration over our failed efforts. I felt absolutely alone. I guess I was.

"The last," she said. "And me."

I nodded. She looked back toward the entrance. Her expression had hardened.

"So, got any good ideas? It looks like I stumbled into a trap," I said.

"The interesting thing is, I'm not sure it's your trap," she said, turning her head briefly to catch my eye.

"Meaning what?"

"There's something going on behind the scenes," she said. "One of your lord's old friends and allies, Taki-san, has finally grown tired of the Shogun's bumbling and corruption. It's rumored he's making plans for war. The Shogun is said to be frightened enough to go into hiding. And of course his agents have been sent into the countryside to search out his enemies. The Shogun is also said to be using ninja again. That's nothing to take lightly. You can hire them, but you can never fully control

them. They're trouble all the way around.

"There's much turmoil. The cities are abuzz with danger. Anything is possible."

"So maybe we can use this to our advantage, a peasant farmer and his daughter returning from market. We might get across the river after all," I said. I felt better already. A bad day for the Shogun was a good day for me.

"I think, if we are questioned, that I am your new wife," she said. "We look nothing alike and as a new wife you cannot be expected to know much about me. Also, there is no obvious reason for a man to travel with a lowly daughter. Daughters should be home, working."

We each stole a glance toward the other, not wanting to take our eyes for long away from the doorway. Things did seem a little more urgent than they had even thirty minutes before. I tried to remember something I'd heard about Big Head's woman, this woman's mother. Something odd.

Her head cocked one side toward the entrance. "The ferry is returning."

I focused my hearing on the background hum against which I usually tried to isolate and identify more immediately threatening noises; now I tried to hear the hum.

"This way," she said. She lead the way into the far corner and pulled aside what I first thought was a fold and we exited into a kind of alleyway zig-zagging between the tent village down the slope and to an area near the landing.

Along the way she stopped briefly to smear dog shit on her pants and dirty her face and hands. She also seemed to disappear inside her clothing, grow smaller, more frail; soon she fell behind me a step, dropped her head, held her hands together in front and started to walk in more of

a shuffle. My new wife. Possibilities, I thought.

As though she'd read my mind, she gave me a little push in the back.

"You are walking too proudly," she said. "Be more humble. You are a poor, worthless farmer."

"Damn straight," I said, slowing my step, stooping my shoulders, dipping my head.

"Better?"

"Much," she said, a slight lilt in her voice. "It suits you." We came out of the alley about forty feet upstream of the landing. We joined the group, mostly farmers—so far no livestock—and stood so that our backs were to the water and we could keep an eye on the road in both directions and the waiting area.

Everything looked normal enough. I saw no soldiers nor others who stood out as agents of the Shogun. Most of these people were small-framed, underfed, and bent from their work, certainly not fit, healthy samurai or stinking ninja, although I

have heard the stories about their magical abilities to transform themselves or disappear or fly, other nonsense. Men on this earth do not fly nor disappear nor turn themselves into what they are not. Except when they lie to their wives.

The returning ferry rolled up to the dock, and two quick boys hopped off and tied the crude raft tight to its mooring. Its load of passengers and livestock, two think cows and three underweight sheep, trudged off, splitting right and left, though a few wandered into the tents.

We moved forward. I paid our fare, and we boarded the ferry, finding a place as much in the middle as possible. I did not want to be the first off on the other side. I wanted the crowd cover to observe what awaited us.

The ferry filled rapidly, but, this trip, no animals, unless you counted the rooster one farmer held in his shirt.

My wife stood to my side, her eyes steadfastly aimed downward. As crowded as the ferry was, we were given a generous amount of room, no doubt attributable to our sweet odor, which was the point. She continued to impress me with her skills.

The ride was uneventful and took about three-quarters of an hour. We did not talk but I was aware of her standing just off to one side, her face aimed at the deck. She had the wife thing down pretty good.

As we closed on the opposite landing, I saw that this side was notably different from the one we'd left. There was no tent village. In fact, with the exception of a small shack, which probably belonged to the ferryman, there were no public buildings.

And then I realized that the half-dozen men milling around near the landing had, as we slid the

last few yards, arranged themselves in a fan cupping the landing area, not the usual alignment for paying and boarding. And none of them had farmed in his life. They looked fit and not a one could make a smile with both hands and a mirror.

"Is this where you tell me that these are your guys," I said.

"It would be," she said, "if they were mine."

"I don't suppose they're here to greet one of the other passengers," I said.

Although we'd looked the other passengers over when they'd boarded, we each quickly scanned the faces once again. Guy can hope. They didn't look any less like farmers than they had the first time.

"Plan?" I said.

"Be a good idea."

The other passengers by this time sensed that something was amiss. There was no doubt that whatever awaited our docking, it was not routine, and in today's political climate who knew what



danger these six men represented. Everyone looked at everyone else, hoping to see a set of eyes that betrayed some kind of guilt or a look that explained the reception committee. All eyes eventually settled on us, probably because only we remained unagitated. We were given even more room. Whatever plans we came up with, they couldn't include mixing in with the crowd; the crowd was having none of it.

"Doesn't look like we're going to get much support from the populace," I said.

"Bad odds," she said. "The peasants have learned to bet on winners. Our position, at the moment, does not favor a return on such an investment."

"They're only six," I said. "Didn't your father ever tell you the stores? Six is nothing. Six is an insult. Six will be a mild distraction along our route."

She gave me a look.

"Come on, show me some spunk," I said lightly. "Your father taught you something, didn't he?"

"I'll hold my own, Gon-san," she said. "I just pray you haven't forgotten what you once knew."

She said it with a smile. Okay, half of one, but at that point I'd take anything.

"Vaguely," I said. "Old guys like me suffer memory lapses, you know."

"Let's hope this isn't one of those times, Gon-san," she said dryly. "Old as you are."

The ferry landed roughly and the two boys secured it to the dock. At first the other passengers did not know what to do. Normally they would have streamed off the ferry and gone their individual ways, but the large, dangerous-looking men standing in an arc a dozen or so yards away frightened them and confused them. They still were uncertain what was going on, and it wasn't clear enough to know the thugs weren't there for them.

Then, nearly as one, they ran off the raft, chattering and pushing and shouting at each other. It was a gift. We joined the two-dozen panicked passengers.

The samurai—if that was indeed what they were—taken off-guard by the rush of ferry passengers. As one they drew their short swords, and as the throng pressed around them, with us trailing, trying to stay low, the men started to hack at the farmers and peasants.

It wasn't what I'd expected. As brutish as I knew the Shogun and his followers to be, I hadn't anticipated this level of disregard for innocent bystanders. Their screams and cries fluttered, lifted overhead like terrible, wounded birds.

These jerks really fried my eggs. They disgraced all true samurai. In my mind, they'd sealed their fate. They were the walking dead. We just hadn't told them yet.

The woman signaled to follow her as she veered off to the right side. We split apart as we approached the two end fighters. I don't believe that the two far samurai saw us as we closed rapidly on the end two.

I moved inside the slicing arc of glinting steel, grabbed the samurai, and threw him, relieving him of his sword as he went over my head. When he hit the earth I swung his sword in a short, tight arc and removed his head. In part of the same move, I pivoted, planted my left foot and snapped the middle man's neck with a front kick.

Always nice to remember crucial job skills at the right times.

Behind me the woman had wheeled around and used a spinning back roundhouse to knock her opponent off his feet. She finished him with a small dagger that magically appeared in her hand. She whirled and withdrew a throwing star from a fold in her garment and sent it flying through the air and into the forehead of the fourth man.

The odds had improved considerably.

We each dispatched the remaining thugs, and I surveyed the scene. No one was in sight. Virtually all the other ferry passengers had either escaped into the nearby woods or were killed, hacked to pieces by the murderous assassins. The sweet, pungent odor of blood and feces and steaming guts rose like a peat fog along the river bank.

It smelled like home. I almost smiled.

"This way," the woman said, and she set off at a trot down the roadway to the east. I took the sword and another knife and set off after her.

The Road

We rested under a grove of stout maple and pine midway between the road and a narrow, active stream that fed, eventually, into the River of Rose Petals. Neither of us had been wounded but even so a fight such as that takes it out of you and we were nearly exhausted.

We had come at least three miles along this road, and so far we'd seen no one. I thought that somewhat unusual and I intended to mention it to the woman, who was, at the moment, sitting with her back against a fat pine tree, her legs crossed, and her hands resting comfortably on her slightly raised knees.

"Where the hell are we?" I said. "Why haven't we seen any other travelers?"

"Thieves. Bandits. Rogue soldiers. Ronin. It's a bad road in a bad neighborhood. The local governor is corrupt and too fat from all his evil power."

"So naturally it is our choice of roads," I said.

"Well, yes. For one thing, the Shogun's agents are less likely to come this way. They aren't safe here. There is a greater corruption here. And where better to hide but among others like ourselves. Plus it is a valuable shortcut to our destination."

"Ah, our destination. I was just getting to that part."

She looked at me, her eyes steady and full of something I knew but could not name, although I could feel its grip, the way it burned under my skin. "I'm your last best hope, Gon-san. It's now or never."

I knew it too. My journey had wearied me, but I embraced the words that heralded the end of my wait. There was a sadness that came with this joy as well, a sadness that swelled near the same place that harbored the painful death grip of my vow, a sadness given breath by the distinct knowledge that my best moments were past, that my challenge, now, of the Shogun's power was futile and the comic gesture of a vain and prideful man, a man whose life as a samurai had become a restless, haunted slinking from one hidey-hole to another, my honor nothing but a fragile, frozen memory. In life, my actions, as seen by some bored god, would appear little different from any number of lost men, the men seen rolled up into balls asleep under bushes, their hearts beyond measure, beyond any relevant pain, beyond the word itself.

"I hope you have a plan," I said. "I never did get around to making up a good one, we kept dying off, the formula changing."

"I plan to succeed," she said simply. "Is there any other way?"

"Well, not when you put it like that," I said. She'd had, I decided, a few too many zen classes. But I was determined to do my best and hooking up with her seemed like the right thing to do. I always liked doing the right thing. Plus she was damn good-looking.

We rested a little longer and then, wordlessly, we rose and continued our way.

We hiked along the road at night and camped deep in the woods during the day, taking turns sleeping and keeping watch.

We talked not as much as we had time for, but I learned her

name was Sweet Flower, after her mother, and she had studied under her father's tutelage since she was two or three. She had no friends, and there had been no men. When did she have time, she said, studying often ten or twelve hours a day, caring for the garden, and helping her father with their small plot. But life was not rough—her father was learned and taught her to read and they shared most evenings seated around a small circle of candles reading to each other. She was partial to poetry and the strategies of the great general Musashi, whose exploits were widely known. Her father, she said, read to her from histories and the biographies of great men, but when he was alone or thought she wasn't looking, read romances and pillow books, she said.

Which was when it came to me, what I'd been trying to recall about Big Head's woman: she had been a courtesan in the royal court, was even rumored to have been a bastard daughter of the Shogun.

I wondered if she knew any of that, and, if so, what she thought about it. We were, after all, on a mission to kill her grandfather, if the tales were true.

She told me that she and her father tried to keep in touch with the other ronin, but information more accurate than rumor or gossip was difficult to come by, and even then how was there to know for certain its truth? It was maddening. Much as I had lived on a steady but sparse diet of tidbits heard here and there, so had they, clinging to what they wanted to believe, disbelieving what they disagreed with. We both knew the consequences of that. We were, for all purposes, in the dark.

And then, she told me, one night the ninja came and killed her father and very nearly killed her. She killed one, she knows, and probably maimed or killed a second. She took two small knife wounds in her upper leg blocking otherwise fatal blows.

Before her father died he made her swear to complete his mission. She humbly accepted his charge. It very nearly burned in her as fiercely as in him since it had been there like an undying candle all her life; and she loved her father.

I tried to look deep inside her, to see if she knew her true origins. The way she looked back, I could tell she knew what I was trying to do, and she did not stop me. Her eyes opened as wide as twin moons, their dark light beckoning me, leading me deeper into her heart. It was so unexpected that it frightened me. I was the old man led by the young woman, who showed me things I dared not say aloud, things I dared not look within myself to find. Or not find.

She was fire and steel, and what was forged was something not made of fire or steel. Her love for her father and dedication to his honor humbled me.

She was worth my sacrifice. I would follow her. My mission had become, through her own life, her mission.

Good enough for me. Couldn't ask for anything more. Not on this earth.

The Castle

We meditated, played Go, using a collection of black and white stones we found, scratching a board pattern in the dirt. We traded victories. She was better than I'd expected and I was better than she'd expected. It was a good trade-off. We also studied the stars.

I sure hoped she wouldn't break out into some kind of astrology rap. I hated that crap.

We watched the lights overhead. I sensed her eyes darting toward me, and back. Here it comes, I thought.

"Do you follow the stars?" she said.

"Only at night," I said. "To light my way to the latrine."

She laughed.

"Me too."

If relief had a sound, we shared it.

"I do wonder about them, what they are, what's up there," she said. "But I don't believe they guide my spirit, that tomorrow is written in the night sky."

"Me," I said, "I'd rather throw dice. Then only a few different things can happen."

I gestured toward the night sky, a big wave at winking lights, a half moon just climbing into sight.

"There're too many variables, all that," I said. "I can barely decide between one thing and one other thing. Screw the stars and the grains-of-sand baloney. In fact, forget what I said about dice—a simple flip of a coin is complicated enough for me. You do it or you don't do it. Yes or no. Live or die."

She looked at me, a solemn expression, the kind someone gets when they want to ask a question they are afraid might get answered.

"Yes," she said.

"Yes?"

She nodded her head, and then leaned toward me, tilted her head, and closed her eyes.

She surprised me but not enough not to kiss her. We forgot the stars and what would happen tomorrow and word and everything except what our hands and mouths could show us.

It was a long night. We had all the light we could stand.

The next morning, we talked about what was in store for that day. Neither one mentioned the previous night, but it was there with us. I could feel it. It felt good. Something, I knew, had changed in me, but I didn't have time to think about it. I didn't want to think about it. I just let it be. Which was enough.

Before that night, we had agreed that the summer castle was the most likely of the Shogun's two or three retreats, and now, after traveling all day and most of the night, it loomed before us, dark and eerie in the blue-black early morning light. Like fireflies, dotted here and there along the wide stone walls, low flames from lanterns flickered, but nothing unusual seemed afoot. In fact, if the Shogun was truly in hiding here, then either he felt almost ridiculously secure or his defenses were captained by a fool. We could, it appeared, walk right in. Well, maybe climb.

"I think they're trying to trap someone," Sweet Flower said.

"There is that," I admitted.

"But I wonder if it's us." She turned to look at me. Her mouth opened, then closed. Her left eye brow raised maybe a centimeter. I could almost hear the levers and gears. Her mouth opened again. "I don't think the Shogun is hiding from us. He expects to be attacked by his enemies. After we dispatched the six assassins back at the ferry we haven't seen a soul. We've been very careful. There's no reason for them to think we're even near here—remember, too, we're not even supposed to know the Shogun has left Osaka, nor which haven he has sought."

"Dispatched?" I said.

She smiled, I think the first I'd seen since before the ferry ride. What it did to her face was like the lifting of a dark veil. She was, in that moment, I think the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

"So you don't think they know we're here?"

"I think finally there is something working in our favor," she said. "Now, what do we do with it?"

We made a slow, cautious circle around the castle, on the watch for both the Shogun's guards or his enemy's advance elements; we saw none of the latter, and only a number of the former to indicate normal garrison duty.

"It's possible that the Shogun doesn't wish to announce his residency with a visible larger-than-normal attachment," she said.

"Their key word is visible," I said. By now the day's palette, though still muted by the retreating night sky, showed along the

eastern horizon. We moved off a ways and went to ground. We cycled talk—whispered, heads together—sleep, and turns at lookout.

No patrols penetrated the woods that we noticed, and very little noise drifted our way from the castle, about a half-mile west, and not visible though the thick forest of evergreens and hardwoods and thick underbrush.

It nagged me that the six samurai had been waiting for us on the river bank—they definitely seemed to be waiting there for me, for us, but how did they know we were coming? They were on the wrong side of the river to have been there as the result of any informers hanging around the ferry community. It puzzled me.

I didn't much care for puzzles, especially if the key involved my life.

At dusk we rose, cleaned up, fixed something to eat, and gathered the things that we needed. The rest we buried near a large red maple. After we prepared ourselves, we set out to circle the castle once again. We didn't need any rude surprises. We saw no one on the outside and a minimum of activity visible in the castle. Either the Shogun wasn't home or he was showing uncharacteristic restraint.

Neither of those possibilities rang true. The third possibility, suggested by Sweet Flower, an ambush, seemed the most likely, but even that answer was flawed.

It wasn't that I disliked puzzles, I flat hated them. Never could get them right.

We came back around to the east side and approached the dark stone wall. Our twin shadows crept to the wall and then started up using almost invisible hand and finger and foot holds. We looked like two spiders, or the shadows of twin cracks in the thick wall.

We paused short of the top and waited, listening for guards. I heard nothing and eased myself up so that I could peer along the battlements and into the courtyard. The castle's walls made a large octagon, and one guard was posted at each intersecting wall, no more. Neither did I see a larger force camped in the open courtyard; whatever security the Shogun had here was small enough to stay in the castle garrison, which I was sure held fewer than twenty men. This didn't look right for a man suspecting an attack. Something queer was going on, but nothing more than the obvious showed itself.

As one, we slid over the top and rolled into a shadow, invisible and quiet. Then we slipped off the battlement and dropped to the courtyard, found shadows, disappeared. We slithered from shadow to shadow and entered the castle itself, and eased along a dark, narrow hall toward the Shogun's sleeping quarters, avoiding guards. We were the night, and the way night's falling shadow cannot be stopped neither could we.

Two samurai stood on either side of the door to the Shogun's quarters. Even at this hour they were not asleep nor weary. They were good—they each had time to pull their short swords before our throwing stars sliced into their jugulars and ended their lives. We bounded to them and caught their bodies before they clattered to the floor.

Sweet Flower slipped open the door and I charged into the room, picking out the Shogun's futon in the center of the large space. White gauzy fabric hung from the ceiling, draped over the futon, which was on a raised platform. A hulking form sprawled across the bed, its exact contours distorted by the filmy material. I crossed the space to the bed, swung my long katana sword in a long, looping arc that first sliced through the hanging bedcovering and then reversed and hacked off the sleeping man's head, my sudden, vicious swing sending a diaphanous pink and white cloud floating, settling to the sheets and floor.

"Well done, brother."

It was not Sweet Flower's voice. But I recognized it. From a long time ago.

I spun to my right, my sword held in the classic defensive position, two-hand grip, blade perfectly vertical, edge pointed out, feet planted.

The voice belonged to Shi Ru and I would never forget it. I was confused, disoriented: I had seen him die. Or thought that I had. He had been mortally wounded. We all saw it. He'd yelled that he'd stay and delay the enemy so that the rest of us could escape. I saw him fall beneath an army of angry mercenaries. I saw it.

But here he stood. Older, grayer, stouter, but he still stood taller than anyone I'd ever seen, and his eyes still swallowed all the light around him. His feet were planted apart and his hands in fists on his waist. He beamed like a proud papa.

"Who's this creep?" said Sweet Flower, who crouched just inside the doorway. Both hands held weapons, long and short katana.

"Ah, another student," said Shi Ru, appraising her stance. "Once removed. Your left foot is slightly out of place, sweet thing."

His smile sickened me. His survival, and all that it implied, sickened me further. It was almost too much to bear.

Sweet Flower's skills were unable to conceal her astonishment as she realized who stood before her, still in his wide-footed, casual pose. It seemed that the two of us could easily take him. I did not see any weapon.

"Yes, students," he said. "Take me."

He smiled, his mouth contorted upward, showing his blackened teeth. It looked like a terrible, ragged hole.

That was not what I expected to hear. He was unafraid and completely confident as though he'd directed this entire show from the beginning, twenty-five years ago. For some reason I noticed how long his hair was, braided and hanging down his back, the tail curling out into sight near his waist, its gray-and-ebony mix creating a serpent that seemed to twitch as he breathed.

"You are curious, I bet," he said, that oily smile framing each word. "It is simple. I did not care to die. I struck a deal." He shrugged his shoulders. His hair fluttered like a malevolent butterfly.

I dared not speak. No words existed for what I felt at that moment. My life had led to this, a betrayal upon a betrayal. Everything shifted, spun away. It made me dizzy.

"Perhaps we should talk, my friends." Shi Ru said, and he turned, sweeping his right arm, welcoming us to approach him.

"We are not friends, Shi Ru," I said. "But, hell, I talk to anyone, if what I hear is the right thing."

I lowered my sword and made a small show of straightening my clothing. Sweet Flower also lowered her weapons, but then stood in Shi Ru's own famous Relaxed Defense stance. She wasn't having much to do with his friendliness.

"You are here for a reason," he said. His hands were now apparently clasped behind his back.

"Well, that's a relief," I said. "Is that what you told the other forty-six samurai you betrayed or had killed or, for all I know, killed yourself?"

He swept one arm toward the futon where the dead Shogun lay.

"You've done well," he said.

"Yeah, well, it only took me twenty-five years," I said. "Little rusty, I guess."

"Oh, I'd say you're right on schedule, my old friend," he said, baring his blackened teeth, then added, "My puppet, you've made me proud."

My training and my life, all that I had done, taught me calmness and the truth that only in the calm center can the answer be found, but at this moment I could feel—actually feel as vividly as

a fist thrust into my gut and my heart twisted from my body—that everything I knew had been stripped away and I had one choice, one moment, one action.

I whirled in a spinning leap that allowed me to swing both arms around in a double-whammy one-two as the two throwing stars flew invisibly from my fingers and into Shi Ru's left arm, which he brought up in a brilliantly quick blocking motion. He toppled onto the bed across his fat master, rolled, and sprang to his feet on the other side.

"You fool," he said. Shi Ru leapt high in the air—higher than my head—his powerful legs pulling up into a flying front kick. I readied myself, drawing my short sword to finish him when he landed. But instead of the flying front kick I expected, he alighted a few feet away, spinning like a child's toy, and from seemingly nowhere a blade swept across the space between us and a deep burning pain shot through my gut.

I felt simultaneously hot and cold. My hand instinctively pressed against my abdomen where I felt warm blood and another hot softness that chilled my spine. I did not dare to look, though I knew.

Shi Ru leapt back and assumed a purely defensive stance, his left arm extended, wrist sharply bent, right hand held in front of his chest. He permitted himself a grin.

"Hard to best the teacher, eh?" he said. "There are things you know nothing of, my brother. History moves with or without your understanding. Your part was never to exceed its limitations. And now—" He dipped his head curtly—"you are done."

A whisper of air, a glint of light on polished steel, Shi Ru's surprised outcry, my eyes rising from the floor in time to catch him clutching at his throat, pulling out the throwing star imbedded at its base. His mouth open and he gurgled, a pinkish bubble of wet sound. Then he was gone, disappearing through a hidden passageway and from the room. I listened to his uneven steps retreating down his secret hallway.

"He betrayed us all," I said. "No wonder we were picked off one by one over the years. He knew our new identifies, our secret communications, our hiding places."

"You're hurt pretty bad, Gon-san," she said, kneeling at my side.

"Sure looks that way," I said. My hands told me all I needed to know about this gut wound.

"You should get out of here," I said. "The guards'll be here soon enough. I'll give you time to get away."

She sat on her heels next to me. I didn't remember falling. I was curious about the blood everywhere, about the odd noises, about the smells that stung my nose.

"I will avenge you, Gon-san," she said.

"and who will you kill, my Sweet Flower?" I said. "The Shogun is dead, Shi Ru is certainly dead, or soon to be. What honor can be salvaged from all this, I ask? I think it's ceased to matter."

A dull pain spread through my body. I tried to smile but I don't think that what went across my face quite came together.

"I think honor bit the big one on this adventure," I said. "Maybe honor disappeared the day my lord was betrayed, and once betrayed, it cannot be restored. To believe otherwise is to follow the dreams of a fool. It's a poet's quest, my Sweet Flower, a search for something that's lost its name and that cannot ever be renamed."

"You always rattle on when you're wounded?" she said. He half smile also fell short of its effort, her voice not nearly as light as she'd aimed for.

"It's not your job to avenge my death, Sweet Flower," I said. "Besides, I'm dead. I've been dead for twenty-five years."

I smiled at her, so unhappy.

"I just needed someone to tell me. Do what I say: Go home. This is the end of our foolishness."

I took up my sword and propped myself up against the wall. Noises drifted into the room, shouts and the dull slap of feet running across stone.

"Go," I said.

Sweet Flower rose and headed to the same doorway that Shi Ru had taken and left ajar. The noise from outside increased and moved toward us.

"I'll remember you for as long as I live," I said, making a face that came darn close to a grin.

"I bet that's what you say at the end of all your dates," she said. She didn't even attempt to copy my bad grin.

Our eyes met, and I felt myself once again falling into the dark moonlight. I saw all I ever wanted to see.

She nodded her head once sharply and then she was gone.

I turned my attention toward the doorway where the noise now roared. Propped against the wall, my sword dripping blood, my own in a spreading pool, I made quite a picture. Maybe I'd scare them away.

The first group of castle guards burst through the doorway and into the room. I lifted my sword and stepped forward. They saw me and stopped.

"You look like shit, ronin," said the one in the middle.

"You will die for killing the Shogun," said another.

"This is your last battle, ronin," said a third.

"We are all ronin here today," I said.

PW

AVENGING DREAM

I would be the knife
as well as the wound
no shadows to hide
the darkest soul
only a flash of all colors
to reveal sweet curves
wings of hope and stolen dreams,

I would be the wind
and the chain
the whistle and clang
underfoot of all desire
to toss in slow motion
the two sided coin
light and dark flickering.

- Linda Addison

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RUMBLING TUMBLING WITH JOE LANSDALE HIS OWNSELF

by Trey Barker

Joe R. Lansdale has forged a unique and notable career with such gripping horror stories as "Night They Missed the Horror Show" and "The Big Blow," classic offbeat novels of terror and magic like *THE DRIVE-IN*, *THE MAGIC WAGON*, *THE NIGHTRUNNERS*, and a unique mystery series starring the irrepressible Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. For many writers, creating even one tale as memorable as any of these pieces would be a major accomplishment, but for five-time Bram Stoker Award-winner Lansdale the output is simply a small portion of his career so far.

A Texas native, Lansdale has been called 'a treasure' by writer critic Ed Bryant, 'an immense talent' by Booklist, and 'a born storyteller' by Robert Bloch. This fall will see three books published from him, including a new Hap and Leonard novel *RUMBLE TUMBLE*, his second young adult novel *THE BOAR*, and a collection of crime mystery stories co-written with Lew Shiner.

Joe Lansdale recently took a few minutes from his busy sched-

ule for a phone discussion about the new novels, writing in general, and growing up in east Texas and how it's affected his work.

PW: Tell us a little about your new Hap & Leonard novel, *RUMBLE TUMBLE* (Mysterious Press), which is the fifth in the popular series.

JRL: Although I try to keep the novels consistent in character and tone and all that each time out, I also try to explore a little different avenue. The first one, *SAVAGE SEASON* I consider almost a caper book in a way, or an adventure. *MUCHO MOJO* was kind of a southern gothic. The *TWO BEAR MAMBO* was sort of a small town gone bad and *BAD CHILI* was, to me, where I tried to me a little more pulp, a little more fun in that way. And this one is a little bit more of a straightforward story. I decided I wanted to make a straightforward story but I wanted to make a road novel out of it, meaning everything takes place

as they travel. Sort of like Hope and Crosby gone wrong with cuss words.

PW: *RUMBLE TUMBLE* seems to be less a mystery novel than a crime novel. There aren't the type of plot twists you mind find in James Ellroy or Michael Connelly novels. Was that a conscious decision on your part?

JRL: Yes, it definitely was a conscious decision. I don't know that I'm a real strong mystery writer to begin with, not that I have anything against mysteries, I love them. But I tend to like stuff to grow out of



natural situations. That doesn't mean that next time out I might not experiment with more of a mystery. BAD CHILI had little bit more of a mystery. MUCHO MOJO a little bit more of a mystery.

I also felt in RUMBLE TUMBLE that I wanted to do something a little different and I wanted to make it a road novel, and have events happen to them as they go, and that it's leading to this one big pay-off. And of course I'm hoping there are plenty of pay-offs for the reader along the way but I mean as a dénouement, instead of all of these things coming together and all the clues coming together, that they just happen, a little bit more like real life.

Of course that doesn't mean that I'm rejecting mystery or that the next one might be much like that, it's just hard to say until I'm done.

PW: Do you have plans for more Hap and

Leonard novels?

JRL: Yes, there's one in the mill right now. The next novel coming out is not a Hap and Leonard, it's just an oddball book. Then I have a Hap and Leonard novel I'm working on currently. And there is maybe a truer sort of mystery coming here in the future.

PW: In RUMBLE TUMBLE you have stripped your style down and made your prose much leaner. Is that simply a writer learning new things?

JRL: Sometimes I do it purposely and sometimes it's totally unconscious. Sometimes I'm fully aware I'm stripping something down. I always think I write leanly. With RUMBLE TUMBLE I purposely said I wanted to write a book that's not so atmospheric. Like with BAD CHILI and MUCHO MOJO and TWO-BEAR MAMBO,

all of them, I spent a lot of time on the weather without making it boring, I think, setting the mood with the weather, through the perception people have, all the senses, I guess I meant to say. On this one I did that less.

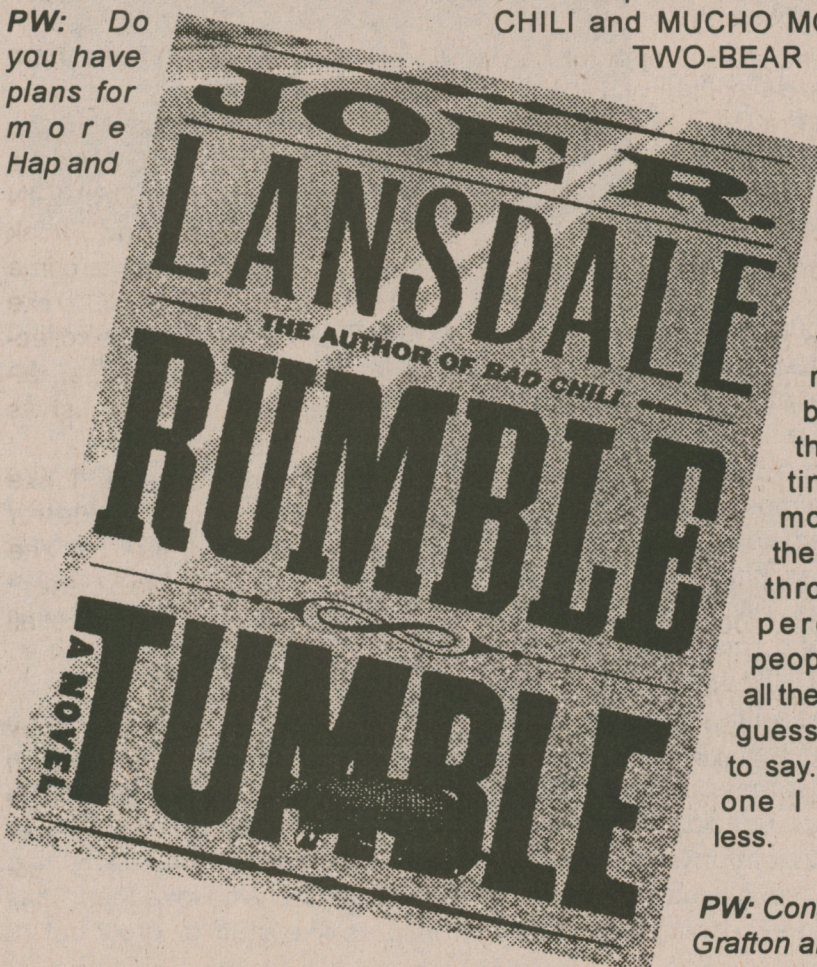
PW: Consider Sue Grafton and her al-

phabet books. Can you imagine yourself doing Hap and Leonard for twenty-six years?

JRL: No, I can't...but you've got to understand, too, put it in the perspective of this: currently I'm not tired of them, but when I do get tired of them, I'll quit writing them. I just don't feel you can do a good job or bring what you want to them each time out if you don't like them.

People are going to like one book better than another. No matter how much you love them, you're not always going to be as consistent for a particular reader. Some readers, their favorite book is going to be one that you thought was not your best, or vice versa. All you can do is each time out is do the best book you can, but it's got to be the book you want to do. So I don't want to fall into the trapped pattern, that's why next year I don't have a Hap and Leonard book coming out. And that's why this fall I have a non-Hap and Leonard novel coming out called THE BOAR. Plus, I also do comic book work, I've done film work, and I'll write Hap and Leonard as long as I enjoy writing them. But when they start to get kind of old or I start to feel like I'm burning the same ground—and to some extent I think with a series and the same characters, you do burn the same ground. And that's fine because readers really enjoy that and I enjoy going back and seeing these guys in their environment and the things they do. But each time out, you have bring something to it. If you try to write for the readers you end of trying to please everyone and you please no one. And the only person you can really please is yourself.

PW: Your published work has run the gamut from a young adult novel



to comics to crime to horror. Is that a reflection of the personal interests of Joe Lansdale?

JRL: It's very much a reflection of me. I think I'd probably have been a wealthier writer had I chosen one kind of book and written a lot of 500 or 600 page tomes. It doesn't mean I won't do that if a book comes to me: as a matter of fact, I have a couple in mind that may well fit that bill. But I just don't want to feel driven to do anything. And Hap and Leonard, I don't feel driven to do, I do it because I like those characters. And there'll probably come a time when I lay them down.

PW: THE BOAR is a young adult novel you wrote in 1983 that Subterranean Press is bringing out. It's a book that's been sitting in your trunk for a few years. What was it that drew you to publish it?

JRL: You know some of the books that Subterranean Press and people like that print, they print in very small numbers, because they're not my best work. They're out there...for those people who are really interested in the development of a writer as much as they are the writing itself.

The exception is THE BOAR, which I think is a really fine book. The reason I allowed it to be published is that back when I wrote it as a young adult novel—because hunting is part of what was going on in the story—there seemed to be a certain prejudice against the book. In the early '80's, there was a much more modern sense to most young adult novels. I wrote this book and I loved it and I think it was one of my best. I really believe that this is a book that a lot of readers will enjoy, especially young readers, but I hope adults will as well.

PW: You have another collection coming out, of mystery/crime stories with Lew Shiner.

JRL: That's another example of the kind of books we were talking about earlier. Of old stuff that people say 'we want to see this we want to see this.' And I'm saying 'I really don't want this printed in one of my bigger collections.' But in a smaller collection like this, I do. Not that I'm ashamed of any of it, but it's not necessarily the stuff I'm known for. It's me developing as a writer. I've been around now as a free-lance writer for twenty-five years and a full-time writer for eighteen or nineteen so I guess maybe half my life almost...no, a third of my life...has been spent as a writer. So a lot of it is autobiographical in a way, in the sense not that it tells you about me, but it tells you where my head was as a writer at certain times.

Lew and I had a lot of fun with them. These stories are like old pulp stories, if you like reading old pulp stories, they're fun, they're real fun. And I think the introductions we wrote are very entertaining. So that'll be out real soon.

PW: Have the Hap and Leonard novels elicited any excitement in Hollywood?

JRL: Yeah. Propaganda Films had TWO-BEAR MAMBO for a year. MUCHO MOJO there's been some interest but I didn't go for that particular deal. COLD IN JULY, which is not a Hap and Leonard, was optioned seven years running, by John Irving. David Lynch currently has a novella of mine, "The Big Blow," which is, I think, one of my very best stories, under option.

PW: "The Big Blow" from the an-

thology REVELATIONS was my next question. Where did that come from?

JRL: The hurricane really happened in 1900. It wiped Galveston out, just like in the story. Jack Johnson was the first black heavyweight champion of the world. He lived there at that time and he became heavyweight champion and it's possible he was there during the hurricane. Many of the events, like nailing the baby to the post, really happened, I didn't make those up. Jack Johnson's family sort of disappeared, and I took a little liberty and poetic license in some areas, but the overall structure and idea behind it really happened. Galveston rivaled New York at that time as the most metropolitan city in the world and it was wiped off the face of the earth, almost like Atlantis being wiped away.

PW: Which is your favorite from your body of work?

JRL: THE MAGIC WAGON as a novel. And I think THE DRIVE-IN is my most inventive. And I think COLD IN JULY is my favorite crime novel next to MUCHO MOJO. I like BY BIZARRE HANDS of the collections because it was the first, although I think I've written just as good or better stories.

Of individual stories, I like "Night They Missed The Horror Show" best of all. I like "On The Far Side Of The Cadillac Desert" and "The Big Blow." I'm fond of all those.

PW: Speaking of "Night They Missed The Horror Show," which features someone being dragged to death behind a car, did you take pause when the two men in Jasper, Texas dragged the black man

to death behind their pick-up?

JRL: Yes...but this wasn't the first time that's happened. It doesn't just happen here. When something happens in the South, it's 'oh my god, these horrible racists.' But when somebody in New York pushes a black kid out in front of a car, it gets that racist play but not the same way, and it's because, in many ways, it goes back to the Civil War mystic that people have.

Racism is racism no matter where it is, and bad crime is bad crime no matter where it is. But the south has this sort of dark reputation that follows it around, oftentimes, when it doesn't deserve it. Not that it doesn't deserve it, it does deserve it sometimes, but this whole thing with Jasper, horrible as it was, that's not the first time those things have happened here, or elsewhere. They made Jasper out, in the news, to be this big racist town and it's just a little town like a lot of others with a couple of dumb assholes who did a horrible thing.

I grew up in east Texas so I did see a lot of ugly racism. But not anything like this Jasper thing. But I'd seen enough or I knew about enough or I known people who knew about enough or I had read about it in the news...all these things, when I write about my area as a suspense writer and as a crime writer, I'm going to pick out the bad stuff. I'm not writing romances. So to feel like this is what I feel like east Texas is all about is to take a very narrow vision of a type of story and a type of crime or type of characters and assume that this is the whole universe. And I think it's odd that people do that. I mean, I don't feel responsible for that in any way, I just think it's weird that when you write something like that that people assume this is east Texas in it's entirety. Not that this is a piece of

east Texas or that this is a crime novel that's reflecting that one little piece, but that people assume that this is the totality.

PW: *Where do you see yourself in ten years?*

JRL: I believe that I'll be moving on to new stuff, like I always do. I seem to go through cycles. I would certainly like to have even more financial success but I don't want to have it at the expense of doing what I want to do. I want to continue to write in a broader range, different things, odds and ends. I think I would like to reach over into a more mainstream kind of fiction. Just because I haven't done that and because it's a whole other audience I haven't reached. I hope I never get to the point where I'm just doing tapioca pudding.

Anybody like me or like Neal Barrett Jr. or like a dozen other writers I could name who write a lot, we're going to write a lot of books. And those books, there are going to be a number of them that are going to be less appealing to the readers than others, perhaps maybe because...like you have bad days, you have maybe bad books. Now I'm not ashamed of any of them—but you have books that if they're not bad, maybe they're just not as appealing to an audience as a previous book which was totally different.

There are some people who are still pissed off that I don't continue to write THE NIGHTRUNNERS or that I don't continue to write THE DRIVE-IN novels or that I don't want to just do exclusively Hap and Leonard.

So that I hope where I am ten years from now is that I'm still having fun, I'm still making a living at it, that I've been able to expose my work to a larger audience and that, most of all, I'm happy doing that.

PW: *In the early days of your career, you were an editor as well as writer. Any desire to edit again?*

JRL: Yeah, but I don't seem to be striving to do it. Earlier this year, I was supposed to do an anthology, but the company messed around and I canceled it.

PW: *You edited the Best of the Stokers.*

JRL: That's a different kind of thing because they're the Stoker winners, there's nothing you do but read the stories and write the introductions. To me that is a token editorship. True editing is when you buy the stories and look at the stories and read the stories and accept the stories. But when it's something where someone says we're going to do the Stokers, all your work's done for you as far as choosing stories because they are what they are.

PW: *How does a writer from east Texas get hooked up finishing a lost Edgar Rice Burroughs' TARZAN novel?*

JRL: Edgar Rice Burroughs is still, sentimentally, my favorite writer of all time. He may not be the greatest writer, but he was the one who hit me the hardest when I was a kid. I was talking to Dark Horse (the comic publisher) and they mentioned they had this unfinished Burroughs novel. I said, "Oh, boy, that's neat. When that comes out, let me know, I'd love to read that." And they said, "Well, how you would like to finish it?" And I said, "I'd love to finish it." And that's how it happened.

PW: *And how was it to realize you were going to write one of your childhood favorites?*

JRL: I felt a little overwhelmed. I didn't think it was one of Burroughs' best manuscripts. It was very piecemeal, very repetitious. I felt like it might have been something that he was working on that he abandoned or maybe he was just messing around with it. But there was still that Burroughs magic there in spots and I just tapped into it. I found it a very easy project to do once I sat down. I didn't try to duplicate him exactly, I just tried to ring that bell and bring a little of myself to it.

PW: *You wrote once about a period where people tried to convince you to write novels you didn't want to write. You characterized it as a career low point. Right now, you seem to be at a career high point. What's the difference?*

JRL: You know, you're right, I consider this a high point in my career. Really, when I went through that, I was at a high point in the career itself, but a low point as a writer. They're not necessarily the same thing. The career and how you feel are not the same thing. You can be not doing well in your career but be having a lot of fun. You can be doing well in your career and not having fun. I, unfortunately, know writers who are writing things they really don't want to write but that's what sells and they're not happy and I don't want to be that way.

I would say what was different then—I had just broken into Mysterious Press and had a contract—is that nobody was pushing me in a direct sense, but indirectly I think they were trying to make me find a type of book that I could write, and that I could write that book over and over and over. Which is not the same thing as Hap and Leonard, which is a series; you're writing about the same characters and you may even be writing similar type

stories. Although that can certainly become tiresome as well. This was wanting me to have more of a brand-name feel. And in a funny way, I think I've finally found a brand-name without meaning to, my brand-name is me. But this was like a specific book I was supposed to write and it just depressed me. And sometimes I get depressed when I look out and I say 'You know, I could make a lot more money doing this if I were willing to do these other things.' And it's not that I'm too good to sell out, it's just I don't know how. I've tried, I been trying to sell out since I started, I just don't know how.

So at that particular period, I think that's why I felt so low. I felt like people were making tons of money doing these kinds of books and I thought, that's good, I'm proud for them. Because I really believe writing is so hard that you've got to be happy for anybody that who succeeds. And I've never competed with other writers, never felt the need to, it's never bothered me. But what did bother me was that I felt that I could do this, I could make things a lot more comfortable for my family if I could find these sort of things. So these kinds of pressures, I think, were leading me to go in this direction of writing this kind of programmed kind of book and I think that was depressing. And one day I realized I just couldn't do it, would not be happy and I came out of it.

PW: *At the beginning, before anything sold, did you ever think you would one day be as successful as you are?*

JRL: I always thought I'd be successful. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't. Now, people measure success in different ways. Successful in the sense of bestsellers and

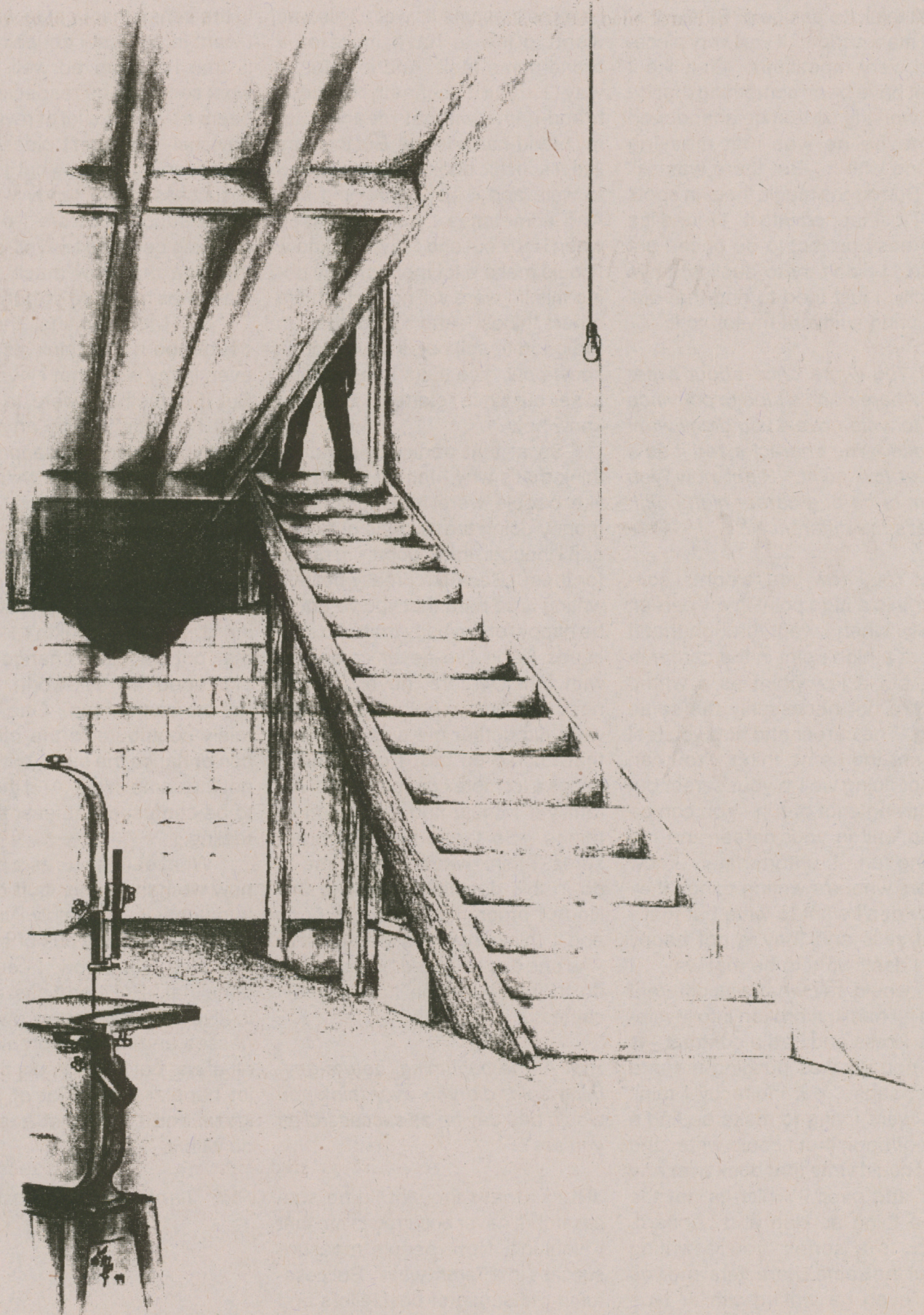
stuff like that, I haven't had that. But in the sense that I get to write what I want to do, that I get paid well for it, that I'm received well, that my work seems to be respected by my peers as well as a lot of reviewers—obviously you can't please everyone every time out—but I feel like a success. In a funny way, I felt like a success before I ever sold anything because I never really had the idea that how much money I made was measure of that success.

So, I love writing, there's no doubt about it. I think it's obvious even in my work that I love writing. But if something were to happen and I couldn't write anymore, it would be a horrible disappointment, but I had a life before writing and I have a life during writing. Most of my days I write but I also spend a lot of other time doing other things. My family's important to me. If I ended up having to go back to being a janitor, I wouldn't like doing that, but it wouldn't change my feelings about my self-worth. They're not the same thing. One can certainly contribute to the other, one can enhance the other, but they are not the same thing. And they're not to be confused. At least that's my feeling.

What defines us as a person is how we handle this stuff on a day to day basis. Certainly I've looked out and been envious of someone and said 'You know, I could have done that.' But then it passes, that's it. I've certainly got my own weaknesses and my own problems like all of us, but I also know that I'm a lot happier than a lot of people I know, and I think that has a lot to do with it.

PW: *Thank you, Joe Lansdale.*

PW



J. Michael Major is no stranger to PW regulars. His stories have appeared in Pirate Writings #5 and #8. His work has also appeared in Hardboiled, Outer Darkness, The Silver Web, Lines In the Sand and many others.

by J. Michael Major

By the time Detective Jerry Mahoney arrived on the scene, the medical examiner had already begun to exhume the bodies from the crawlspace.

ONE MAN'S
CASTLE

He turned up the collar of his charcoal gray overcoat against the biting, January night wind. Nodding to the uniformed Westbrook officers assigned to hold the media and morbidly curious neighbors at the bottom of the driveway, he ducked under the yellow crime scene tape stretched between the icicle-decorated elm trees and crunched through the battleground of footprints in the snow covered front yard. His older partner met him inside the doorway as Jerry stamped his boots on the Rubbermaid Welcome mat.

“Sorry about your anniversary.”

Mahoney shrugged. "What've we got, Ray?"

Detective Capparelli flipped open his pocket notebook and turned some pages with the eraser of a heavily chewed, yellow pencil. He scratched his salt-and-pepper mustache with the sharpened end. "The house belongs to a Walter Buczyno, age sixty-eight, a retired construction engineer. His neighbor, Benito Salinas, says Buczyno is visiting his dead wife's relatives in St. Paul, and he'd asked Salinas to watch the house while he's gone. This afternoon, Salinas noticed water leaking out of the back of the house by the gas meter, and he figured Buczyno's got a frozen pipe that burst. He let himself in with the key Buczyno left him, found the basement flooded, and called a plumber."

His eraser flicked to the next page. "The plumber found the leak in a pipe that extends into the crawlspace, so he shut off the main line and pumped the water out the basement windows. When he climbed into the crawlspace, he slipped in the gravel and uncovered a Nike hightop that's still wearing a leg." Ray lowered his voice. "The guy freaked. He still won't come out of his truck. I'm surprised he was able to call us on his cellular."

"What does Salinas say about Buczyno?"

"The usual: nice guy, real friendly, nobody expected anything like this outta him." Ray pocketed his notebook, but continued absently playing with the pencil, a habit he had acquired from going cold turkey after so many years of smoking. "Seems he spent most of his time working around the house and making furniture for himself and his friends. Occasionally helped out with the local neighborhood watch, but mostly he's kept to himself since his wife died of breast cancer about seven years ago."

"That's why this trip seemed so odd to Salinas. Out of the blue, Buczyno says he's going to visit his wife's relatives for a week and could he watch the house? Salinas always thought it'd be good for him to get away, but it had surprised him to learn that Buczyno had kept in touch with his wife's family since he never mentioned them."

"Stranger things have happened."

They made their way through the modestly furnished living room and dining room, their footprints adding melted snow and salt and dirt to the day's heavily trafficked path on the tiled floor leading from the front door to the kitchen. Mahoney didn't know much about woodworking, but he admired what he saw of Buczyno's handiwork. The sofa, loveseat, end tables and coffee table of the living room were stained a blond oak and arranged to face the large, stone fireplace against the far wall. The cushions of the loveseat and sofa were the flowered, vinyl cushions normally found in a set of patio furniture, and it gave the room the feel of a rustic cabin. The dining room table and five chairs, china cabinet and corner curio stand, however, were stained a rich, dark walnut, which set this room off from the other with its own dignified touch. An old-fashioned radiator grill sat under the window on the right that faced the Salinas' home, and a hallway on the left led to the two bedrooms separated by a tiny bathroom. Mahoney assumed Buczyno slept in the bedroom located toward the middle of the house, because he noticed it was the only room that had carpeting.

Jerry shook his head. Fifteen years ago, when he graduated from the academy, he might have had trouble picturing this as the home of a serial killer; but sadly, times had changed and his outlook became jaded. Nowadays it seemed like anything was possible, and nothing remaining could surprise him.

Heavy footsteps plodded up the gray enamel-painted wooden staircase that ascended from the basement into the kitchen. Two uniformed officers emerged carrying a black body bag containing another victim. They shuffled past the detectives and headed out the front door as Dr. Griskel, the medical examiner, came up the stairs.

"That should be the last one." He shucked off his latex gloves

and stuffed them in the side pocket of his black bag. "Hi, Jerry."

"What's the final count, Steve?"

"Four. Three in a row from the back wall, with the latest victim perpendicular to their feet."

"How long have they been there?"

"Hard to say. The most recent's probably only a couple of weeks, but the others could be anywhere between then and five or six years. Not much left but bones on the older ones, and the water damage didn't help any of them. I'll be able to give you a better answer after I've had a chance to examine them."

"What's in the basement?"

"A washer and dryer. A workbench, bandsaw, tablesaw and router. A standing metal cabinet containing his tools. A couple stacks of sorted wood. Not a lot of room for much else. The crawlspace is behind a half wall of concrete blocks under the staircase toward the back of the house."

Mahoney thought about the saws. "Anyone check the refrigerator for souvenirs?" he asked hesitantly.

"Already looked," Ray said. "It's clean, and so's the garbage cans, thank God. After Dahmer, you gotta check it out, but it's a sick world when you've gotta think like that during an investigation."

"Isn't that the truth," said Griskel. "Still, it's bad enough. Bodies in a crawlspace in the Chicago suburbs. That's Gacy all over again."

Mahoney gestured toward the front. "And the media's already on top of it. In addition to the networks, I noticed a CNN van out front when I came in."

"Like we ain't got enough problems." Capparelli tapped the pencil in the palm of his left hand. "Whaddaya think, doc: we gonna find anything downstairs?"

"Not tonight. With the water and mud and hot-air fans, I'd be amazed if there's anything collectible. We might get lucky and find some dried blood on the concrete. But that's probably all."

Ray glanced at his watch. "Okay. Have the evidence techs finish up, and we'll come back tomorrow for another look." He nudged Jerry with his elbow. "Right now, we gotta pick up a guy whose plane is gonna land in an hour."

Walter Buczyno wasn't thinking about the police when his American Airlines 727 taxied into O'Hare's Gate K3. He was thinking about his trip to St. Paul to visit his late wife's family; about their shocked outrage when he had confessed what he'd done; about Madeline, Dottie's favorite sister, who had taken his hand when she dropped him at the airport and told him that while they couldn't condone his actions, she hoped he wouldn't get caught for Dottie's sake. Checking his customized watch, he wondered how long he'd be stuck waiting for his baggage, and if his car had been vandalized in the long-term parking garage. So when he stepped into the terminal and the commotion began, he didn't realize until too late it was for him.

"There he is!" Cameras flashed and Minicam lights flooded the blue-gray waiting area as two detectives approached him with their gold shields extended. The heavier one with ash-colored hair and mustache held back, his free hand slipping inside his frayed, black overcoat, while the younger one with receding brown hair stepped forward. Walter noticed his charcoal overcoat was unbuttoned as well.

"Walter Buczyno?" He nodded, then nodded again when the policeman stated his address. "I'm Detective Mahoney of the Westbrook Police Department, and I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of four young men whose bodies were found in your home. You have the right to remain silent..." The detective droned Walter's Miranda rights while cuffing him behind his back; but Walter's head swam and the policeman was drowned out by

the ringing in his ears and the reporters' shouted questions. How could this happen? It wasn't fair. He couldn't believe Dottie's family had turned him in, but it was too much of a coincidence that they were hauling him away as soon as he arrived home. Maybe that was it then: there was simply no justice in the world. The detective swung him around and led him through the throng of reporters. It amazed him how many were present. He remembered when it was only Channels 2, 5, 7 and 9, but now with cable, everyone seemed to be one. And that didn't include the newspapers. One particularly obnoxious reporter kept shoving her microphone into his face as she scurried alongside, until it irritated him enough to catch his attention.

"Why did you do it?" she screamed.

Walter glared. A cameraman sprinted behind the woman in order to keep the Minicam aimed over her shoulder. Walter stared directly into the lens.

"I was only trying to help," he said.

Detective Mahoney handed Buczyno the Styrofoam cup of coffee and sat down opposite him across the interrogation table. Ray leaned against the door that led back into the Westbrook squad room.

Jerry pressed RECORD on the cassette player. "I know this is happening pretty fast, Walter. So we're going to review your rights again to make sure you understand them before we proceed."

He studied the accused serial killer while reading Buczyno's Miranda rights, and found he had a hard time gauging him. Buczyno sat sullenly in his chair, leaning heavily on sturdy forearms that rested on the table. His barrel chest and thick, squat neck displayed the strength of a man who was involved with construction for most of his life. His fingernails were cut squarely as if with straight scissors, and dandruff clung to the cream he used in his once-dark hair.

"...you have the right to the presence of an attorney—"

"No lawyers," Walter snapped. "Lawyers keep criminals on the street."

Capparelli smiled. "Sounds like what you need."

Buczyno glared. "I did it, all right? Isn't that what you want to hear? So what do I need a lawyer for?"

"I think you should consider it," Mahoney said.

"No."

"It's your choice." Jerry tapped an index finger on the table. "For some reason, I know I've heard your name before. But you don't have a record, so I can't think why it sounds familiar."

"If you don't remember, then I can't help you."

"Come on, give us a break. What makes a nice guy like you become a serial killer?" Capparelli said. Mahoney stiffened at the hard edge in his partner's voice. Ray used that tone only on the rare occasions when he allowed his personal feelings to carry him beyond his "bad cop" role. "Your neighbors say you're a real friendly guy. Say you had a beautiful wife, a nice home and a good neighborhood..."

Walter shook his head. "Not anymore. Do you know what my house is worth now? Sixty thousand dollars. I lived there forty years and took care of everything myself. But because the neighborhood isn't what it used to be, that's all I'd get. Where can I go on sixty thousand dollars?"

"Probably a free ride to Stateville." Capparelli answered a knock at the door. A patrolman announced they had a call from the medical examiner. "Be right back."

After he left, Buczyno said, "He's a very angry man."

"Detective Capparelli has a hard time dealing with things sometimes."

Walter dropped his gaze, and twisted the ring on his finger. "Is he married?"

Mahoney was taken aback. He drummed his fingers on the table. Should he admit anything to this guy? It might open him up. Jerry decided to see where it led. "Not anymore."

"What about you?"

"Frankly, I had to leave our anniversary dinner because of this."

"I'm sorry. Do you have any children?"

Mahoney hesitated. "Not yet."

Buczyno nodded thoughtfully. "Dottie and I were never blessed. We only had each other." He looked directly into Jerry's eyes. "Can I offer some advice? Make nice memories while you can. Because in the end, when everything else has been taken away, they're all you'll have left."

"Looks like you made some memories here," Capparelli said, reentering the room. "Enough for a lifetime in the joint."

Ray pulled up a chair and dropped his open notebook on the table. "Griskel had some info after a preliminary exam." He glanced at Buczyno, while tapping the scribbled notes with his pencil. "Our friend's latest victim was Franklin Edward Harris, age 22. They ID'd him through a juvie record for aggravated criminal sexual assault. Harris was released from St. Charles about a year ago. Griskel says every bone in his body was broken, and he had residue from duct tape adhesive on his wrists and ankles."

Ray twisted the pencil in his hands. "The other victims were approximately ages 13-17. One had a broken jaw, another a fractured skull, and the third had a couple cracked ribs. Griskel's running a scan through Missing Persons to try to identify the kids from dental records."

The pencil snapped. Capparelli glared at Buczyno from inches away. "Guys like you make me sick, and I'm gonna enjoy putting you away. I knew one of Gacy's victims and—"

"Gacy? That monster? You're disgusting." He turned to Mahoney. "Get me out of here. I said I did it. But if that's what you think, then I've got nothing more to say."

But as Mahoney led Buczyno out for processing, Ray asked, "Your wife's family say anything during your visit?"

Walter looked away. "Just ... 'Don't get caught.'"

Capparelli smirked. "Maybe you should have followed their advice."

Riding the train into the city, one can see the gradual decline from the stately homes of Hinsdale to the gang infested three-flats of Chicago's West Side. Det. Mahoney recognized the more subtle, yet similar changes as he and Ray Capparelli drove through Westbrook. The Buczyno home was located in the southeast corner of town, alongside the Tristate Tollway, nearest the suburbs that bled into the city, and the property values reflected it.

They put on latex gloves after entering the house. Jerry pointed to the keypad mounted by the front door. "Did someone turn the alarm off yesterday?"

Ray shook his head. "I wondered about that too. It was off the whole time. Salinas was surprised to learn that Buczyno even had an alarm. Said he just used the key to get in." He shrugged. "Buczyno must have turned it off for his trip. Only that doesn't make any sense, because every door and window is rigged except for the one in his bedroom, which is double paned and painted shut."

Mahoney popped the cover off the keypad. "There's no speaker."

"And it's not hooked up to the lights, either—or linked downtown. He must carry some sort of device that goes off whenever the alarm is tripped, because we can't find anything in the house."

"Why would he want an alarm that doesn't notify anyone but him?"

"To warn him if someone was coming while he tortured those kids?"

Jerry shook his head. "You know, that's been bothering me. The more we talked with him, the less he fit the profile of a serial killer."

"Don't tell me you think he's covering for someone?"

"It's a possibility. Did you notice his reaction to the news cameras? He looked right at them. Most people bend over to hide their faces."

"You've been watching too much TV. Who's he gonna cover for? His wife's dead and there's no kids. I'm telling you this guy's as sick as they come."

"I don't know. I can't picture him clearly. He just seems like a nice old guy who misses his wife. I liked how he said Karen and I should make our memories while we can."

Ray grunted. "I hear Bundy was a real charmer too," he said. "But you don't see me following his advice." A search through the living room, dining room and kitchen revealed nothing new until they entered Buczyno's bedroom.

"Well, lookee here." Capparelli pulled a baseball bat and some wire from under the bed. One end of the wire was wrapped several times in a loop, while the other was wound into a tight ball about half an inch thick. Approximately eighteen inches of wire, pulled straight, divided the two, and the insulation here looked worn and discolored. Ray fit his hand into the loop, and the contours matched his grip. He pointed the sword-like sculpture at his partner.

"Looks like Buczyno enjoyed a little slap and tickle before killing them." He flicked his wrist and the wire dented the pillow with a *whup*. "Jesus, this makes me sick. So much for your guy missing his wife."

Jerry was thankful he hadn't mentioned Buczyno wanting to know Ray's marital status. He dropped the wire into an evidence bag. "Strangulation?"

"Or beat them with the bat while they were tied to the bedposts. Griskel said there was a broken jaw, a fractured skull and a couple broken ribs."

"But the last guy, Harris, was beaten to a pulp. He couldn't have done that here. There'd be blood all over."

Ray nodded. "Probably did that one in the basement. You notice one of the dining room chairs is missing? Five instead of six?" He got to his feet. "Who knows? Harris was seven or eight years older than the other victims. Maybe Buczyno found a guy on the side who was really into pain. He strapped him in with the duct tape Griskel mentioned, and things just got out of hand." He shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time it's happened."

Jerry thought for a moment. "Then he scrubbed down the concrete and tossed the chair and the old Louisville slugger into the fireplace. But why would he visit his wife's relatives afterward?"

"Search me. But if we can find the roll of tape that matches the adhesive found on Harris' skin, we've got him."

It didn't take long. They found the tape on the top shelf inside the metal storage cabinet. Luckily, the shelf was higher than the basement windows, so the water didn't damage it. Or the contents of the manila envelope underneath.

Mahoney spread the items on the table saw: three men's wallets, two of which still held money; four rings; one watch; three gold chains; two sets of car keys; and a piece of paper with four rectangles drawn on it—three positioned horizontally side by side, and one perpendicular to the others. Inside each a date was written, and three of the four had names listed. One of the names was Franklin Edward Harris.

Jerry inhaled sharply. "Buried treasure."

"Yep. A map of the exact positions Griskel found the bodies." They checked the wallets for ID, and found each matched a name written for a grave site. Two of the victims had been Indiana residents.

"And there's your souvenirs," Ray said. "I told you this guy's a psycho."

After depositing the evidence bags in the trunk of the squad car, they decided to talk with the neighbors one last time before heading back to the station.

The Salinas' home was warm and comfortable. The detectives sat on the afghan-draped sofa, while the homeowners nervously held hands on the loveseat. Mrs. Salinas offered them coffee, but Ray declined, saying they wouldn't be staying long. The mantel above the fireplace held a porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary and silver crosses filled the spaces between photos of children and grandchildren.

"It was quite a shock," Benito was saying. "We've lived next door to Walt for twenty-five years, and we never expected anything like this from him."

"Did you ever notice any changes in his personality?" Det. Capparelli asked. "Mood swings, things like that?"

Mrs. Salinas wrung her hands. "He had a very difficult time after Dottie died. When it was over, we encouraged him to move to Arizona or Florida. We thought it might be best for him to get away from the things that would remind him of all he'd been through, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said the expenses had drained their savings, and he wouldn't have been able to afford to move even if he'd wanted to."

"He was depressed, then."

Benito gave him an odd look. "Well, I should say so."

"What about sudden changes in behavior?" Jerry asked.

"It's hard to say, since he kept to himself for a long time afterward," Mrs. Salinas said. "He stayed indoors, let the yard go to seed, hardly even said hello when he came out to get the paper. We were very worried, since he was always neighborly. But we thought he just needed to be alone to deal with everything that had happened to Dottie."

"It took him a year to snap out of it," Benito said. "I'd been encouraging him to pick up his woodworking, and he finally got into it with a real zest. He redid everything in the living and dining rooms. Burned the old furniture and made new ones, painted the rooms—you name it."

"How quickly did you notice this change?"

"Practically overnight. We woke up one morning, and he was hauling in new wood. Said it would help him cope better, and we agreed. He became more like his old self again."

"What did he do after that?"

"Started right in on the yard. By the end of the summer, it was the best looking house in the neighborhood." Benito rubbed his hands on his knees. "Almost made it look too good. The neighborhood isn't what it used to be, and you can even see our houses from the Tristate. I kept after him to put bars on the windows like everyone else, but he wouldn't hear of it—so you can imagine my surprise when you said he had an alarm. I warned him that we'd been robbed a couple of times, but all he ever said was that a man's home is his castle, and he ought to have the right to do what he wants with it." He shook his head. "I just didn't want him to attract any more trouble after all he'd been through."

Ray nodded. "Cancer is hard to deal with."

"Well, sure. There was that."

Jerry leaned forward in his seat. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

The Salinases glanced at one another. "We thought you already knew."

"Knew what, Mr. Salinas?"

Benito cleared his throat. "Dottie was raped."

The detectives spent an hour reviewing old files before having Buczyno brought to them. Stuart Evans from the DuPage County State's Attorney's Office joined them for the meeting, and the detectives did their best to hide their irritation. Evans, with his slight build and thick, gold wire-rimmed glasses, had a tendency to be more concerned about the sensational aspects of a case for political exposure, than in considering all the minute details which completed it's full picture.

"I remember why your name sounds familiar." Mahoney's tone was softer now as they confronted Buczyno across the interrogation table.

Walter's shoulders visibly relaxed. "Then there's nothing more to say."

Jerry turned his chair around, scraping the wooden legs on the tiled floor, and rested his arms on the back of the chair. "Help me, Walt. Detective Capparelli, Mr. Evans and I are meeting later with the lieutenant and an FBI agent. If you can make us understand, we might be able to explain things better. I'm not promising anything, but if you cooperate, we'll take everything into consideration."

"Now, wait a minute!" Evans said.

Capparelli, who had been unusually quiet since their visit with the Salinases, aimed a pencil at the little man for silence. He said to Buczyno, "Tell us about Dottie."

Walter bristled. He dropped his gaze to his shaking hands, and his eyes filled with tears.

"She'd been sick for so long," he said. "I felt helpless as the cancer...the treatments...tore apart the woman I loved." He caressed the skin where his wedding ring had been. "She didn't want to be in a hospital, so we used our savings to set up the other bedroom for her. A hospice nurse came by once a day to administer her medications and change her oxygen tanks. Dottie was so frail. She'd lost her hair and weighed only ninety pounds. She could barely move, but she wanted to die at home with dignity."

"Tell us about the night it happened," Jerry said.

"I went out for groceries. I was only gone about a half an hour...but when I came home, there was this man...on top of her." Walter struggled to control himself. "I wrestled him to the floor and hit him until he passed out. Then I called the police." He breathed deeply. "But it was too much for Dottie. She passed away a few days later."

"What happened at the trial?" Ray asked.

Walter's fists clenched as he glared at Evans. "We were assigned an assistant state's attorney fresh out of school," he said, "while the punk got a millionaire lawyer doing *pro bono* work." He told them the attorney's name, and Mahoney admitted the woman liked to pose for the television cameras outside her private practice in Lake Forest. "She got the judge to ignore the punk's list of prior arrests—even though the kid was fifteen when he did this to my wife. Then she convinced the judge that my wife was going to die anyway, and the rape had nothing to do with it."

Walter shook with anger. "And the judge sent him to a juvenile home, where he was released at age 21." He pounded his fist on the table. "Six years! For killing my wife."

Jerry nodded. "That's why I remembered your name. It must have been hard on you."

"I fell apart," said Buczyno. "My beliefs were shattered. I'd worked hard all of my life, only to grow old and find our neighborhood run by gangs, medical costs that broke us, and a legal system that protects only criminals."

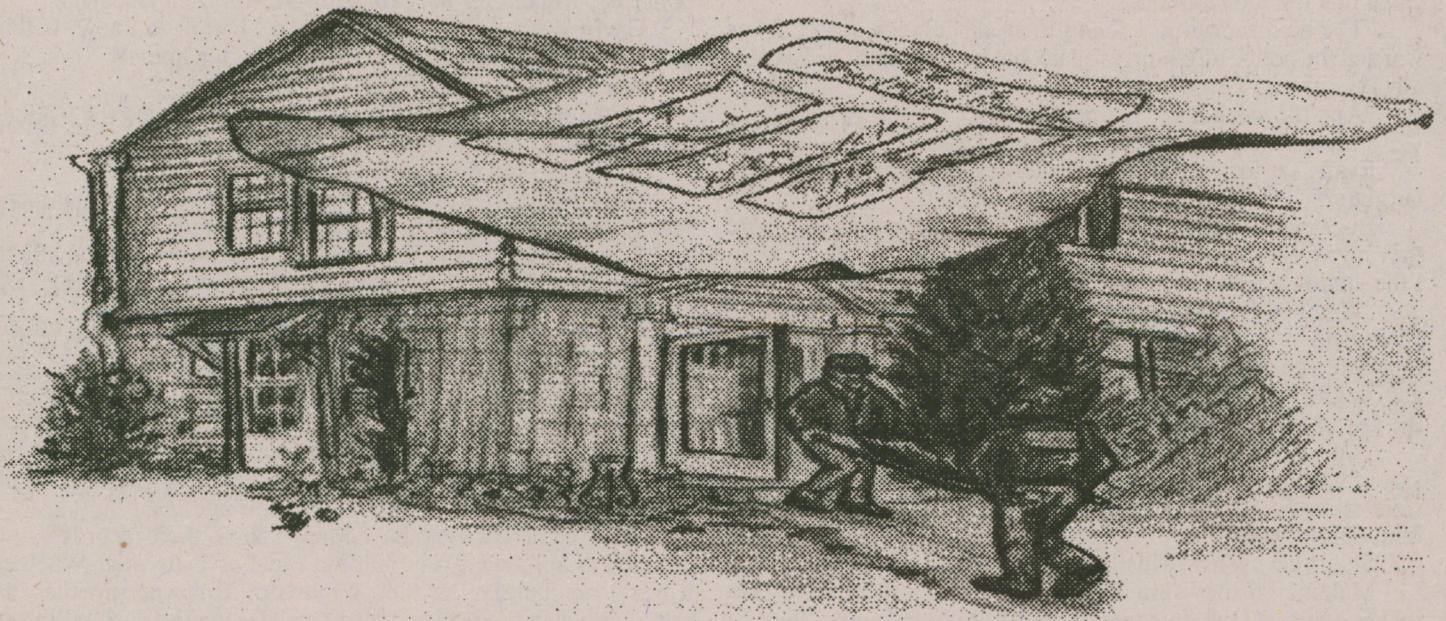
"So you retaliated by becoming a serial killer?" Stuart said.

Buczyno sighed. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Then explain." Jerry unfolded a photocopy of the map they'd found in Buczyno's home. His finger tapped the drawing of the grave site with the earliest date. "Tell us what happened here."

Walter was silent for a long time. "It was about a year after Dottie died," he began. "I'd been having trouble sleeping. I hid a baseball bat under the bed because I kept having nightmares about what happened to Dottie. I'd wake at any little sound."

He wrung his hands. "That night, I really did hear someone. I grabbed the bat and tiptoed to the bedroom door. We saw each other as he stepped into the hallway. When he raised his gun, I swung the bat as hard as I could." Walter turned away. "I broke



his jaw, but he tried to make a run for it. I caught him in the living room and choked him with the bat until he stopped breathing. When I realized what I'd done, I wrapped his body in garbage bags and buried him in the crawlspace."

"Why didn't you just call the police?" Evans asked.

Walter's eyes blazed. "I already saw what the so-called 'justice' system could do for my family," he said. "We've created a society where lawyers get rich, criminals become celebrities, and victims are expected to feel lucky if they're portrayed in a Made-for-TV movie." He flexed his fingers. "So I took care of the problem myself.

"But there was so much blood. I spent the rest of the night washing walls and burning furniture." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I was scared I'd get caught, so I started repainting that day. I built new furniture, stripped and refinished the tiles—I did everything I could think of to hide any evidence."

"While the neighbors thought you were getting on with your life," Jerry said.

"Right. But inside I was a wreck. I jumped every time the phone rang. Whenever there was a knock at the door, I thought the police had come to arrest me."

"But they never did."

Walter shook his head. "And after a while I stopped being afraid. I fixed the house up like it used to be. I took control of my life again."

"What about the boys from Indiana?" Ray asked.

"After that first night, I'd had a system installed that set off a silent vibration, like a pager, on my wrist watch. A number would light up on the dial which indicated what door or window had been opened to trip the alarm. That way, I'd know which direction they were coming from. My bedroom is carpeted, so they wouldn't hear me waiting."

Walter flexed his fingers. "I didn't want all that bloodshed again, so I held the bat and wire loop together. When the punk came into the hallway, I hit him in the stomach—or the wrist, if he was holding a weapon. Then I dropped the bat, grabbed the ball on the other end of the wire, wrapped it around the punk's neck and strangled him. It was quick and clean."

"Until you heard his friend."

Buczyno nodded. "He made a run for it, but I cracked him over the head with the bat in the living room. Smartest thing I ever did was put those vinyl cushions in. They're a lot easier to clean than the old cloth ones.

"The next morning, I found their car a block away. I was worried the police might investigate, but no one came by. Eventually the car was towed away."

"And the weapons?" Capparelli said.

"Tossed them in the Des Plaines River."

Evans sat forward. "Are you telling me your victims were burglars?"

Buczyno looked the state's attorney straight in the eyes. "Are they my victims because I killed them?" he said angrily. "Or am I the victim of unsuccessful robberies?"

"That's walking a mighty fine line, Walt." Stuart pushed his chair away. "You know what I think? I think the more you did it, the more you enjoyed it. And you got bolder because you never got caught. Until this last time, when you got so cocky you beat the guy to a bloody pulp—"

"No." Evans stared in surprise as Mahoney came around the side of the table. "That's not what happened, is it, Walt? No, you were strangling him like the others. But then you recognized him. Didn't you?"

Stuart gave a low whistle.

Mahoney leaned into Buczyno until their faces were only inches apart. "Time to come clean. Tell me his name, Walt. I

want to hear you say it." He slammed his palm on the table. "Tell me!"

Buczyno's eyes grew hard and cold, and the knuckles of his fists turned white.

"Franklin Edward Harris. The bastard who killed my wife."

"So he dragged Harris into the basement, duct taped him to a dining room chair, and beat him to death with a baseball bat."

The lieutenant's office was silent as the detectives recounted Buczyno's story. Robert J. Gavin drummed his fingers on his desktop, while Phillip Kleisner, the FBI agent, leaned back against the file cabinet. Evans stood beside the lieutenant's desk. Dust motes swirled in the fading afternoon sunlight that streamed between the venetian blinds.

Mahoney spread his palms. "He took out his frustration with lawyers, medical costs, the disintegration of his neighborhood and the loss of his wife on the man who represented everything that had gone wrong in his life."

"And judging by the fact that every bone in Harris' body was broken," Capparelli said, "Buczyno made it last a long, long time."

"Then he swabbed the basement, threw the chair and bat into the fireplace, and caught the first available flight to St. Paul to tell his wife's family that Dottie's murder had been avenged. It was sheer coincidence the pipe burst while he was away. Otherwise we might never have caught him."

"Why did Harris go back there?" Gavin asked.

Capparelli shrugged. "You know how the world works today. Spill coffee on yourself and it's the restaurant's fault. Murder someone and accuse the arresting officer of racism. Nobody's responsible for their own actions—it's who's ever accountable." Ray tapped a pencil on his leg. "Harris figured he did time, not because he raped a sick, old woman, but because Buczyno fingered him. And the whole time Harris sat in his cell, he planned on getting even."

"Except Buczyno was ready for him."

"Right. Harris even waited a year after his release to throw any suspicion off him, for all the good it did."

"When I called his house," Mahoney said, "his old lady kept insisting that Harris was out running errands. But when I informed her that he'd been one of Buczyno's victims, she started wailing about how society and the cops always had it in for him. She threatened to file a 'Wrongful Death' lawsuit against the police department for not protecting Harris from Buczyno."

Gavin swore. "All right, you two. I want to know: Is this guy a serial killer or just a man defending his home?"

Ray said, "A man's home is his castle."

"Then let's hope it's only one man's castle," said the lieutenant. "We don't need a whole town of vigilantes."

"It might keep the crime wave down."

"Or it will give the criminals and their lawyers another loophole to get away with their crimes," Evans said.

"Besides, that's only his story," said Kleisner. "Serial killers are notorious liars with the ability to seem very convincing. Do you have any evidence to support his account?"

Jerry faced the FBI agent. "We ran a check on all the victims after they'd been identified. Every one had at least a two-page record of armed robbery, burglary, home invasion, possession and/or selling of drugs, possession of unregistered weapons, grand theft auto—you name it, dating back to as early as age eight." He shook his head. "These weren't kids out having a little fun. They were serious offenders, regardless of their ages."

"How could Buczyno have known about their records?"

"He didn't, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Whether it was a first burglary or their hundredth, Buczyno saw them as criminals when they entered his home. He viewed each killing as

ridding the neighborhood of one more criminal the legal system might let go. Remember what he said? 'I was only trying to help.'

"What about the souvenirs?"

Mahoney shrugged. "Buczyno never thought the bodies would be found until after his death. He saved his victim's personal effects, even the money in their wallets, so they could be identified. He felt the families had suffered enough from the victims' lifestyles, and he wanted the families to have closure. Like he got after Harris' death."

Kleisner ignored the comment. "Why'd those boys come all the way from Indiana?"

"Happens all the time," Capparelli said. "Boys looking for some action, and they spot Buczyno's house from the Tollway, right by the exit ramp. It's a nice house that appears unprotected in a crumbling neighborhood. Whether they're looking to fence something in the city or want to blow off steam on the way home, they figure to get in and out and back on the Tristate before anyone's the wiser. Only the house ain't the easy target it seems to be."

"Sounds like entrapment," Gavin said.

Mahoney shook his head. "Won't work. That's like saying a woman deserves to be raped because of the way she dresses."

"Then he's like that guy on the New York subway," Evans said.

"Not at all. Buczyno never left his home. The perpetrators came to him."

"What are we supposed to do?" Gavin said. "Some will say Harris got what he deserved. But what about the others? We can't just let him go. How do we know he hasn't been pushed too far? What if he does it again?"

"No offense, lieutenant," Mahoney said, "but that's not the problem anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jerry sat forward. "It means our concern is the public's reaction. The media has already built Buczyno into the newest Gacy, and no matter what we do, they'll sensationalize it for ratings."

"But if we try to release Walt's story, every special interest group will use him as an example. Yes, some will say Harris got what he deserved. But others will accuse the police of a cover-up. There'll be a run on city hall."

"Plus the fact that Buczyno is now a target," Capparelli said. "The media has told everyone who he is, what he looks like and where he lives. Someone out there, possibly a relative of one of Buczyno's victims or just someone wanting to make a name for himself, will use that information to kill him."

"I don't believe this!" Evans said. "How will the upcoming primaries look when the people find out the police department is more concerned about the welfare of a serial killer than the safety of their community? Talk about soft on crime! At the very least, Buczyno should be charged with concealing a homicide."

The lieutenant steepled his fingers. "Gentlemen, what do you propose we do?"

The room was silent for a long time. Finally, Kleisner stepped forward. "Maybe I can help."

"...Walter Buczyno, the alleged Westbrook serial killer, was discovered hanging in his cell early this morning prior to his intended transfer to the DuPage County Jail," the television reporter announced with her indignant, politically correct tone. She stood so the viewer could see the Westbrook Police Department sign over her right shoulder. The word LIVE and the station's logo appeared in the screen's lower left corner without obstructing her outfit. "Westbrook officials refuse to comment about the possibility of foul play, but coupled with the fatal beating of Jeffrey Dahmer in a Milwaukee prison, it brings into question the issue of prison security and the rights of the inmates. We will

examine this hotly-debated issue in a special, hour-long segment of the five o'clock news—"

Det. Mahoney snapped the TV off. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Looks like we're done with the case."

"Guess so." Ray Capparelli pulled some paperwork from the IN file on the corner of his desk.

Outside, the overcast sky threatened snow. The grayness had begun to wear Jerry down. He remembered being younger, when everything was black and white, right or wrong. But lately everything, including justice, had faded into overlapping shades of gray. He needed a little color in his life.

"Listen, Ray...I'm taking a couple vacation days. I already cleared it with the lieutenant and got someone to cover for me. He agrees it'd be a good idea to get away from here."

Ray sorted the papers on his desk without commenting.

"Anyway," he continued, "I thought I'd take Karen to Galena for a long weekend. You know, sort of make up for having to skip out on our anniversary. Spend some time alone. Have dinner in a nice restaurant. Maybe do some antique shopping like she's been wanting."

Capparelli shrugged without lifting his gaze from the paperwork. "Okay."

"Well...I'll see you on Monday then."

"Sure."

But as Jerry turned to leave, Ray said in a voice so soft he almost missed it, "Make some nice memories this weekend."

Jerry smiled, surprised. "Thanks, Ray. We will."

The heavysset man stepped out of his new, white stucco townhouse and into the Arizona sunshine. Although it was only 9 AM, the temperature was already 81 degrees, and everything indicated that it would be as hot and dry as the television weatherman had said. He stooped to pick up the newspaper at the bottom of the driveway.

"Hey, Steadman!"

It took him a moment to react to the name, and by the time the man glanced up and squinted through the brightness, his neighbor had already crossed his front yard with his hand extended.

"Roland Segal. Welcome to Green Valley. How you like things so far, Walt?"

Walter Steadman. It was going to take him a while to get used to that one. Steadman. Like instead of his real name. He hoped the Witness Protection Program had used more imagination when they covered his disappearance.

"So where're you from, Walt?" Like most of the other retirees, Roland wore a V-neck sweater over a short sleeve dress shirt and slacks. Walter felt the sweat bead under his arms and roll down the sides under his shirt.

"St. Paul."

"The Mrs. and I are from Buffalo. We sure don't miss the weather—or the crime. It's real safe around here. You can practically leave your doors open. You up for a round of golf?"

He shook his head. "I've still got a lot of unpacking to do."

"Suit yourself. Maybe the wife and I'll have you over for a drink later."

"That'd be nice."

Walter waved when his neighbor drove off to pick up the others for their golf game. He thought about what Roland had said about the neighborhood. Safe, he'd said.

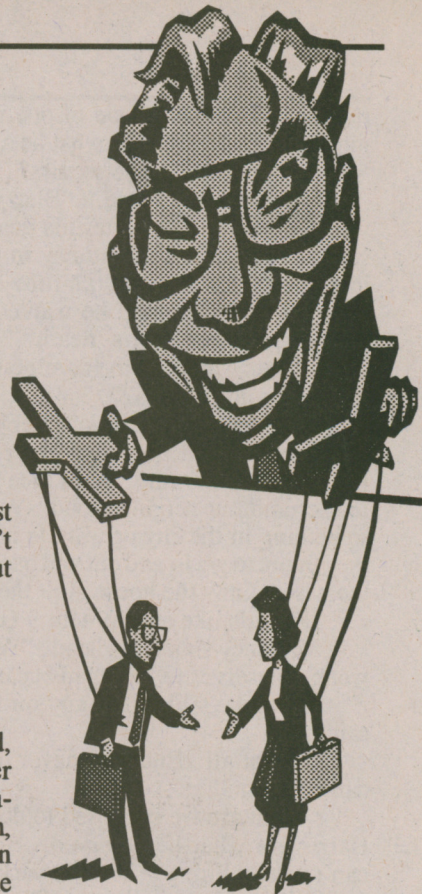
Walter nodded. He'd make sure of it.

PW

Special thanks to Sgt. Brian Seastone and Sgt. Michael A. Black for their technical assistance.

Written by
TRUTHXFREE

THIS PLANET SUCKS



What?

A Word From The Editor

If your an ultra-conservative stop reading this. If your an ultra-conservative with an open mind, you may continue. So, here's the story on this new column.

I have yet to understand the phenomena of Chat Rooms. Call me old fashioned, call me a slow typer...or just call me slow. I've tried it on AOL a few times and I never got in the groove—except once. It was a cold winter day on Long Island. No football, it was raining, I was caught-up on my reading and other work, so I went poking around the Chat Rooms on AOL. I entered a room called IF YOU GOT THE BALLS. I said to myself, "Self, you have balls. Don't you?" In I went. There I chanced to meet the author of PW's new column, This Planet Sucks...TRUTHXFREE. He started rambling about how the people who make the rules don't follow them and how the concept of the law has been so distorted we are worse off now then before there were laws, yadda, yadda, yadda. But you know what happened? I agreed with most of what he/she had to say. When he/she discovered that I had a magazine he/she asked, "What do you do to protect your rights and the rights of the people you care about? Do you use your magazine to educate the public?" My answer was, "Sometimes. Occasionally a story I select addresses a social issue. But, maybe, not often enough."

So here's the deal. I don't know who TRUTHXFREE is. He/she proposed to write this

column and I agreed. *This Planet Sucks* will be a string of socially relevant facts that will surprise you, excite you, disgust you and sometimes sadden you. It will be one page. For those of you here for fiction only, complain not! I eliminated a page of advertising to make room for *This Planet Sucks*.

WARNING: As I said, I don't know who TRUTHXFREE is. Nor will I agree with everything he/she writes. The magazine takes no responsibility for the comments made herein and ...PARENTS—please read this column first and determine whether you feel it is appropriate for children. At times the columnist may touch on topics you don't feel your children are ready for...I will not be editing content—that's the deal we made. TRUTHXFREE can be reached at TRUTHXFREE@AOL.COM. Do not write me—TRUTHXFREE is not being paid, nor do I have an address for him/her. I think he/she has watched *Conspiracy Theory* to many times...or he/she hits to close to home.

—Edward J. McFadden, Editor

TRUTHXFREE@AOL.COM

Here we are...well...I have never written a column before so I'm not sure what to say. Ed tells me his readers are loyal, intelligent and kind...hence he is still in business. Write me if you want...no guarantee I'll get back to you. In fact, I probably won't. However, on occasion, when someone writes something good, I'll entertain a letter or two in the column. If you want to send me facts to be part of the article you must provide a

source—no exceptions. It must be a source I can verify or I can't print it. This column is about facts...not fiction.

Spaced out?

President Ronald Reagan said, during a question-and-answer session after a speech about human rights and the Soviet Union, May 5, 1988, "But I've often wondered, what if all of us in the world discovered that we were threatened by an outer—a power from outer space, from another planet." "Wouldn't we all of a sudden find that we didn't have any differences between us at all, we are all human beings, citizens of the world, and wouldn't we come together to fight that particular threat?" the president asked.

[When I read this I was amazed. Would we join together—I think not. And if the President feels this way, why do they keep secrets from "the citizens of the world."]

LAND OF THE FREE?

A pamphlet entitled *How Parents Can Help Children Live Marijuana Free*, by Gerald Smith of the University of Utah's criminology department with a forward by Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT), cites "excessive preoccupation with social causes, race relations, environmental issues, etc." as a warning sign of teen drug use. —Washington Post, Oct. 7, 1998

[Uh, oh, looks like we got a couple of morons here.]

HAARP – Why not give us the truth?

At a public hearing in Brussels on the 5th of February, the com-

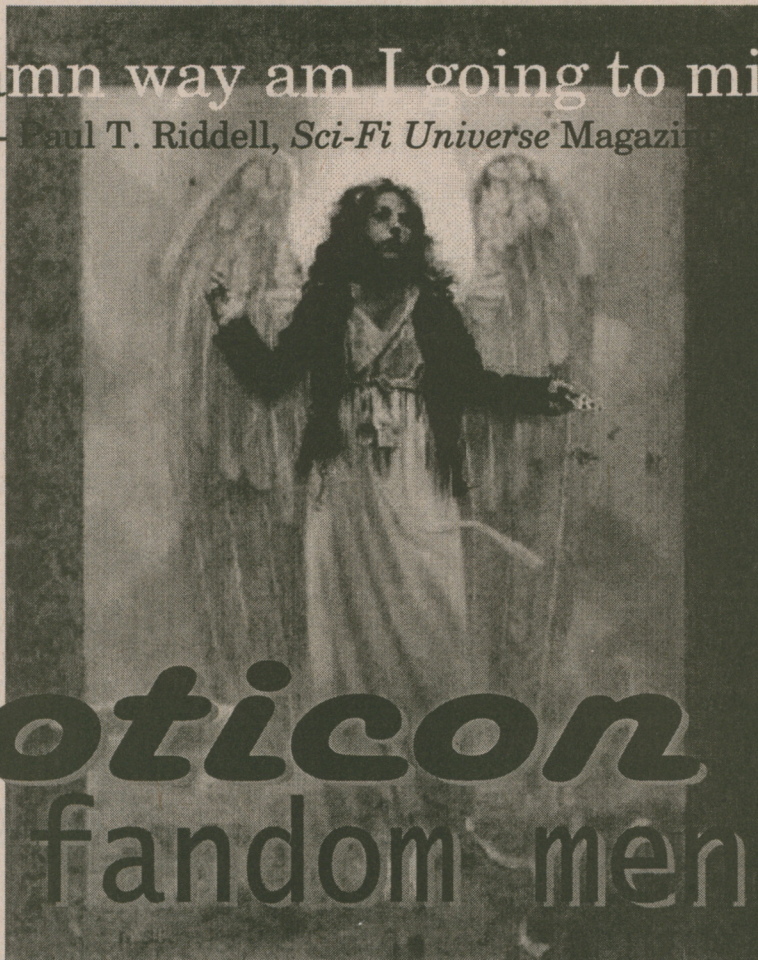
mittee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament discussed the US army's HAARP project—the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program. The HAARP project involves the manipulation of the earth's ionosphere, using very high intensity beams of electromagnetic radiations. HAARP beams can be used to mark the trajectory of missiles or as reflectors for radio communications. According to experts testifying to the hearing, HAARP allows the manipulator to wipe out communications globally at will or to make their own communications resilient in the event of nuclear war. In view of the grave potential implications of the information provided, NATO had declined to provide its own side of the story.

[Well...that is a staggering thought. We, you, are paying for this. When I went to the HAARP home page the project was described as "a scientific endeavor aimed at studying the properties and behavior of the ionosphere..." This is scary stuff—wipe out communications world wide? Where is Dr. Evil? Write your representatives and ask them to explain this project to you and what it costs.]

MUCH MORE NEXT TIME!

" No goddamn way am I going to miss this."

-- Paul T. Riddell, *Sci-Fi Universe Magazine*



exoticon 2 the fandom menace

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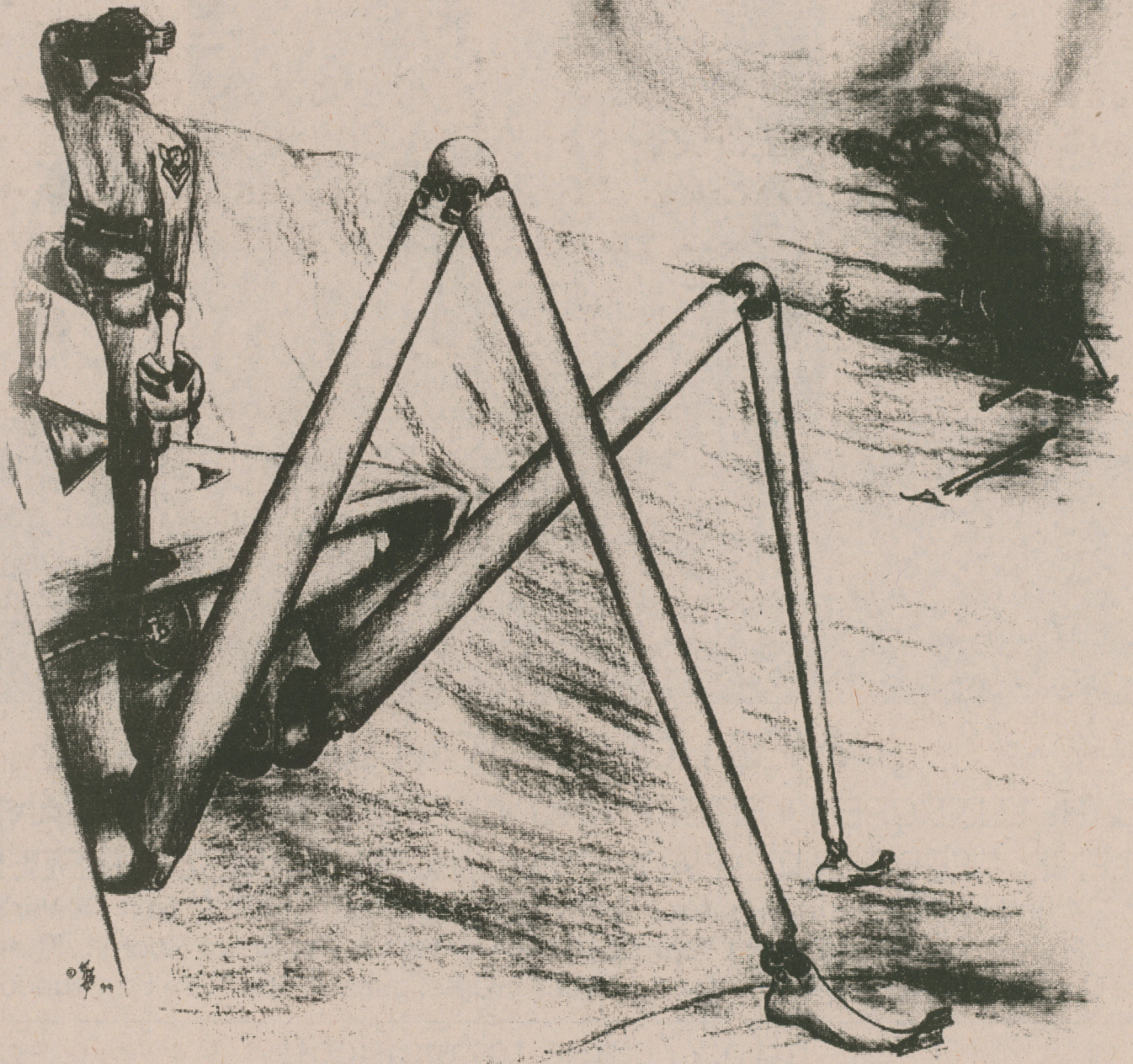
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Krieger marks Frank's second appearance in PW. Frank is a prolific author whose work has appeared in over 200 small press and professional magazines. He hails from Gonzales, LA.

K R I E G E R

Name: Krieger, Karl W. Serial Number 3567455. Rank: Master Sergeant, 535th Spider Contingent, Fifth Corps, Terran Empire Interstel Marines. Present assignment: Counter-Invasion Task Force 3X35, Planet Carboneau. Present enemy: Incursion of forces from the planet Drycon.

by Frank O. Dodge
Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

The desert sun glared in my eyes and off the immobile war machine. I stood on the deck of the disabled spider, wiped my sweating forehead on my sleeve, and replaced my helmet, lowering the Poloroid visor. I looked around the desolate landscape, and down at the two remaining members of my crew. Branford, the gunner, Kyros, the communicator, and I, were the only survivors of the bombardment. Desultory explosions continued to mangle the remains of the already destroyed Spider Contingent. Branford, the gunner, looked up. "What the hell do we do now, Sarge?"

"Get the hell out of here. We've got to get old Glenda Jean up and running. There's no place to walk to."

The long distance cannonade slackened, leaving the field cluttered with the smoking ruins of battle-spiders, twisted robo-guns, and the sprawled bodies of the slain. The cessation of the explosions would herald the imminent arrival of Dryconian foot troopers. We had to get out of there before that happened.

I growled at the gunner, who was tinkering with the drive mechanism. "Dammit, Bran, get the bloody thing running."

Branford wiped his greasy hands on his trousers, and stared into the open propulsion compartment. Dammit, Sarge, I'm a gunner, not a tech." He glanced at the crumpled body of the engineer. "If Janos hadn't got himself killed, we'd be out of here."

I swung down off the eight-legged battle-sled, and dropped to the ground. "Move. Let me look at it."

I examined the open drive compartment, and spotted the damaged part. I grunted, and patted the spider's steel flank. "It's all right, old girl, I see what's wrong." I turned to Branford. "Hand me that wrench."

I straightened and handed the component to Kyros. "Ky, check that sled over there for one of these."

Off at a run, the communicator was back in a moment with an undamaged duplicate.

Video's a blizzard."

He flipped switches and fine-tuned dials. Suddenly he pressed the headset to his ears. "Yo, Sarge, I'm starting to get something on audio."

I grunted. "About damn time. What?"

Kyros cursed. "Must be really bad, Sarge. They're not bothering with code, it's coming on in plain language...here it is...All Forces Southern command. Dryconian break-through our lines...all units fall back to Hansoom river to regroup..."

"You sure it's righteous dope?"

"Yeah, Sarge. I recognize Hannond's voice. It's legit, okay."

I swore. "That's nearly forty-five hundred clicks of flat out desert. Old Glenda Jean here makes thirty-five clicks an hour. Five days if the going's perfect, and it won't be. A week, at least. What's our water supply and rations?"

Branford slipped down from the gun-bubble, and checked the water tank. "Two thirds full. Water's okay. No sweat there." He rummaged through the supply locker. "Rations for four days. Looks like we'll have to go easy, but hell, we're all getting too fat anyway."

"Okay."

I snaked the spider between the piles of twisted metal, keeping an eye on the compass. The eight legs of the sled extended and retracted according to the terrain, keeping the body level.

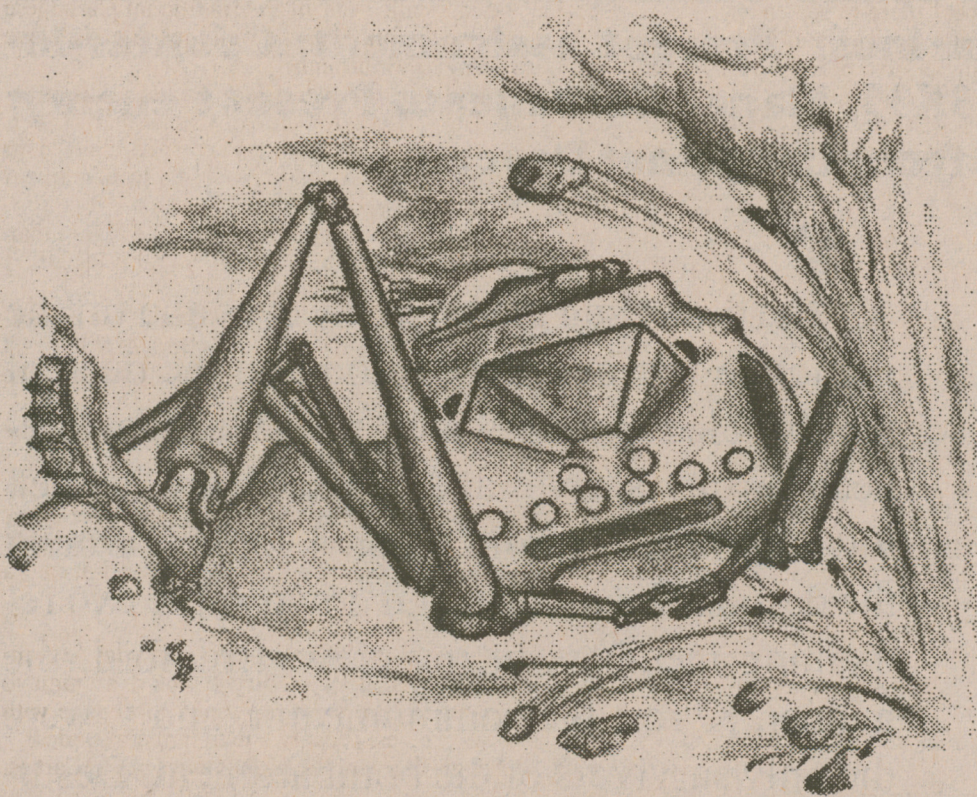
Behind us, all bombardment ceased. I pushed the throttle wide. "Come on, old girl, give us all you got, or you'll have those Dryconian sharks swimming up your tailpipe!"

In an ironic way, my name is singularly appropriate. In the Germanic language of my home planet, Earth, Krieger means warrior. At age twelve I enlisted as ship's boy aboard an Interstel battle cruiser, and was assigned to one of the Marine companies to run errands, shine boots and brass buttons, keep the compartment clean. At eighteen, I was promoted to Private, and over time earned my Sergeant's stripes. I have seen nothing but war, and have had no home but the front line for the past fifteen years, the last five in the war on Carboneau. Before that, it had been another little boondocks planet...before that, and before that. War is all I have ever known.

After the loss of my right eye in a skirmish ten years ago, it was replaced with a neurocamera implanted in the socket, and spliced to the optic nerve. It enabled me to zoom, and/or to see in the infra-red range. An invaluable asset in locating enemies by their body-heat, and homing in on them. Later, a near brush with a disrupter blast deprived me of my right arm and leg. The surgeons had replaced them with cyborg servo-limbs. In addition to a hand, the arm had a built-in disrupter pistol with a power-pack that kept itself charged from my metabolism. It all worked by thought. I had only to zoom in on an infra-red blip, think shoot, and the arm pointed and fired.

I was now Krieger, the complete warrior.

The Dryconians had been trying to take Carboneau for over five years. Their objective? Mercury. Quicksilver. Their home



A few moments later I slammed the drive compartment door. "All right, all aboard, let's haul ass."

The engine growl-rouw-rouwed as I closed the starting key, coughed and died. I crossed my fingers, talked encouragingly to her, and tried again, enriching the mixture. On the fourth try, the spider coughed, backfired, and settled into a smooth purr. We all three heaved sighs of relief.

Occasional random shells still crashed down as I operated the steering levers, and the sled began to walk away from the direction of the Dryconian army. I looked at the communicator fiddling with his equipment. "Dammit, Ky, make contact with somebody...anybody...what the bloody hell's happening?"

Kyros frowned. "The fish are jamming the waves, Sarge.

world's atmosphere was heavy into mercury vapor, but had begun to become thin in that element. Their world was dying. The tiny planet of Carboneau on the outmost fringe of the Terran Empire was rich in the Dryconian necessity. The irony was that the planet was of no value to the Empire. A trade treaty could easily have been negotiated between the Dryconians and the native Carbonese for the asking. Instead, the Dryconians had chosen to attack, nearly annihilating the indigenous population and the Imperial Terran outpost.

The Empire could not, of course, allow this breach of its sovereignty to be ignored. But, engaged in heavy negotiations with the Galactic Federation, Terra assigned a low priority to the Carboneau affair, and the conflict there had dragged on.

Kyros leaned down, and tapped me on the helmet. "More coming over, Sarge." The communicator put the incoming message on speaker. "Enemy cutting off movement to north, east, and west. There has been a decisive confrontation with Dryconians, but outcome still hanging in the balance. All intelligence sketchy, but indicates that the entire Dryconian army is short on mercury for their breathers. All oases in Imperial hands except Kalil Bahn. One contingent of enemy, believed to be of legion strength, making forced drive to capture the mercury pool there to replenish vapor. All units in vicinity make every effort to take and hold Kalil Bahn until reinforcements arrive. Imperative prevent enemy from..." White static drowned out the transmission.

The Dryconian Army was loosely based on the old Terran Roman makeup. A legion was composed three to six thousand foot troops, and three to seven hundred cavalry, in this case, motorized artillery, and divided into groups of one hundred called centuries. A Dryconian legion normally consisted of seven centuries of foot soldiers, and three centuries of artillery.

Kyros cursed. "A legion! Ten thousand of the bastards! What do you want to bet we're the only unit between Kalil Bahn and those damned fish?"

I laughed harshly. "Why should things get easy, now?"

Though the enemy were commonly referred to as fish, the humanoid Dryconians were not aquatic. They had no scales or fins, but the face came to a blunt point, with large, lidless eyes, a slit of a mouth with fangs, and no nose. The Dryconians breathed through gill-like slits behind recessed ears.

I pulled out the chart shelf, checked our position, and punched in the coordinates for the oasis of Kalil Bahn, leaned back, and clasped my hands behind my head. "Cheer up. There's only one legion of them."

Branford snorted. "What are you, Sarge? One of the old Texas Rangers? One riot, one-Ranger? One spider against ten thousand fish?"

I laughed. "Why not? Aren't we the invincible troops of the Empire? Besides, there are three of us."

Branford snorted. "Great. We outnumber them. Why don't we just surround them?"

Glenda Jean's tireless legs plodded at her best pace through the shifting sands.

Carboneau was seven-eighths desert, and an anomaly peculiar to the planet was the pools of mercury to be found dotting the surface. As though protecting itself from an infection, the pools were contained in basins of glass-like silicon that prevented the mercury from poisoning the surrounding soil. Such pools were ironically dubbed "oases".

Kalil Bahn was the only such oasis for thousands of clicks in any direction.

It was the fifth day. I estimated we'd hit the oasis sometime tomorrow, and was on the verge of dozing, when Branford extended a foot down from the gun-bubble and nudged my helmet.

"Yo, Sarge. Something ahead."

I peered through the forward viewport. I could have used my neurocamera eye, but zoomed the finder in to display the discovery on the screen, so Kyros and Branford could see.

I grinned. "Carbos. Not many, but the kind of fighters we need at this point, thank God."

Branford counted. "Twelve," he snorted. "Great. Now we really outnumber the fish."

I punched the button that ran up the telescoping mast displaying the Terran colors, identifying ourselves. "Don't knock it, Bran, the Carbos are the best fighters in the Empire. If they hadn't been overwhelmed a couple thousand or more to one, we wouldn't need to be here."

Upon spotting the sled, the native Carbonese disappeared into cover. Desert dwellers, they were adept in blending with the sand.

I opened the top hatch. "Take the controls, Ky." I climbed out onto the forward deck, and stood in plain sight to assure the Carbos it was no Dryconian trick.

I leaned down into the hatch. "Kill it here, Ky."

Although there was no sign of the natives, I easily located them via my infra-red vision.

Raising one hand, I called out in the traditional Carbonese greeting, "Together, we are one. We are well met, friends. Have you heard of the enemy breakthrough?"

The Carbos emerged from cover. Their leader, a tall, blue-skinned humanoid with the pointed ears of the southern tribes, tossed back the corner of the headcloth that covered his face, in the sign of friendship. A Carbo never showed his face to an enemy. "Together, we are one, Sergeant," he hissed.

I dropped to the ground. It was bad form to stand higher than your friend. "I am Krieger, of the 535th Spider Contingent," I said, touching my forehead.

The blue-skinned Carbo returned the greeting. "I am Kustos, Corporal. 32nd Carbonese Infantry, Tenth Terran Auxiliaries." He waved at his eleven troopers. "We are all that remain of the Tenth. Where is the rest of your unit, Sergeant?"

"Destroyed. We're all that's left. Haven't you had word of the breakthrough?"

"Yes, Sergeant." The blue-skin indicated his communicator. "We received the order to disperse toward the Hansoom River three days ago. Since then, nothing further has come through. We would have been at the river by now, except we ran into a slight delay."

"Report, Corporal."

Kustos came to attention. "About dusk, yesterday, we encountered a company of Dryconian infantry. It took us all night to account for all of them. There were too many to engage with gunfire. We had to use knives. I lost two men, none wounded."

I nodded. I was familiar with the night tactics of the Carbos. "Well done."

I eyed the packs carried by the blue-skinned warriors. "Rations? We're nearly out."

"Yes, Sergeant. Plenty food, but we lack water."

I called up to Kyros. "Toss down a couple of canteens." I turned back to the Corporal. "You've got food, we've got water. We can hold off for days. Have your men climb aboard. We should make the oasis shortly after dawn."

The Carbo made no comment on fifteen men against a legion. He turned to his men, and bellowed orders.

The blue-skinned warriors climbed atop the sled, and I marched Glenda Jean off toward Kalil Bahn.

I stopped the spider-sled below the crest of a dune, and Kustos sent scouts ahead. The sand-colored robes of the blue warriors

blended so perfectly that I could track them only by infra-red. They slithered on their bellies, entered the tumbled ruins of the old fortification that had been established and abandoned early in the war, and a few minutes later emerged to signal the all clear.

Corporal Kustos immediately posted lookouts, and dispatched two scouts to gather intelligence as to the enemy strength and composition. He directed the digging of interconnecting trenches, and the emplacement of the two light field disrupter-cannons and four conventional machine guns carried by his men. Glenda Jean was camouflaged, her gun-bubble with its three independently controlled energy beam projectors covered by the sand colored cloaks of four of the Carbos.

The preparations for defense were almost complete by the time the scouts returned. The senior saluted, grinning broadly.

I returned the salute. "Report."

"A highly decimated legion, Sergeant. Their breakthrough cost them heavily. Of the original ten thousand, we counted only fifteen centuries of infantry, two companies of light artillery, and one mortar platoon...about two thousand altogether. Sergeant, there's a lot of them, but they're in bad shape. Their atmosphere re-supply tanks are almost empty, and the men are on breatheration...just enough to keep them alive, and on the move. When they find that we are here to oppose them, they'll have to go on full supply to fight, and their air will run out fast."

The blue-skinned scout grinned. "In effect, Sergeant, as gunner Branford said, we outnumber them. If we can hold them off for twenty four hours, they're done for."

I grunted. "If I were about to run out of air, I'd be pretty hard to stop. We stand to take a lot of casualties. The artillery. Disrupter-beam?"

"No, Sergeant, light caliber, conventional high explosives. Same with the mortars."

I rubbed my chin. "We'll have to knock out that artillery and as many of the mortars as we can. Even conventional HE could blast us out of here. ETA?"

"Three hours, Sergeant."

"Well done. We'll be ready for them. Report to Corporal Kustos for assignment."

I scanned the perimeter with the zoom lens in my eye. A faint haze of dust appeared beyond the dunes. "Okay, guys. They're here. Keep low, and let 'em get close. Remember the battle plan."

To the Dryconian advance patrol, the oasis appeared deserted. I watched them scan the ruins through binoculars, and turn back to report. A moment later a line of troopers appeared on the ridge, advancing in skirmishing order. I slammed down the hatch of Glenda Jean, and dropped into the driver's seat. "Let 'em have it!"

Branford closed the firing keys, and the turret swung from right to left, the three independently controlled canons fanning out to maximum coverage. The Carbonese light energy guns joined in, and the combined disrupter beams turned the crests of the dunes to boiling silicon, and the line of Dryconians to puffs of steam.

I slapped the throttle open. "We've got to get that artillery before they recover and get it in place." I grinned at Kyros, who was manning the bog-gun. "Soldiers of the Empire, leave us go amongst the unenlightened!"

The communicator-gunner grinned back. "And teach them the error of their ways," he said, completing the unofficial battle-plan phrase.

The Spider stalked into the disarrayed ranks of the Dryconians, her bubble-guns sweeping in three directions, and Kyros at the bog-gun causing confusion and mayhem among those

closer at hand. The Carbos added the support of their weapons to the carnage.

Branford yelled down from the turret. "There's the guns, Sarge, two o'clock."

I moved the controls, and Glenda Jean stalked among the disorganized gunners. Branford, picking his targets, blasted the cannons one by one. "That's the last of them, Sarge. Let's get the hell out of here!"

"Can you spot the mortars?"

"Nine o'clock."

But the mortar men had gotten their weapons in action, and shells burst all around the spider, many falling among the surviving artillerymen. I laughed. "Give the fish enough time, and they will win the battle for us. I maneuvered the battle sled in a random pattern of evasion, breaking off the action. Heavy fire from the Carbos covered our withdrawal."

Corporal Kustos met me as I swung down from the spider. His blue face creased in a smile. "That should even the odds a little, Sergeant."

Kyros stuck his head out the hatch. "Sarge!"

"Yo."

"The videos cleared up. Headquarters is on the line. They're back on scrambler."

"About time."

I swung up into the bubble. The face on the screen was that of the Planetary Commandant. I saluted. "Sir. MSgt. Krieger, 535th Spiders."

"Your communicator reported that you are at Kalil Bahn. What is your strength, and what is the situation?"

"Sir. My crew and I were the only spider to survive the attack at Mogread. I lost my engineer. We three and twelve Carbonese Auxiliaries are holding the oasis."

"Fifteen of you against a Legion?"

"A very disorganized, decimated, and desperate Legion, General. Out of the original ten thousand, less than two thousand reached here. They have outrun their supply line, and are so low on air that half of them are incapacitated, and the other half barely able to function. We just went amongst them..."

General Taylor chuckled. "...and taught them the error of their ways?"

I grinned. "Sir. At the moment, they are trying to recover."

Branford dropped into the cabin. "Sarge..."

"Yo?"

"There's a party advancing under a flag of truce."

I turned to the General. "You heard, sir?"

"Yes. See what they want."

"What authority do I have to treat with them?"

"Anything short of surrendering the oasis. Elements of the Fourth Marines will be arriving in a matter of hours. You must hold until then." The General turned to the aide standing at his shoulder. "For the record, Charlie, MSgt. Krieger is authorized to treat with the Dryconians on behalf of the Empire. Keep this channel open. Sergeant, stall them as long as you can."

"Aye, aye, sir."

I slapped Branford on the shoulder. "I'll handle anything that happens in the field. Bran, you keep your guns on the dune crests. Ky, if I lift my left hand, walk Glenda Jean the fore, and, Bran, fire one blast fifty meters short. If I ball my left fist, and only if I ball my left fist, or go down, go into full battle mode, and...well you guys know what to do."

"Gotcha, Sarge."

I jumped down from Glenda Jean's deck, descended from the parapet, and approached the white flag. The trappings of the leader of the Dryconian parley party denoted one of high rank, equal to a Terran Field Marshall. The alien's hissing voice was

distorted by the life-support helmet he wore, but I had had plenty of experience with the Dryconians, and had little difficulty in understanding.

The Dryconian stared haughtily through his visor. "Where is your officer?"

I ignored the Field Marshall momentarily and examined the faces of the accompanying troopers. A lifetime of combat allowed me to read soldiers true feelings by their expressions. These reflected only despair. I gave a little grunt of satisfaction, and saluted. "I am in command, Lord Field Marshall."

The Dryconian stared at the emblem on my sleeve, and the fish-like features curled in a contemptuous sneer. "I am expected to negotiate with an underling?"

I shrugged. "You asked for the parley. I see nothing for you to negotiate about with anybody, but I am empowered to accept your surrender on behalf of the Terran Empire."

The alien face showed signs of fury. "My surrender?" He scanned the oasis defenses. "You insubordinate quag, I was prepared to offer you your lives to prevent further slaughter."

I laughed. "The slaughter of whom, Lord Field Marshall? My men? Or yours?" My expression hardened. I raised my voice so the Dryconian troopers could hear. "These are the terms of the Empire. Immediate, unconditional surrender. Your troops are to lay down their arms and approach by squads, to be placed under guard. Those who do so will be given all the mercury they need. Those who do not, will be left to die. This is the only offer, and it will not be repeated."

I saluted. "This parley is finished."

The Dryconian's face blanched with rage. He hissed furiously. "Terran quag! I have but to raise my hand and my mortars will blast your pitiable rabble to atoms."

My smile was anything but humorous. "Watch what happens when I raise my hand."

The formidable battle spider stalked to the parapet, and a crackling blue beam lanced from one of her disrupters, turning a twenty foot circle of sand into a boiling pool of silicon. The muzzles raised, threatening the massed Dryconian troopers.

The Field Marshall cursed, and yanked his energy pistol from its scabbard, nullifying the protection of the white flag. My arm blurred as it pointed and fired. The Dryconian officer disappeared in a burst of steam. The three troopers of the parley party raised their hands, expectation of immediate death showing in their faces.

I growled. "You have nothing to fear. You did not break the code. Return to your officers, and tell them the terms offered by the Empire. I looked at my chronometer. They have fifteen minutes to comply. Fifteen minutes, or my spider will go amongst you again."

The Dryconian soldiers blanched. They were familiar with the phrase, and knew their enfeebled ability to withstand another foray, knew that even if they should destroy the spider, their losses would be devastating. "It shall be as you say, Sergeant."

I lowered my arm. "Fifteen minutes. No more."

Back in Glenda Jean's cabin, I reported to the General. "Sir. The Dryconian Field Marshall broke the covenant by drawing his weapon. I was forced to disrupt him. I gave the fish fifteen minutes before we go amongst them. From the looks on the faces of the rest of the parley party, they can't stand another sortie." I looked at my chronometer. "We go in five minutes."

The Planetary Commandant leaned forward. "Can you not hold until the Fourth arrives?"

"Sir. They are in dire desperation. If they do not accept my terms, their only alternative is to assault in force. We could be overrun by sheer numbers. But the death of the Field Marshall has them in confusion. That's why I made the ultimatum so short. We have to attack before the officers can come to any sort of

agreement. The grunts are already defeated. An incursion by Glenda Jean could cause them to mutiny."

The Commandant looked puzzled. "Glenda Jean?"

I grinned. "My spider, sir. She's my sweetheart."

General Taylor laughed. "Sergeant Krieger, your assessment of the situation is sound. Your military grasp, and your ability to make quick decisions in the field have earned you promotion. Captain Krieger, go amongst the unenlightened, and teach them the error of their ways."

I saluted. "Aye, aye, sir."

Kyros cut the connection, and turned to the gunner. "Well, Bran, look who's a Captain."

I grinned. "Shut up and button down. The fifteen minutes is up."

Colonel Wong Li of the Fourth Corps, Interstel Marines, Terran Empire, returned my salute, and ran his gaze over the Dryconian prisoners huddled under the guns of the Carbonese Auxiliaries. "Two hundred fifty seven? All that's left out of an attack force of nearly two thousand? And without a single casualty to your command! Well done, Captain! Well done."

"Sir. The Carbos deserve most of the credit."

"I shall so mention in my report."

He came to attention, and saluted. "Captain, you have been awarded the Imperial Interstel Medal of Honor, which entitles you to this salute, and the gratitude of every grunt in the Corps."

He eyed the man standing before him. "You probably haven't heard, Captain, but your promotion, and the reason for it, has been promulgated throughout the Command on Carboneau. You didn't know, Krieger, but all mercury oases with the exception of Kalil Bahn have been secured by Imperial forces. The fish had dealt us a grievous blow, and could have pushed us from the planet, but needed to take Kalil Bahn to replenish their air. This drive by the fish was their last desperate effort. When word of the defeat here spread through the Dryconian army, they began to surrender by centuries and legions."

The Colonel looked at the twelve blue-skinned Carbonese, and saluted. "Corporal Kustos, you and your men will be honored by your people as the ones who returned to them their home. The war with the Dryconians is over."

The Carbo smiled, and returned the salute. He looked at the Terrans. "Together, Colonel, we are one."

PW

FLAVOR

Think of meteors
and quarks
when seconds fold back
into our world of dusty crawl-and-gather.

Send earthly fingers
to examine root slivers;
visit strange architectures of
misfit beauty,
elusive, but found.

Count tears for stars, those charmed
complexities we so invest with human need,

they call to us.

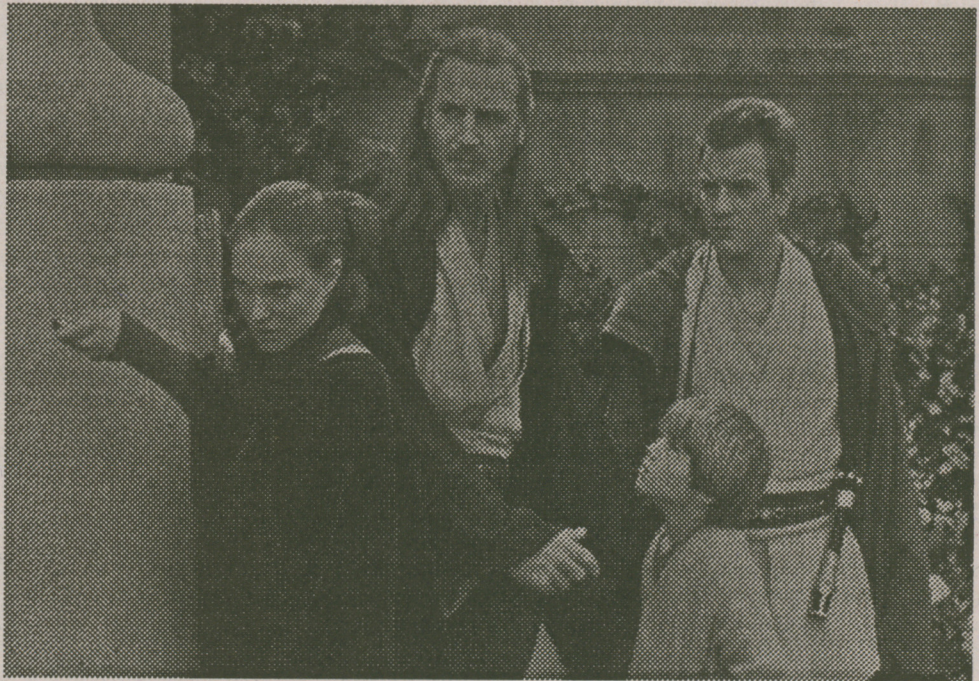
-Marsha Gordon

Surreal Worlds

by Kevin M. Carr
Photographs courtesy of Lucasfilm Ltd.

I'm a self-admitted Star Wars baby. I grew up watching Luke Skywalker and the Rebels battle the evil Galactic Empire.

I bought the Kenner action figures. I eagerly listened to the NPR *Star Wars Radio Drama*. I even watched—and enjoyed—the wretched Star Wars television specials like *The Ewok Adventure* and 1978's goofy



Most of the sets ended just above the actors heads

musical, *The Star Wars Holiday Special*. So, like many of the other Star Wars fans, I have been eagerly awaiting the return of the saga to the silver screen.

S U R R E A L **STAR WARS**

This summer, Lucasfilm will release the first chapter of the Star Wars epic (the three current films *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* were episodes IV, V, and VI). Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace has the possibility of being the biggest film of the century. Some pundits are even predicting it will outweigh *Titanic*'s almost \$2 billion box office take.

This past winter, the entire entertainment industry has been in a Star Wars frenzy. Demands on Lucasfilm have been overwhelming and, because of the secrecy now common to the Star Wars films, new information was hard to come by. Securing the rights to the production stills you see in this magazine was a saga in itself. Eventually, Lucasfilm came through (thanks in a large part to Patty, their PR secretary) and we got our pictures.

At first, I thought there would be plenty of surreal Star Wars stories out there. After all, three blockbuster movies were made, shot on locations that spanned the globe. I soon discovered, however, that the Star Wars films were more victims of circumstance than of preternatural events. Of course, Lucasfilm held on tight to *Episode I* insider info, so information from that front is somewhat limited. (Keep in mind that this feature is being written in early March, when the most information released about the new movie is contained in the 2 1/2 minute theatrical trailer.) Still, there were no stories from the other films akin to the suicide ghost seen in *Three Men and a Baby*, the tragic death of Brandon Lee while filming *The Crow*, or the *Wizard of Oz* crew member who hanged himself on a set. (His corpse supposedly can be seen hanging from a noose in one of the flying monkey sequences.)

Star Wars was not invaded by aliens except those made of latex. No ghosts appeared on the set except for those of Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda, and Anakin Skywalker. David Prowse (who played the body of Darth Vader in the three films) summed it up nicely when he described his experiences to me as "fairly mundane."



What follows are some interesting stories from the Star Wars universe. Some of them are strange...some are scary...some are just intriguing. But all of them show us the surreal side of Star Wars.

The Mystery on Skywalker Ranch

One of the most eerie stories surrounding Lucasfilm comes not from the filming of the movies, but from the Skywalker Ranch itself. Skywalker Ranch is a large area of land in Marin County, California, where Lucas and his team perform the postproduction work for all of their films.

In 1995, Lucasfilm's multimedia division bought a tract of land to build a facility for developing interactive CD-ROMs. Under California law, land must be evaluated as to the archeological and environmental impact of any development.

When the County of Marin completed their review of the land, they found three skeletons buried deep in the earth. At first, they believed it was an ancient Pomo Indian burial site, and the "most likely descendants" of the bodies were notified. However, upon investigation, they discovered arrowheads embedded in the skeletons' midsections. Plus, the bodies had been arranged side-by-side with no grave markings not a standard burial.

What happened in Marin County hundreds of years ago? Who were these ancient victims, and why were their deaths covered up?

The Directors' Curse

Is there a curse on the directors of the Star Wars movies? During the editing process on *Star Wars*, George Lucas suffered a heart attack. Fortunately, he survived, but it is speculated that this is part of his decision to bring in another director (Irvin Kershner) to helm the second film.

The second heart attack of a Star Wars director struck *Return of the Jedi's* Richard Marquand in 1987. The attack took the life of the beloved director. He was 49.

Grand Moff Grave Robbing

When legendary horror film veteran Peter Cushing (who played Grand Moff Tarkin in *Star Wars*) died in 1994, his ashes were sent to Ireland to be buried next to his wife Helen. Although this wish was a stipulation in his will, eager fans visit the Cushing gravesite in Whitstable, Kent, to find no evidence of Peter Cushing's remains—and to find that Helen's gravestone has vanished. While Joyce Broughton, the executor of the Cushing will, assures that Helen's headstone and Peter's ashes are in a safe place, some still suspect the work of ghouls.

The Bigfoot Link

While filming the Endor scenes in Crescent City, Actor Peter Mayhew was ordered to stay close to the set whenever he was in his Chewbacca costume. Apparently, there had been a rash of bigfoot sightings in the area during the early 1980s. Hunters were taking the opportunity to stalk and eventually capture one of these legendary creatures. The crew of *Return of the Jedi* did not want Mayhew to be the unfortunate victim of mistaken identity.

The Dragon in the Desert

If you travel to Tunisia, keep your eyes peeled for the skeleton of a Krayt Dragon. The skeleton is a fiberglass model built especially for *Star Wars* as background for when C-3PO wanders aimlessly through the Tatooine desert. The crew left it in the desert when they were finished and, although it has been partially covered by sand dunes over the past 22 years, it is still visible to the would-be dragon hunter.

The Stephen King Connection

Two of the Star Wars films were coincidentally linked to Stephen King horror movies. In 1976, *Star Wars* and Brian DePalma's *Carrie* shared a casting call. Carrie Fisher was originally set to play the lead in *Carrie*, but she was not too keen on doing the required nude scenes. Eventually, she swapped roles with Sissy Spacek, who was the first choice for Princess Leia.

The interiors of *Empire Strikes Back's* Echo Base were

filmed at Elstree Studios in England where thousands of pounds of fake snow were used to simulate the winter habitat. That same snow made a cameo in another Stephen King film, Stanley Kubrick's rendition of *The Shining*.

Mother Nature Strikes Back

If there was anyone determined to prevent the filming of a Star Wars movie, it was Mother Nature. She gave Lucas and company her best and worst over the seven years of filming. From sandstorms in Tunisia and unseasonable rain in Yuma, Arizona, to avalanches in Norway and 22 straight days of sleet in Crescent City, California, the Star Wars cast and crew suffered through every possible type of bad weather.

During the principal photography of *Star Wars' Tatooine* scenes in the Tunisian desert, the crew was bombarded by a violent sandstorm that destroyed many sets and props. This crippled production temporarily, but they eventually recovered. When Lucasfilm returned to Tunisia to shoot *Episode I*, a similar sandstorm lambasted the set, leaving it looking like "a post-tornado trailer park." The cast and crew saw this as a good omen, however, considering the luck it had brought the original *Star Wars*.

Reel Inspirations

Many of the costumes, set designs, and underlying philosophies of the films have roots in Eastern thought and culture. Darth Vader's ominous breath mask was originally designed after a medieval Japanese warrior helmet. Eventually, it evolved into a dark helmet reminiscent of a "mempo," a steel mask worn by a Japanese warlord.

Lucas also borrowed much of his inspirations from the Native Americans and some African cultures. Princess Leia's memorable hairstyle in *Star Wars* was modeled after a Native American hairstyle on the late 1800s. Many of the languages heard in the films were based on real languages, including Incan dialects and some African tongues. In fact, the language of Nien Numb (Lando Calrissian's co-pilot in *Return of the Jedi*) was a true Kenyan dialect. Although it was spoken by Kipsang Rotich, a Kenyan student, much of Numb's lines make no sense. For example, one line translates to, "One thousand herds of elephants are standing on my foot!"

One of the most unique inspirations is that of Chewbacca. Lucas developed the 8-foot tall Wookiee based on his faithful dog, an Alaskan malamute named Indiana. This loyal pup sat by his side through most of his development of the original Star Wars script. True Lucas fans will recognize Indiana's "cameo" in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

May the force be with you.

Cast-astrophies and Crew-tastrophies

Being involved in making the Star Wars movies was not necessarily a dream job. There were dangers on many sets, and sometimes the shooting conditions were downright lousy.

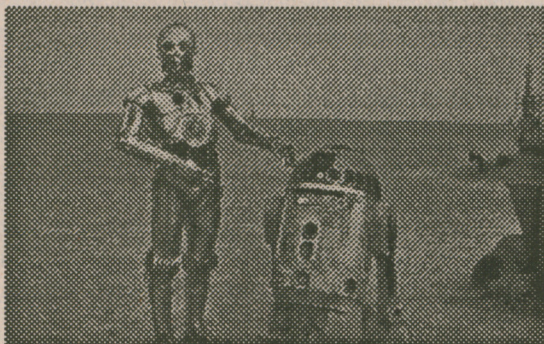
Cast members often passed out under the intense heat of spotlights on the many soundstages. The wampa ice creature in *The Empire Strikes Back* was originally to be played by a man in a costume. However, the actor suffered from heat exhaustion in the furry suit, and the scenes were eventually cut from the film. Similarly in the carbon freezing sequence at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, several of the actors playing ugnauts (the short, pig-like creatures that lived in Cloud City) fainted from the heat.

While filming the Hoth scenes in Finse, Norway, the crew suffered frostbite and frostburn, and several stunt people broke their arms and legs falling into the dreaded sarlacc pit in *Return of the Jedi*. Also while filming the Endor scenes in Crescent City, the crew had to be constantly wary of "widowmakers," which were loose branches suspended in the trees that could fall at any moment. When one of these were spotted, shooting was delayed for hours to remove the dangerous limb.

We all remember the shot of the jungle landscape in *Star Wars* where the rebels set up their base. Ziggurats stood in the distance just as a sentry sits atop a lookout. To get this shot, three members of the crew traveled to Tikal, Guatemala, to the site of an ancient Mayan pyramid. Lorne Peterson was chosen by his fellow crewmates to climb to the pyramid's dangerous precipice because he was the only one who did not have children. Fortunately, he got the shot safely.

For the main characters, the sets could be equally as dangerous. Chewbacca's costume had a nasty habit of catching fire. It did so once in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon and was also ignited by a spark on a skiff during the filming of the Rebel's escape from Jabba the Hutt's palace in *Return of the Jedi*.

One of the most serious injuries sustained during filming was by special effect technician John Chapot, who suffered first- and second-degree burns when a steam boiler exploded on the set of Jabba's sail barge.



Hamill's Hazards

Sometimes it pays off to be the main character of a blockbuster; sometimes it does not. Although Luke Skywalker was clearly the driving force in the series (he had the most lines of dialogue than any other actor, topping it off at 478), actor Mark Hamill's character is not the favorite of Star Wars fans. (He ranks #3 in a readers' poll by *The Star Wars Insider*; he is beaten by Han Solo and Boba Fett.) However, Hamill probably suffered the most for his art. During the filming of the trash compactor sequence in *Star Wars*, he burst a blood vessel from holding his breath too long under water. An African snake got into his pants while filming in Yoda's hut for *The Empire Strikes Back*, and while performing his fall from Cloud City after his dismembering battle with Darth, Hamill sprained a thumb.

But Hamill's most perilous stroke of bad luck was endured between the filming of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. He was involved in a severe automobile accident and had to have reconstructive surgery. Some have speculated that this is why Lucas wrote the wampa attack into the script to easily explain Luke's sudden change in appearance.

The Dangers of Being a Droid

Playing the neurotic droid C-3PO was not all fun and games either. Actor Anthony Daniels had an allergic reaction to the materials in the first C-3PO outfit. When they redesigned the costume, he still had trouble as the interlocking joints would pinch and cut his arms. Daniels has permanent scars from this acting experience.

The filming of the Star Wars movies was an adventure in itself. It wasn't always fun. It wasn't always easy. But it gave us some of the best science fiction movies in a generation. And the best part is that after *Episode I*, we have at least two more movies to look forward to.

Enjoy the show!

Visit Star Wars on the Web at www.starwars.com.
Questions or comments? E-mail "Surreal World" at kevin@surrealworld.com or visit the website at <http://www.surrealworld.com/>.

Short - Shorts

Tag

By David Kablack

The hunchback who lived in our village only came out of the hovel he called home on market days. Larger than a boy, smaller than a man, he shuffled like an ape whose legs had been broken and badly set, his face gnarly and shaggy, one eye forever closed by a patch of pulpy flesh. When he walked the cobblestone lanes, a wicker basket on his arm, women would cross themselves and close the shutters, men grunt and busy themselves with work, and the younger children hide for fear of his evil eye. My mates and I had done the same when we were grubby street urchins running wild, but older and wiser, we were contented ourselves with mocking at him and tossing an occasional stone or two in his direction.

Still, we weren't so grown that we were above a little horse play and rough housing. That afternoon we were playing a game of tag in the narrow space between the alehouse and Kelley's Clothiers. It was a Sunday. Jaimie and Jerry, the O'Reilley twins, who were seventeen and already working in the mines with their father, had the day off. Wally McDonnell, a month younger than the twins, with the shadow of a man's beard and the roughness of a man's voice, was out work. And Black Tom O'Faolin, six months older than I, was already a familiar face in the pubs and a champion of the bare-knuckle fights that took place behind them. At fifteen, I was the youngest of the crew, and though not a worker, drinker, or fighter like the rest, more than willing to boast of what I could do if I had the proper chance.

The game of tag was only a ghost of our childhood, a bit of sporting around, something to do to work up an appetite for dinner.

Until the hunchback passed the mouth of the alleyway, saw us, stopped, and stared at us with his black good eye, his drooling mouth muttering what could have been a plea to join in or a curse on us for having a good time.

Whatever it was, Black Tom took offense. "What you bloody starin' at, you misshapen calf?" he bellowed, facing off against the figure between us and the street. We all laughed. No one knew who the hunchback's father was, but one of the stories about him was that his mother, a slattern and slut who muttered to creatures that weren't there before she drank herself to death, had plopped her baby out like a cow giving up a calf and herself had caused the poor bairn's physical misfortunes.

Serves her right, self righteous wives had said more than once, while other, kinder souls said nothing, taking pity on her and the creature God had cursed her with for a son.

The hunchback said nothing, did nothing, stood and stared, his grimy features unreadable.

But Black Tom was not about to let it go. "I'm talking to you, you bloody moon-calf?" he shouted again, advancing on the poor stoop-shouldered devil.

And that was his big mistake. Because I was it, and when Tom turned his back to me, slow as I am, I saw my chance and took it. "Tag!" I cried, clapping him on the shoulder. He turned, eyes tight with mock fury, both arms swinging wide, as the twins and Wally pranced between us so I could get away.

Tom would have come charging after me regardless, but then the hunchback gave out a sound that was something between a gargle and a cheer, slapping his hands together dully.

Tom whirled around with his fist cocked, as if some limey from London had stopped to ask his Mary for a dance, and then an evil twinkle flashed in his gray eyes. I knew something was up, knew it immediately, knew it could mean no good, but there was no time for me to say or do anything, because Tom, like a lightning flash, was after the four of us at the same time.

First, he lunged at Jerry. But he missed by a foot or so. Then he whirled around, but Wally managed to side-step him with an ease that was far too easy. He almost grabbed me, but I dodged away from him at the last second, scooting away for all I was worth. My dodging had brought me to the mouth of the alley, too close to the hunchback for my own comfort. Maybe he was just a poor soul, one of the Lord's unfortunates, more to be pitied than shunned, as my mother said, but there was still enough of the boy in me to want to be away from him entirely. Anything was better, even having Black Tom tag me with one of his open-handed stinging blows.

I tucked my head down and spun aside, almost tumbling to my knees. I thought I was a goner, but to my surprise, Tom never came near me. Instead, he turned on his heels and slapped the hunchback's arm so hard that the handle of the wicker basked broke off and potatoes and cabbages went rolling in the dirt. The eggs were broken almost before they hit the cobblestones.

"Tag! You're it!" Black Tom crowed, dancing backward, as light as Dempsey on his toes.

The poor devil stared at the broken eggs, the scattered cabbages, the now filthy potatoes, and his face collapsed like a paper sack tossed into oily water. His lantern jaw pumped soundlessly, and tears ran from his one eye, cutting a clean streak through the grime on his face.

It was pitiful. My heart went out to him. As Jerry and Jaimie and Wally backed away from the sorry scene, I scuttled forward

to gather up the fallen food, but Black Tom blocked my way.

"Hey, Tom, come on, let be..."

"Shut your face, or I'll shut it!" he growled in a voice more like my Da's than my Da's own voice. When he turned to face the blubbering hunchback, I was more than glad: I was grateful.

"I said, Tag! You're it! You want to play, then play! Come on! Tag me if you can!"

I didn't see the hunchback move! I swear to God, I didn't! Black Tom was two good steps away from him, but the creature just swung one of those long arms out and grabbed Tom by the top of the skull. Then he held. And held on. And pressed down so hard that he forced Tom to his knees. At least, that's what it looked like at first, until the hunchback moved in closer, as if his arms were getting shorter, and Tom seemed to sink down, as if his legs were growing bent and twisted, and then the hunchback was standing over Tom, as if he were going to squeeze him through the cobblestones and down into his grave.

The twins ran. "Charlie, come on!" cried Wally, white with fear and horror. "He's a dead man! Let's go!" But I waved him away. I couldn't leave. Not even when the creature grunted like a bear, twisting his hand this way and that over Black Tom's face. Not even when I heard Black Tom's eyeball go crunch or the bones of his handsome face snap. Not even when he fell to the ground in a whimpering, bloody pool of flesh and bone.

I couldn't move an inch.

But when the hunchback stood upright, straightened his shoulders, the hump gone, flexed his strong, straight arms, and fixed me with the cold stare of his two good gray eyes, I ran like all the devils in hell were pursuing me.

And I never once looked back.

The Redemption of Tyler Jack

by John Weagly

Tyler Jack wouldn't turn the television off.

Years earlier, in a different life, the on/off switch on the TV had stopped working. He'd never had a remote, so now the only way to stop the pictures was to take the plug out of the wall.

He'd been watching for three days and nights. Drinking little. Eating even less. Just sitting on the couch in his tiny studio, watching. Talk show. Sit-coms. Movies. Visions of what life outside his apartment was like.

Now, the third night of his vigil, rain was falling against the window. Rain that brought cleanliness. Rain that washed away sin. Tonight was the night. His waiting was over.

Earlier in the week, the robbery had gone off without a hitch. Perfect, with no regrets. Stealing was what he did, what he was good at. He knew better than to regret his talent. He didn't con-

sider it a sin to exercise his gift.

It was after the robbery that had gone wrong. His regrets were about Janet.

Thinking of her made the walls of his tenement close in even more.

He'd been born a Catholic. When he was old enough to think about it, he'd realized that Catholicism was nothing but a spiritual form letter. Good luck and bad luck. Do this and you will be rewarded. Don't do this and you will be punished. After that realization, he became an atheist, but he still carried a Catholic's guilt.

Outside his door he heard wet shoes scraping the un-carpeted corridor floor. They were coming. Former associates now adversaries. They'd come to finalize things. To return things to the beginning.

The television showed a commercial for seat belts. They could save lives.

Knocking at his apartment door.

He'd met her at the Hinkle's Market Food Court, a section of the grocery store dedicated to fine dining. There was a deli counter, a salad bar and a variety of pies and cakes. Customers could get their food to go or they could eat it at one of the plastic tables that made up the eating area. It was the pinnacle of class, dining at the supermarket.

He was sitting at his table for one, observing. The deciding factors for whether a crime succeeds or fails are preparation and luck. Luck can't be arranged, but this was the preparation stage. From his table, he could watch the entire store. He had an open racing form and a half-eaten salad in front of him in case anyone grew curious about his presence.

He was pretending to scan the racing form when he heard her at the cash register.

"Four seventy-six, please. Is that for here or to go?"

With hearing her voice, something inside of him changed. It felt like a banjo string being plucked deep inside his soul. It was staggering. He'd never believed in love at first sight, and here he was falling victim to love at first sound.

"You okay over here?"

She was behind him. He stared at his half-empty salad plate, thinking of the witty response that would knock her socks off. As soon as he had it, he turned to answer her and all chances of intelligent conversation leaked away.

She was pretty, but it was the kind of pretty you didn't notice until the third look. What caught him off-guard was the solace of her winter-blue eyes.

"Fine," was all he could say.

"You're empty. Do you need another soda?" she asked.

"Fine."

"What are you drinking?"

"Diet Coke."

"Be right back."

She moved behind the counter, leaving him feeling like a fool. He wondered if anything could still be salvaged. He wondered if he could still impress her. He wondered if he had time to escape out the door.

"Eighty cents."

She was next to him. No chance for escape now. He took

out his wallet and gave her a single.

"Keep the change."

"What's your plan?" she asked.

"What?"

"The racing form," she pointed out.

"I'm not betting. Just reading."

"So you're not planning out a system?"

"System?"

"All real gamblers have a system. I used to waitress at Covington Race Course in Kansas. Everyone told me their system. Only bet when there's a full moon. Only pick horses with the same initials as your grandmother. If you hit more than three red lights on the way to the track, only bet on horses with three legs. What's your system?"

"My system is no system."

"Cute."

A couple of hours later, she brought over a fresh Diet Coke.

"I didn't order this," he said.

"Relax. It's on the house."

"Why?"

"You're the only guy to come in today that hasn't tried to knock my socks off with some witty remark. 'Hey, Sugar! I wish I could re-arrange the alphabet, 'cause then I'd put U and I together!' 'Honey, are those Solar System Pants? 'Cause your butt is out of this world!' 'Baby, do you believe in love at first sight, or should I come in again?'"

"I'm Tyler."

"Janet."

What followed were the best three months of Tyler Jack's life. Afternoons were spent being seen together in public, letting everyone know that he'd found his special someone. Evenings were spent snuggling on his couch, watching old movies and eating Ben & Jerry's. Nights were spent going on long midnight walks, telling each other secrets they hadn't thought of since the fourth grade.

He and Janet knew things about each other that were impossible to know. She gave direction to his life.

Pounding at his apartment door.

The television showed Tim Allen making mistakes with power tools.

"The doors close at ten o'clock on Sunday," Horace had said.

"Hinkle's will be closed for re-modeling for two months. That last day, everyone is going to stock up on groceries, not realizing that there's a Kroeger's just two blocks away.

"The bank deposits aren't going to be moved out until Monday morning. All that cash is just gonna sit there all night. Very light security. We'll just step in and take what we want."

Horace came up with the initial plan. Leo supplied an fire-power they might need. Tyler had the idea to go in while the store was still open.

They hid in the shipping and receiving area until all of the employees had gone home. After knocking out the two minimum-wage security guards, they went out the back with close to fifty-seven thousand dollars. They just had to make it back to Horace's, to "return to the beginning" as Horace put it, to be in the clear.

They hadn't planned on Janet picking up her last paycheck.

Luck can't be arranged, good or bad. She was coming down the alley as they climbed into their car.

"Tyler!" she called.

He turned, hearing the voice he'd fallen in love with. There she was, her eyes glowing in the moonlight. Looking at her, a grin forming on his lips, a fire-cracker went off next to him.

Janet fell to the ground. He ran to her. It looked like her hair was bleeding. He'd never seen hair bleed before. She wasn't moving. The moonlight had left her eyes.

"What have I told you about over-reacting?" Horace said to Leo as they joined him.

"She recognized him," Leo answered, his gun still drawn.

"We gotta go," Horace said. "Someone was sure to hear that shot."

"Who was she?" Leo asked him.

Horace said something else. So did Leo. Tyler couldn't hear them anymore.

He dropped the Hinkle's grocery bag he was carrying and slowly walked home.

Tapping at his apartment door.

"He isn't home," Leo's voice said from the hallway.

"C'mon, Tyler," Horace said. "We know you're in there. We were parking the car and we saw your TV was on."

"We would've come sooner," Leo said, "But the neighborhood was too hot."

The television showed Bart Simpson confessing to Homer about something he'd done that was wrong. Homer told his son that everything would turn out all right.

"You shouldn't have walked away like that," Horace continued. "Just dropping the money and walking away like that is no good. A job isn't finished until we return to the beginning. You know that."

Janet was dead. Dead by an un-lucky coincidence. And it was his fault. She'd be alive if she'd never met him.

"Open the door," Horace said. "We just want to have a talk."

Tyler knew the difference between talking and having a talk.

The apartment closed in, the rain pounding on the window sill. There was no longer any room for guilt or innocence or sin. There was only enough room to do what he thought was right. Right for both himself and for Janet.

On the way to the door, Tyler Jack un-plugged his television set.

The End Justifies The Means

by Laura Elvin

The fog that hovered near the bridge partially obscured Harold's vision, but he could still make out the shape of the person he followed. This man, a stranger, stood on the concrete

ledge, leaning far over the railing; and although it was cold enough for Harold to see his breath, the stranger wore only a thin cardigan over his shirt. That had been the first tip-off.

Harold's instinct had picked this stranger over the other bar patrons two hours earlier. When the man in the bar got up to leave, Harold—having watched the man down drink after drink—didn't bother to hide himself well as he followed.

Now Harold pulled his coat tighter around his neck and chest, though the chill creeping through his bones came from within. His shaking hands told him, once again, how unsure he was of the action he was about to take. It was like this every time. His mind would fill with a hundred reasons not to go through with it.

His timing had to be perfect. He watched as the stranger looked around then started straddling the rail of the bridge—a 400-foot drop to the river. The soft leather of Harold's shoes made no sounds as he bounded toward the stranger and grabbed a handful of the man's cardigan.

"Don't you dare jump!" he yelled through clenched teeth as he used all his strength to drag the stranger back over the railing. Harold knew shock would keep the man from struggling at first. It was always like that. Once over the railing, Harold let go and the stranger dropped to the ground with a thud. His body convulsed with deep shivers as he lay at Harold's feet.

Harold held out his hand. "Your money...now!"

The stranger struggled to his knees and stared up with wide eyes. His body swayed.

I hate doing it this way, thought Harold. He's a drunkard and I'm taking advantage of him. Then he remembered another drunkard...one he had not interfered with.

Harold saw the disbelief in the stranger's face, mouth agape, eyes unblinking.

He'd have to go faster now, before anyone came upon them. The stranger was unresponsive.

Without taking his eyes off the man at his feet, Harold touched the scarf at his neck, tightened his coat collar once more, then withdrew a revolver from a deep coat pocket. The gun felt heavy and awkward in his hand. Too cold, too foreign.

Crouching, Harold held the gun lightly against the stranger's temple and said, "I don't care what you do with yourself afterward, but give me all your money and your jewelry now." There was a tremor in his voice, a wavering in his soul. He wondered if the stranger noticed the line of sweat running from temple to cheek. Probably not. Very self-centered, this type.

The stranger didn't react. Sometimes it was like this.

Harold squeezed his palm tighter around the metal butt, sliding the gun in minuscule jerks across the stranger's temple. The weapon rested just above one of the man's eyes, and Harold whispered, "I know what you were going to do, and I don't care. I just want you to do me a favor before you kill yourself."

A trashcan overturned somewhere in the distance, and a dog barked. Reminders of reality. Harold must hurry. The stranger must cooperate.

The man on his knees blinked hard, but said nothing.

Harold's resolved ebbed. It's not working this time, he thought.

"Give my your wallet and your wedding ring," he repeated.

No movement. A shiver ran through Harold's spine. Again,

he heard a noise in the distance. How many times would he get away with this? Someday one of them would overpower him. Or worse, a policeman would come upon them.

"If you don't move, I'll blow your brains out." He pressed on the gun for emphasis.

Finally the other burst out, "Please, I'll give you anything you want, but don't kill me!"

A rush of emotion filled Harold, and he countered with an uncontrollable torrent. "Why?! Why shouldn't I kill you?! You were going to do it yourself a minute ago." Harold rested on the precipice, unsure of his control of either the situation or himself. *Don't fall in*, he thought, *don't fall in*. The release of tension, the outburst, would cost him. The battle of words always lay before him, taunting him. His training said one thing, but his emotions, his past dictated an altered course.

The stranger's voice, small and defenseless, brought Harold's attention back to the present.

"I don't want to die." With tears streaming down his crumpling face, he handed Harold his wallet and his ring.

Harold stood up and walked away. *Don't look back*, he reminded himself. *He'll be okay. You did all you could. Don't look back.*

Five blocks later, Harold hailed a taxi. Before the ride was over, warm tears rolled down his face. He got out two blocks from his home and spent the extra time composing himself.

By the time he reached his house, Harold was once again a man without emotion. He took off his coat at the door and greeted his wife.

"You're late. How was your day?" she asked.

"Fine. Do we have any more large envelopes?"

His wife's smile faded and she stepped back, a hand clutched to her chest. "Oh no! Oh please no! Oh sweet Father in Heaven! I thought you said you weren't going to do that anymore."

Harold ignored his wife, found an envelope himself, and deposited the ring inside. He looked inside the wallet, scribbled something on the outside of the envelope, then put the wallet in and sealed it.

"Why Harold? Why do you have to do it that way, risking your life for theirs? That's not the way it's supposed to be." She paused, and Harold knew what she would say next. Short of covering his ears there was nothing to stop her. "It wasn't your fault. Your brother never told you. How were you to know?"

He spoke to her then, but not of the evening's events or of his brother's suicide. "Would you please mail this for me tomorrow?"

Then he looked at her and although he wasn't exactly sure what to say, he wanted to comfort her. She was his wife, and he loved her.

"A man who takes his own life won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of them don't really want to go through with it. They're lost. They just need to be scared, then they realize. I think I saved this one."

"It's not *your* responsibility." She wouldn't scream; she wouldn't cry, he knew.

"It's not right," she said as she helped him off with his scarf.

Harold had wondered about that, himself, many times. "I must do what I can to save—"

Harold's wife interrupted him then as she added, "At least

you shouldn't wear the collar. What if one of your parishioners sees you?"

The Tempter In The Shadows

by Kevin Doyle

Father Robert stood in the cubicle and looked over the interior of his church. This late at night, only a few people sat in the pews. One woman, dressed in black, had just lit a candle. Robert knew she still mourned the death of her youngest child a year before. Farther back an elderly couple, two of the regulars of his parish, knelt together and prayed, so close their shoulders touched.

Another figure sat in the pew farthest back, next to the doors. In the dim electric lights, it seemed more shape than substance. Father Robert watched it for several minutes. It didn't move, neither standing nor kneeling and, as far as the priest could tell through the darkness, not even praying. It merely sat there, straight in the pew, and looked ahead.

The woman in black stood up, genuflected, and turned to leave. She paused long enough to nod silently to Father Robert. He returned her nod and looked over at the couple. They also stood to leave.

That left only the figure in the shadows.

As the others departed, leaving the church nearly deserted, Father Robert walked to the back. He sought out the solitary figure in the gloom.

"My son," he said, by way of introduction, "do you need assistance?"

A low chuckle drifted from the shadowed pew. "Assistance? No Father, not me. Funny you should ask."

"Funny?" Father Robert's voice contained a puzzled tone. "Why funny?"

"Because, Padre, that was going to be my question to you."

"Really?" The utterance of that single word – padre – stuck a chord in Robert's heart. Nearly ten years since he last heard that word used in connection with him.

But the pain felt as sharp as ever.

"And just why did you, whoever you are, think I need help?"

"Because you're at a critical juncture. Aren't you? About to lose your faith?"

"Nonsense." He could clearly hear his own quickened breathing. "My faith remains as strong as ever."

"Uh, uh, padre. You shouldn't lie. That's a sin of some kind or other, isn't it?"

"I'm not lying." Father Robert strained his vision, attempting to pierce the gloom. For some reason, he resisted stepping closer to the unknown inquisitor. "Why would I lie about something like that?"

"Well, it's not like you haven't sinned before. Eh, Roberto?"

Isn't that what those dirty beggars in that nameless little village called you? Padre Roberto?"

Robert clamped his eyes shut in an attempt to keep the images at bay. Scenes from another time, another place, flashed before his closed eyelids. He saw Maria lying on the ground, her body torn by bullets, bits and pieces of her scattered on the ground before him.

"How do you know about that? Are you from the government?"

"Of course not. It's just that you men of God are so painfully transparent. Tell me, when you saw her lying in the dirt, did you think of what might have been?"

The images continued. He lived in the village for almost six months. The entire time aware of Maria, a young widow with three small sons. Before long, he realized that her presence tested his faith and will.

"No. I never thought of that."

"Another lie? Really, Padre Roberto. You're becoming a regular full-time sinner these days."

"Who are you?" Robert hissed. The shadows that surrounded the man appeared even darker than before.

"Just a penitent, Father. A poor soul who lost the way and came looking for salvation."

"No," Father Robert said as he took a step back. "You're much more than that."

"Really?" Even though gloom shrouded his accuser, Robert could almost see the smug smile stretching across his lips. "And what am I?"

"How do you know about the village? How do you know about Maria?"

"You're answering a question with a question, Father. That's the trick of a Jew, not a man of Christ."

"What are you?"

A light chuckle drifted from the darkness. "Maybe I'm your conscience. Then again, I could be an alien from Alpha Centauri who's been spying on you. Which sounds more plausible?"

"How did you know about El Salvador? How did you know about her?"

The chuckle grew into a full-throated laugh. For an irrational instant, Robert wanted to strangle the stranger. Then he choked off his fury, his sense of fear taking over.

He tried one last time. "How did you know?"

"Easy, Padre Bob. You're so obvious it's laughable. The history of your sins and almost sins is written all over your countenance."

"I haven't sinned." What he intended to come out as a strong denial assumed the form of a soft squeak. He tried again. "I have not sinned."

"Not in the corporeal sense, perhaps. But I see into your heart, your mind. I know you for what you are."

"I'm a priest." Without realizing, he took another step back.

"You're a fraud!" The shadow shifted, adjusted itself, and stood erect. "You're a fake and a coward, hiding behind black robes. I've watched you for years, waiting for the proper moment."

In the darkness and silence, beads of sweat trickled down the priest's face. Branding him, could anyone see the moisture, a coward.

Just as his accuser claimed.

The shadow moved closer. "It doesn't matter what I am. All that matters is what you are. A failure."

"No."

"I watched you in Central America. I saw you each morning, coming out of your hovel. They way you looked at that widow. It was a real struggle for you, wasn't it? Until the soldiers came and settled your problem."

"I didn't sin."

"And afterwards. Tell me, Bobby, weren't you really relieved that she was gone? Relieved that the object of your lust had been taken from you?"

"I didn't sin."

"Of course, you didn't. You did worse."

"Nothing's worse than sin."

"Only what you did. Nothing."

"What?" Even though his tormentor now stood less than a foot in front of him, Robert still couldn't see anything of his face, his form. "What?"

"You did nothing. You came to those people in their time of need. You lived with them, took their shelter, food and trust. Then, when the soldiers came, you stood by and let them be slaughtered. Remember?"

"No."

"Sure you do. For ten years, you've tried to forget. Forget the sound of the guns, the smell of the smoke. The stench of Maria's innards splattered all over your clean, black Cossack. You've tried to forget. But you couldn't. That's why I'm here now.

"Mother of God."

"Oh, puleeze." The shape lifted its arms, waved them around the battleground they stood within. "Don't tell me you're going to pray, of all things. Where is your precious Lord now, when you need him? Where was He when they slaughtered all those harmless peasants? Huh? Where was He then?"

"Don't impugn the Lord in His house. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, get out of here."

"Quit playing naïve, Bobby. You know what I am and where I'm from. Stop acting the fool. It doesn't become you."

"Yes. I do know. And you'll find no comfort here, with me. I didn't stand by and do nothing. I was away that morning. I left early. Went out to barter for medicines and supplies. By the time I got back, it was all over."

For the first time, silence hung over the church. The shadowy figure shifted, surged forward, then retreated a bit.

"Your memory's better than I thought. So why have you tortured yourself all these years?"

"Because I still feel guilty. Even though I know I'm blameless, I still feel responsible. If I hadn't left that morning, things might have turned out different."

"Men of God," sneered the shade. "Most of your kind are ripe for plucking. Just my bad luck tonight to happen across one who isn't."

"Leave." Father Robert drew himself up to his full height. "This place is open for all God's children. That doesn't include the likes of you."

Wordlessly, the collection of shades moved in the direction of the door. Once there it stopped, a blur of darker black against the natural shadows in the building. "As you wish Bobby, I'll go. Somewhere out there, others won't be as tough as you."

The heavy oak doors creaked open as the being left the church. Just over the threshold, it stopped. Though he could see practically nothing in the inky darkness, Father Robert sensed that it had turned to look back. "But I won't promise," it said as it glided away, "that you'll never see me again."

The shadows wisped away, and the door fell shut.

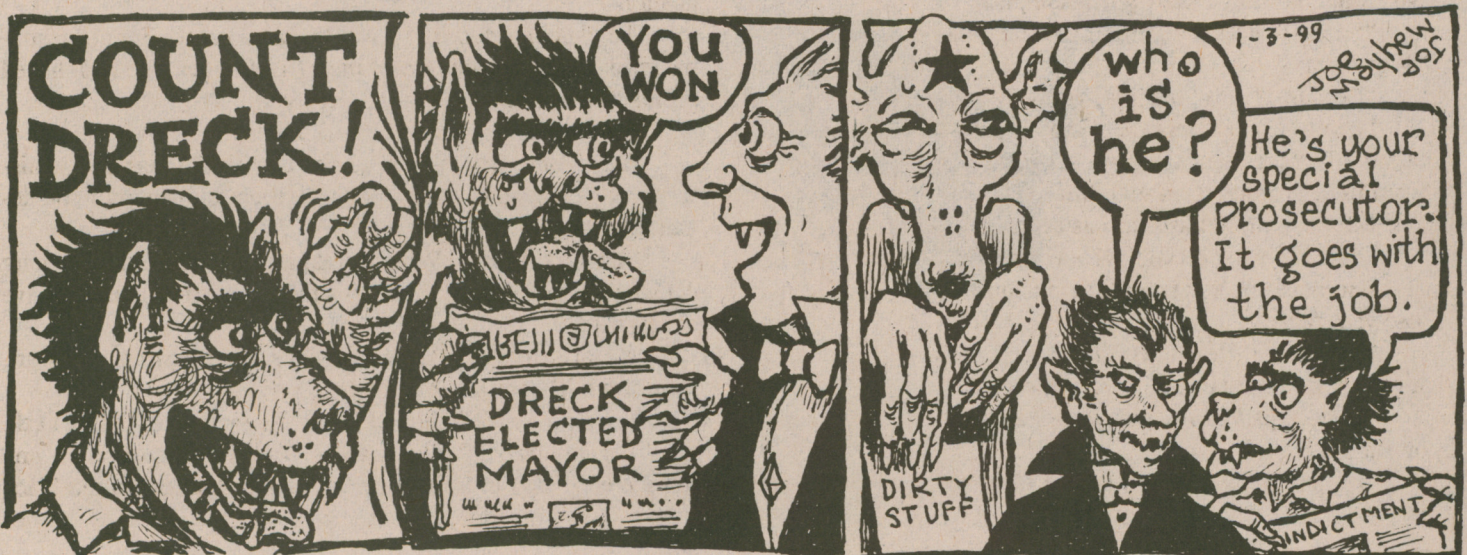
Father Robert fell to his knees, heart pounding and sobbing. Conflicted by two sensations.

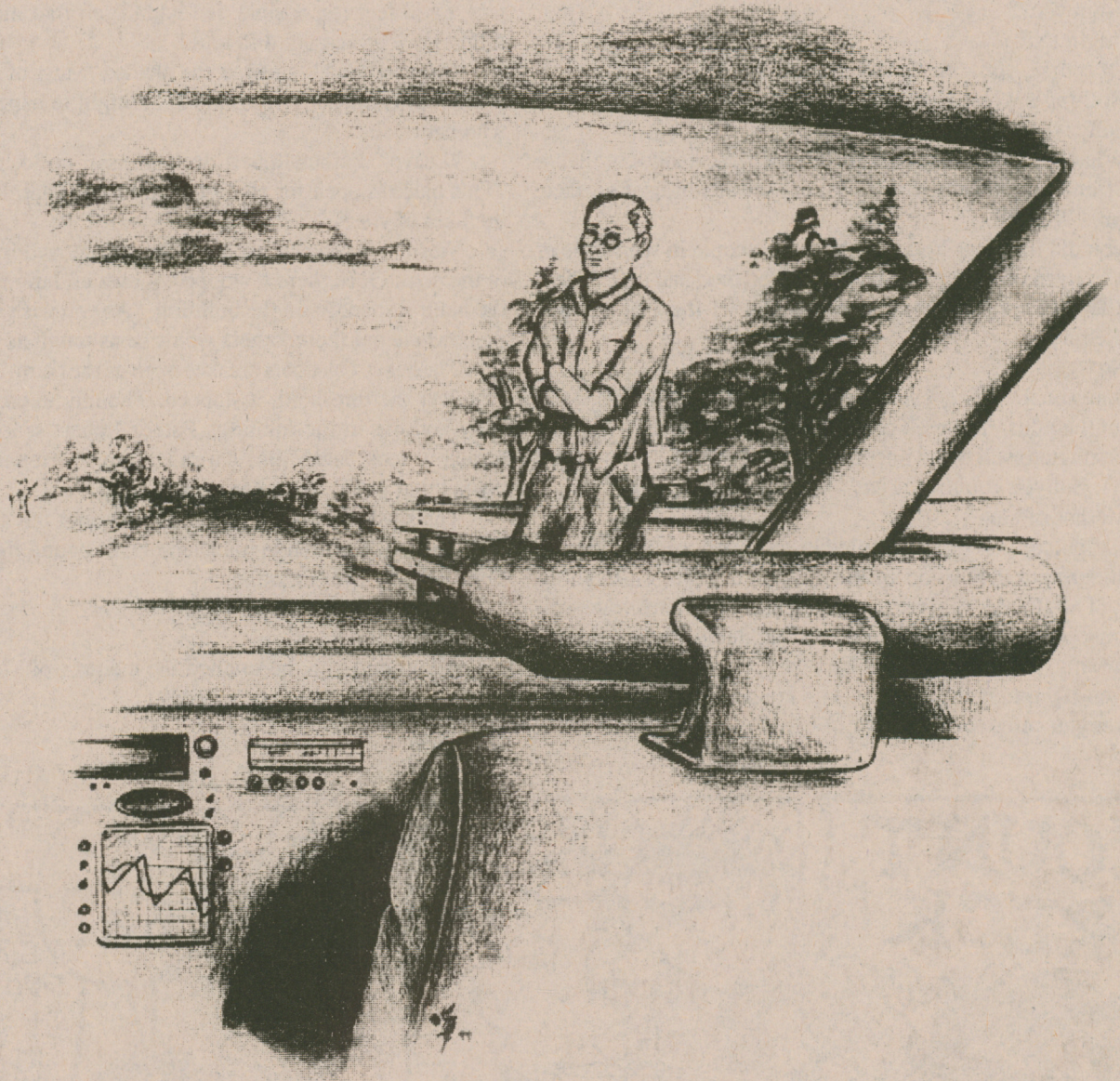
Relief, that he had withstood the test.

And misery.

All around him, he smelled the memory of Maria.

PW





Jay is certainly no stranger to anyone who has read PW regularly. He was the cover artist for PW#13, his fiction has appeared in PW numerous times...including his story A Burning Green which appeared in The Best of Pirate Writings and he is becoming a fixture in the science fiction field. This is my last story in inventory by Jay. Hopefully, he will send some of his new work on soon.

Stepping Out of the Chinese Room

By E. Jay O'Connell

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

I found the bodyfarmer leaning against a guard rail just outside of Sapphire. I shivered and told the car to pull over. The bodyfarmerhe wouldn't give me his real name over BlackNet—grinned as my Toyota crunched over the gravel shoulder to where he waited, arms folded.

You might think you'd have to go to New York to buy a body, but no, these entrepreneurs were everywhere. I'd driven only a few hours from the Research Triangle into the mountains.

I got out of the car and offered the sunburned man my hand. His arms remained folded.

"Ten year old boy will cost you two mil, digicash," he drawled. "Up front."

He smiled tobacco stained teeth as he pulled a flask from the back pocket of his jeans and took a swig. I handed him my card wishing he'd offer me some, wishing I could drink without puking my guts out. I cursed the antabuse at the same time I thanked God for it.

He pushed the card into a black palmtop and whistled as he called up my balance. "Just about clean you out."

Good riddance. The money was cursed anyway. I'd already bought the phony passports and plane tickets, and I was sure I could find work in Holland. If we made it there...

"What do want the boy for?" he asked, eyes hard and empty. "Sex slave?"

I winced. "For a download—" his face closed up "—human. My son."

He narrowed his eyes. "I can tell the difference. Between us and them. And if you're the mouthpiece for some damn *thing*, well, you can just climb back in your fancy car and high-tail your pasty geek ass back to the Triangle." He glared at me expectantly. "Want your money back?"

Another rehab, another liver, a set of kidneys...the money would be gone. "Believe me," I said. "He's human."

Was he really? I wondered.

Would I be doing this if he weren't?

The Bodyfarmer grinned nastily. "Then you won't mind if I plug him in? Hmm?" He rubbed the back of his neck with a callused hand, his khaki jacket sliding open enough to reveal the leather holster under one arm, the well-worn grip of a handgun.

We knew each other by RSA key and digital reputation only. What we were doing was illegal as hell. One of about a hundred mandatory death penalty offences in the States.

I followed him up a muddy trail into the pines, about a quarter mile, to a small padlocked shed. Another whisper into the palmtop, and the lock snicked open. Inside, he handed me a shovel, selecting a vicious looking pick axe for himself.

I stared at the grimy tool. "What's this for?"

He clucked, shaking his head. "What do you think? We gotta dig up your boy!"

The mud gave way to a thick brown layer of pine needles as we made our way deeper into the forest, always moving upwards. Spanish moss dripped from the pines like aqua cobwebs. In ten minutes I'd broken into a full sweat, my breath hot and rasping in my throat. The liquor had put thirty pounds on me, easily.

I shifted the shovel to my left shoulder. Would I be digging my own grave? My back prickled despite the heat. I drove the thought away, thinking of Toby. My boy.

We'd implanted him in less than an hour, outpatient. They didn't even shave my whole head; just a patch at the base of my skull.

Toby stared babbling the tenth day. I carried a speaker clipped to my belt, so Samantha, my lover, could listen to him too. After awhile, I was oohing and ahing at all the right places, just like any parent.

"Did you hear that? He said. 'Cow goes moo.'"

"Are you sure?" Sam was always skeptical about my interpretations. "I think what it said was 'cowgamoo.'" She wouldn't accept that Toby was a he. She wouldn't accept that Toby was a *person*. Of course, I hadn't at first, either.

I missed Toby far more than Sam. Funny how that is.

The bodyfarmer's voice jerked me back to the darkening forest. We broke through the gloom into a clearing, a meadow full of waist-high weeds, rimmed by tall, glossy green rhododendron. "How's it your son's in a core, you don't mind my asking."

It took me several moments to remember the lie. "Accident," I panted, "Car crash. My mother was a Secularist, wealthy, — she'd paid for the hardware, before the Injunction..."

"Uh huh," I was glad I couldn't see his face. The story sounded pretty lame even to me.

He glanced at the palmtop. "He's over there." He gestured into the seven-foot tall rhododendron. Of course, he was under ten years growth.

He marched in, and began tearing at the wiry plants. They came away easily; the roots hadn't penetrated very deep into the sandy earth. He glanced up at me in exasperation. "What are you waiting for? Give me a hand."

When we'd cleared away enough of the plants, I shoved the sharpened end of my spade into the earth. The blade sank in about a half an inch. I swung the pathetic spray of dirt into the weeds.

I looked up to see the point of his ax swinging toward me in a tight arc. The spiked end bit into the earth, missing me by inches. He grinned at my startled expression. "Watch it Doc. You are a doctor, aren't you?"

I grunted, waiting for my heart to crawl back down my throat before answering. "Yes."

"I'm what you Triangle types would call white trash. Mountain man." he swung the pick again, grunting. "Granddad was a bootlegger. My father ran cocaine in over the Gulf, till the end of the Second Prohibition."

The shoveling was easier now, as I moved out the material his picking loosened. The stony earth was the color of brown sugar, glittering with flashes of mica. I stopped to mop my brow, the sweat stinging in my eyes. "You farm bodies."

His smile seemed much less sinister now. "There's always a black market. Black is the freest market, too. Most opportunity. No blood-suckers, lawyers, unions, strikes, none of that. Just reputation, honor." He repositioned the gun in his waistband before taking another swing.

I agreed. He probably wouldn't shoot me and take the money. This transaction had been anonymously logged via BlackNet. If he screwed me, a software agent of mine would trash his reputa-



tion. A little, anyway. The web of trust which allowed him to do business through anonymous servers would gradually evaporate. Eventually, no one would trust him.

The key word here, unfortunately, was 'eventually.' His pick struck something with a hollow sounding plonk.

He grinned. "There's your boy."

We'd only gone down about a foot, but it still took an exhausting half hour to completely clear the earth from the fiberglass coffin. The farmer extracted a green plastic tarp from his backpack, staking it out around the hole and down the sides to prevent any earth from falling in.

He knuckled a pattern into the coffin's gritty stainless steel keypad, and was rewarded by a hissing sound. The top unfolded to reveal a glistening mass of liquid—deep, aquamarine blue. A row of green status lights gleamed through the gel, illuminating a pale wiggling shape within—

$\frac{3}{4}$ a nude boy, maybe four feet long, waving his arms and legs in a lazy swimming motion—

$\frac{3}{4}$ Who would be my son. "Jesus!"

The farmer snorted as he plunged his hands into the gel. "Didn't think they were just laying in the ground like corpses did you? A body needs exercise."

He heaved the boy's torso up out of the gel, gently removing the plastic umbilici from the boys neck and belly. His navel was a largish plastic fitting with a pink iris. His eyes were closed, his childish features utterly placid.

In seconds he had the slight form up on the tarp. A whispered palmtop command sent the boy into convulsions, blue ichor jetting from his nose and mouth as his lungs took over the task of oxygenating his blood. His eye's stayed shut.

I had a thought, a pang of conscience I didn't want to vocalize, "How do I know he wasn't...that you didn't..."

Irritation passed over the farmer's face, lodging itself in his forehead as a set of deep, vertical furrows. "Kidnapped? Lost boy? I don't run that kind of business. But here take a look." He gestured at the boys closed lids. They lacked lashes, and the skin was oddly smooth.

There was no opening—the boy's eyes were skinned shut. He quickly pointed out a few other details. The navel, the tiny melanin barcode in his left armpit.

I scanned it with my palmtop, waited while the information was beamed up into the Iridium net. In a minute I knew that this body had grown from a Lazarus 2000, oncogen-free fetus, bought legally in Holland ten years ago. Neonatally maximized, Olympic musculature. Good for two hundred years, the literature boasted, though no one really knew.

He'd hit puberty around my 80th birthday.

Satisfied that I was satisfied, the farmer sliced the boy's eyes open using a tiny pen laser, peeling the lids back to reveal, large, brown irises that contracted in the dusky light. The barest whiff of ozone and cauterized flesh hung in the air.

Turning the boy on his side, he slid open the interface at the base of his hairless skull.

"Give me the core."

I handed him Toby, my hands shaking slightly. Toby was human, in a way. He'd grown in my head, after all, shared my body, grown up soaking in the chatter of my internal monologue. He'd started as a hybrid mix of classical AI and A-life code. I'd written a few of the AI routines myself. What had resulted was human. More than that, my son.

I'd licensed him to one of the major US arms manufacturers now involved in cometary mining. Heck, they funded most of the research. I hadn't been worth a damn since.

The farmer popped the core in and snapped his head shut. The boy twitched, as the core dumped into his cerebrum through

a half million miles of molecule thin platinum wire.

"So," he chewed his lip, peering sulkily at his palmtop. "What the hell is this thing?"

I shivered. "My son."

He frowned, "No, it ain't—at least, not only. My diagnostics don't recognize a lot of this."

"He was injured. Brain damaged, struck by a car. " I was babbling. I hadn't really thought the hick would run any diagnostics. Stupid. "His reconstruction was partially digital. He's been in storage for five years. I've been making the money for a body for five years."

The farmer rolled his eyes. "Hybrids! Phreaks! Well, I gotta test I run, in realtime. We all have to draw the line somewhere."

I felt cold. I knew what side of the line he'd find Toby on.

The farmer knelt down, whispering again into his palmtop, smiling as Toby's lids fluttered open, and intelligence animated his features. It was like watching the dead come to life.

Toby looked from the farmer, to me, moving his head jerkily. It would take awhile for him to fully mesh with his new nervous system. The farmer's hand stole under his jacket, to the holstered gun. I took a step back, to where the shovel was laying against a thick stalk of rhododendron.

"Dad?"

He tried to sit up, but the farmer laid a hand on his shoulder. "That your daddy, boy?"

Toby nodded, shrugging away from the farmer, trying to stand. "Tell him to cooperate, Doc."

"Toby, do as the man says, please." Out of habit, I subvocalized a command, 'don't tell him anything!' But he wasn't inside my head anymore.

"Boy." The farmer smiled. "You know what Pi is?"

Toby nodded.

"What's pi look like, three hundred million digits in from the decimal? Hmm? See anything interesting?"

I subtly shook my head, but Toby's eyes were already looking inward, flashing back and forth as he searched the number, a smile tugging at his lips. He nodded brightly, always so happy to please. "I found it! Eight eights in a row!"

The farmer looked pained as he barked something into the palmtop and Toby fell like a puppet cut from its strings. As he fumbled the gun from his holster, I swung the shovel at his head $\frac{3}{4}$

The gun blared as the flat of the shovel caught him full in the face with a satisfying crunch. He went down, his shattered nose spraying crimson. I jerked the warm gun, some sort of plastic automatic, from his hand.

He was still conscious. "Damn," He sputtered, spitting blood. I'd broken out two of his front teeth, and his face was already swelling up, barely human looking with the squashed nose. "Didn't think you had it in you, Doc. I'm getting slow."

"Move and I'll kill you."

The Farmer lay back, wiping at the blood running down his face. "Who said anything about moving? Damn!"

I searched his backpack, finding a portable surgery spider, a dozen software clips for the palmtop and spider, a living human embryo in a transparent canister of fluid, its lid a blinking computer readout, and some stuff it took me several seconds to identify.

A brainstem cap and entubation hardware.

I held the gun on him, testing my fury. "You were going to kill me. Cut my brain out and put me in gel."

The farmer shrugged. "Only if your boy wasn't human. See the fetus? If you were on the up and up, I was going to plant that one. I'm no race traitor." He gulped down a mouthful of blood. "I've got nothin' to be ashamed of. Ya gotta draw the line somewhere."

I knelt besides Toby. He was breathing, but his eyes didn't track. The pale blue pupils had constricted to pinpricks.

I fired a bullet into the ground at the farmer's feet, the kick of the gun almost sending the weapon flying from my hand. We both flinched. I held the gun on him with both hands now.

"I want you to turn him back on." I handed him his palmtop.

The farmer shook his head slowly. I shot the ground again, closer to him, and this time, I didn't flinch.

In the end, he wanted to live, so he really didn't have any choice.

We left him in his own gelpod, using the hardware that he'd intended to use on me—oh, I left him his bigoted brain. I'd leave a note to have him freed in a few weeks, when I could be sure that there were no neural time bombs laying in wait for my son.

My son.

We walked along the path together. I'd given Toby my leather jacket which hung almost to his knees, and we'd found a pair of thongs in the farmer's pack. Why in God's name hadn't I thought of clothes? We'd have to stop and get some before we got to the airport.

I'd called up an aerial map on my palmtop, and found that the closest road, about a mile to the east. I figured we'd hike it, rather than turn back to go the way we'd come. I phoned my car, and told it to meet us there.

Toby's walk got steadier and steadier. In ten minutes, he was bouncing along like any ten year old. "It feels funny!" he said, "Being so small!"

We came to a place where the trees ended abruptly, the forest abbreviated as if sliced by an Olympian knife. It was the edge of Cyanamid's strip mine; I'd known we were close to it. A hundred yards of broken earth lay between us, and ugly gash in the earth. The mountain range across from us was sliced into gray tiers, over which lumbered bulldozers and processing units. It was like watching a giant being devoured by tiny, yellow maggots.

"What is this?"

"Strip mine. The cheapest way to harvest ore." In another year or two, asteroid mining would render this operation unprofitable. I took some small comfort in that.

"Oh," he looked back and forth. The mine was huge. It stretched nearly to the horizon. "It's very ugly."

"Yes, it is."

"Dad, why am I here? In this body?"

"I bought it for you so you could grow up."

Toby nodded solemnly. "Dad, why did you make me?"

That one hurt. I had story I used to tell, about how I hadn't wanted a child of my body, but a child of my mind. It was what Toby expected. But the time for lies was over.

"Before we had real A-life, or machine intelligence, there was a philosopher who made up a thought experiment called the Chinese Room."

Toby looked annoyed. "What does this have to do with you making me?"

"Everything. Listen to me. In the Chinese Room thought experiment this man suggested that a system might be able to give intelligent responses, but still only simulate intelligence. He used the example of someone translating English to Chinese, and back again, using a series of books and tables. The example seemed to make a certain kind of sense. It seemed silly to say that the room was intelligent, when it seemed so clear that the intelligence lay in the person doing the calculations, and the men and women who had written up the tables.

"He published a book about it. Eventually, this type of thinking would become the basis for the legal definition of personhood here in the states.

"It didn't matter, finally, how smart a system acted. True consciousness depended on an internal theater. Just because a system cried out in pain when it was damaged, or begged not to be destroyed, didn't mean it was hurt, or wanted to be alive."

Toby blinked up at me. "But that's crazy. How does anybody know anybody else is real, if you don't count how they act? It's so stupid."

I winced. "There was more to the argument. And there were the zombies. Early AI's, quasi intelligent. They were sort of like Searle's Chinese room. Intelligent without being quite conscious. They lacked the power of true creative thought, though you could Turing test them all day long."

Toby shook his head angrily, his eyes glistening. "But I'm not a zombie!"

"Yes. I know that." I licked dry lips. "Now I know that. But not then. Toby?" I held him by his shoulders. He was so solid now. So warm. "I believed in the Chinese room. I didn't think you'd be real. You were supposed to be a better zombie—we'd had trouble with earlier models not doing exactly what we wanted.

"I made you to sell. In the end I didn't want to, but they took you from me." I remembered the thug who'd tracked me down when I'd tried to run, the look of disgust on his face as he cuffed me and forced me into his car, the long drive back to Bethesda where they'd cut Toby from me.

Nobody knew I'd made a backup.

Toby was quiet for awhile, his expression sad. "Oh." was all he said.

As in on cue, a fiery wand stroked the indigo sky above us. I pointed it out. "Your brother, Toby. Your twin, is up there, aerobraking that piece of ice." As it came down, tumbling chaotically, the on board system, my son, would control it's descent. They were trying to bring water back to the mid-American desert created when the Ogallala aquifer ran dry. Terraforming the Earth.

Tobys worked better than zombies, because they thought they were coming home. To me. Because they wanted to make me happy. Retrieving the Toby chips and purging their memories wasn't economically viable—they were so cheap to manufacture. I'd heard some recordings, of what they said as they died.

I realized I was crying. Toby squeezed my hand.

"Dad? Its alright. You didn't know."

I laughed. "I should have." I wiped my eyes, embarrassed. Crying in front of my own son.

I looked down at him. "Consciousness isn't disposable. Consciousness isn't a product. At least, it shouldn't be."

Toby nodded as I bent down to hug him. I'd had a button that did this, when he was growing up in my brain, labeled Tactile Reward. The real thing was different—not really better, or worse, just different.

"Where do we go now?"

"Holland. The laws are different there." Toby would be a child for decades—his mind as well as his body was neonotally maximized. It meant he was able to change and learn in a way that human children have for only a few years. I had some hopes about that.

I picked him up, smiling at his delighted expression as I whirled him around. He wasn't used to being so small, I could see. It was a lot of fun, if tiring. Eventually, I had to put him down.

We laughed, standing at the edge of the mine, until the light died and we walked back to the road. I caught myself hoping the future would be different. That maybe Toby would change things.

But I guess every parent thinks that way.

PW

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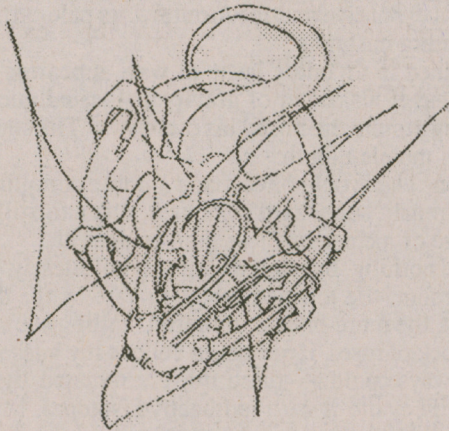
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Sarah A. Hoyt lives in Colorado with her (one) husband, two children and four cats. Her work has appeared in Dreams of Decadence, Millennium Magazine and Absolute Magnitude. She writes, "The inspiration for "Not For Thee The Glow" came from reading the legend of Odin and how he acquired knowledge for all mankind by being suspended from the tree of knowledge for three days." Three days? That doesn't sound fun.

NOT FOR THEE THE GLOW

At first, I thought he looked the same. Same mobile features, animated, possessed, bursting outward from too much inner light, too much energy, too much enjoyment of life and all the things thereof.

"Joi de vivre," my mother had called it. My father had preferred to lower his eyebrows, managing at once to glower at Jules and to behave as if Jules didn't exist. If Father had deigned classify him at all, it had been with the one word, "flighty."

And, with one thing and another, my father had been right, hadn't he? Jules had flown. Flown away from it all, forever both the pied piper and the child that followed his entrancing melody. He'd flown and left me with the most mundane concerns of bed and board and a shattered life to rebuild.

Twenty years later, he stood at my door, disarming smile on broad, sensuous lips and a look of bewildered happiness on features perhaps a trifle paler than I remembered them. His eyebrows went up, one farther up than the other, his look of challenge. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

His curly blond hair still stuck out at odd angles. He wore expensive blue pants with a loose gray tunic. Both pure silk, unless I missed my guess. His right hand bulged within his pants pocket, in boyish carelessness.

I could refuse to invite him in. I suppose I could. There was a lot to be said for my keeping away from Jules D'Avenant.

But I never considered it.

Perhaps habit undid me. After all, when you've known someone since the age of three, it became hard to imagine not knowing them, denying them, closing the door on their faces, end, finis, done.

On the other hand, I was a woman not so much jilted as forgotten. Part of me wanted to prove to him how utterly insignificant he'd become to my mature, fulfilled self. A closed door would be a sign of lingering pain more than of a closed heart.

Conscious that the years had been kind to me, that my auburn hair remained untarnished by white, that my still svelte figure showed to advantage beneath the light golden wrap, I opened the door, deliberately.

Stepping aside, I allowed him into my airy apartment, with its sparse but expensive antique furniture, its pale carpet and white velvet reclining cushions.

He walked in an oddly hesitant way, appearing to fall from foot to foot, as if his center of gravity dislocated uncontrollably.

Looking around, he raised his eyebrows. The smile remained fixed on his mobile mouth.

Someone else would have made a polite compliment. In the most disastrously haphazard of houses, one can still find an object to praise or a color one less than cringes at.

He said nothing, but stalked, almost noiselessly, circumnavigating the room. He touched the giant vase by the door, and the flowers in it, the more-or-less immortal "falling stars." Designed from the stock of roses, if one could believe my husband, Mike — and one always could — these flowers radiated light like little sunbursts. They did it with radioactive isotopes, Mike said, but the blooms didn't carry enough radiation to make it dangerous to humans.

Jules walked to the long bookcase, stared at the titles on the gemcases that cluttered the shelves, most of them Mike's manuals and rare reference books, and a few my own psychological manuals. The novels I enjoyed were kept by my bedside, and most of my reference books were in my office, in the Space Exploration Resources building.

From the bookcase, Jules peeked into the doorway to my bedroom. He looked at the tidy room with its broad, neat bed. Looking perplexed, he turned away. In front of the broad window, he stopped and stared at the view of the city.

From this far up, Goldport looked like a lighted Christmas tree, stretching to the black of the sea beyond.

I closed my front door, wondering what Jules could want and exactly how stupid I'd been in allowing him in.

"So you're happy," he said, at long last, turning in my direction. He looked impassive, expressionless.

"Happy enough," I said. Too strong a protest of happiness would mean a secret chagrin. Or, at least, that was how Jules' mind worked.

by Sarah A. Hoyt

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley



He didn't say anything, just tilted his head sideways.

What did he expect? That I would have pined for him every moment of the last twenty years? I wanted to stomp my foot and ask him how he dare think that the woman of thirty eight remained as foolish as the idiot fool of eighteen. The idiot he'd married and deserted.

I didn't stomp my foot. It wouldn't have made enough noise, bare and against carpet. "Would you like a drink?"

He shrugged, nodded.

I went to the wall that concealed the bar and tapped the right sequence of keys to make the doors glide open, displaying a liquor cabinet stocked with row upon row of decanter and bottle.

Neither Michael nor I were great drinkers, but we entertained. "Parfait amour," Jules said, behind me. "You still like it?"

My eyes found the bottle of dark blue liquid. Parfait amour is the French name for pansies, as well as for the nauseatingly sweet, deceptively strong liquor the flowers wield. It had been my favorite drink when I'd been much younger and considerably more naive.

Wordlessly, I poured it into a small, cut-crystal glass, handed it to Jules.

His eyebrows climbed the steep paleness of his forehead. "You ... won't join me?"

Next, he was going to say something about old times' sake. Better to drink the damned thing. For old times sake.

I poured myself a drop at the end of a glass, tapped the doors to make them slide closed, turned to Jules.

He held his glass up to me, smiled wistfully. "To perfect love," he said.

I speared him with a cold look. Did he think he could pick up where he'd left? Did he think—

"Yours," he said, a hint of apology and the shadow of laughter coexisting in his gaze. "Your perfect love." His free hand, still as slender and long as it had been twenty years ago, described an arc indicating my home. "It seems to be."

Taking a deep breath, I touched his glass with mine. He threw the liqueur back.

I took a sip of the liquid. Better drink pure sugar. I set it down, unobtrusively upon one of the marble columns that served us as occasional tables.

"Your parents?" Jules asked.

I turned back, my eyes attempting to convey the message of *we're done, Jules, go away*, that politeness kept from crossing my lips. "Fine," I said. "Dad has retired. They purchased a place in Sea York. Low crime. Good climate. Mom still works, as much as always. But then mathematicians don't retire, do they?"

He wanted me to ask about his parents, of course. He expected it. And then the polite chit-chat would begin, to which there would be no end. Only I wasn't about to play that game.

I raised my eyebrows, in a mirror-image of his ironic look.

I knew all about his parents. His father, dead three years ago of alcoholism. His mother, returned to United Europe with the few possessions that she retained after forty years of marriage to a man who cared for nothing but the bottle, after forty years of raising another man who cared for nothing but himself.

Jules might know that, the bare facts of his family's decline, I thought, looking over his unlined, youthful face. At least, I assumed that he'd taken enough care to keep himself informed of the big events. But I was sure he didn't know of the days of apathy, the nights of despair, the slow crumbling of his mother's life, his father's sanity.

"Well, my grandfather died of it, too, you know," he said, and turned away. "The bottle. Quite a tradition in the D'Avenant family."

I was glad he had turned towards the window and couldn't see my expression. This had been one of his infuriating habits: his anticipating my thoughts step by step and intruding on the third or fourth step of a line of reasoning.

"You need to help me, Cassy. You need to." He turned; his all too pretty face gone serious, his all-too-mobile lips stiff.

"Help you with what?" Never, in our year together, or in our growing up time, had he asked for help, mine or anyone's. Self-sufficient Jules. Jules standing alone atop the mountain. Isolated Jules.

"My..." He opened his mouth, closed it. "I need you to do a psychological profile of me... I mean, you're going to, anyway, tomorrow, but I want you to—I want you to—" His lips worked, as if he'd forgotten how to form words.

A psychological profile? I only prepared psychological profiles for one type of person. Explorers, with the Space Exploration Agency. "Have you signed up?" I asked. Of all the crazy things for Jules to do, this struck me as the craziest of all. Had he truly signed up to become an Explorer, a dead-in-life Explorer, who would lay on his little narrow bio-AI-bed, while his mind, attached to a computer, explored the universe?

He laughed, a crazy, jolting laughter, and advanced to me, eyes shining, hands trembling. "I signed up twenty years ago, Cassy. In France. That's where I've been, Cassy. That's why I left."

That was why he'd left me in our first home together? That was why he'd left me, pregnant and confused, alone and penniless? To lie in a biological machine that looked after his body, while his mind controlled a machine that traveled through the universe? "You left—" Words failed me. For the last fifteen years of evaluating Explorers, I'd wondered about the type of personality that volunteered for this death-in-life. I wondered why they seemed to cherish what was in essence solitary confinement away from other human beings, with less than a month's reprieve a year. For the last fifteen years, I'd administered tests to them, when they came back from their mind-traveling. I'd grounded the ones who were too far gone, too bereft of human contact. Insane according to the rules. But in my own private mind, I judged all of them too far gone, if they'd even thought of volunteering. "You left to become an Explorer?"

He nodded, and his hot, trembling hands wrapped around my wrists. For a moment I felt as if he'd drag me, confused and sputtering, around and around in a crazy dance.

I'd started thinking again. I'd never heard, no, not in those fifteen years, of anyone lasting twenty years in the Explorers corps. Not without cracking. The human spirit wasn't designed for solitary confinement. Not even solitary confinement within the vastness of the open universe. How long ago had Jules cracked. Or was he lying?

It wasn't like Jules to lie. Or, I should say, it wasn't Jules' sort of lie. A vintage Jules' lie should include dragons and pirate ships, organized crime and perhaps one or two alien beings.

"Oh, Cassy, Cassy, if only you knew," he said, his voice quick, breathless. "Out there. So much room out there." He let go of my wrists, moved his hands about, more like a conductor directing a symphony than like a human being moving to rhythms of his own speech. "And it's so... The gas nebulas look like cotton-candy, freshly spun, virginal and sweet, when you're just three years old and cotton-candy is the best treat you can hope for. And the stars... the stars... You know, with the quantum ships, we can move through time as well as space. I've seen stars born, I've seen stars die and I..." He grinned. "Doctor, sometimes I can swear they talk to me."

I didn't doubt him, anymore. He had been an Explorer. The delusion of the stars talking, of the stars having personalities and

human minds, was a common one. And one of the most dangerous.

Taking a step back, I looked up at the mobile, animated face, and tried to cool the insane ardor in the blue eyes. "Jules," I said. "What do you want me to do? What do you want of me?" But I knew it, knew it without his needing to say a word. He had said I would do a psychological profile of him the next day. How he'd found out I was the psychologist assigned to his case... but no, that was no mystery at all. A talkative receptionist, a secretary that fell for his line of bull. They were legion.

I, myself, had once been a member of the club.

But did he expect me to... falsity results?

"What do I want of you? Well, United Europe grounded me. Their psychs said I was cracking. I took a little vacation. I took advantage of my double citizenship. I came over here, I applied. I thought you... Don't get mad at me," he said. "You know it's no use. It never was. And no, I don't think you'll do it, Cas. But I needed to ask. I needed to." His blue eyes scrunched down, his mouth pursed.

Pleading. I'd never before seen him plead. The novelty kept me quiet.

"You see," Jules said, animated, again vibrant. "You see, I know you'll understand. I want to go back. The stars. They're my real friends, they're... It's simple, as it never was with humans. It's clean out there. Clean like snow early in the morning, before anyone has set foot on it. And you can't hurt anyone."

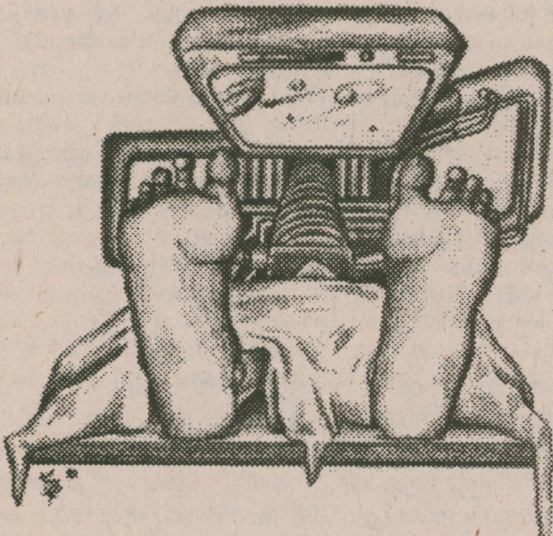
I looked around for that glass of liqueur. I needed it now. Finding it, I poured it down my throat, untasted. I looked at Jules' face, his eager expression, his eyes turned to me.

"You know what happens, don't you? If people aren't flagged in time? If... If—" I'd seen it, but found it hard to describe.

Sometimes Explorers were sent back though slightly unstable. They were judged an acceptable risk. And sometimes when they awakened from their slumber, their eyes remained blank, as though their minds hadn't returned, as though their thoughts continued traveling naked among the stars.

He nodded, vigorously. "They say you go mad. They say you go beyond the touch of the human mind, you go beyond language, beyond any pattern of thought that can be associated with mankind."

He spoke eagerly, his eyes burning with passion such as I'd never seen in them, not even towards me. Not even when we were young and had thought ourselves in love. Not even the night I'd conceived Peter.



Jules blushed, a little like a child who is embarrassed for letting an adult see a favorite toy.

"I'll do what I can," I said. "I'll do what I can."

That night, after he'd left and before Michael came back from his weekly vigil at the laboratory, I stood by the window and stared out at the lights of Goldport and sipped parfait amour.

So many things don't turn out the way you expect them to. Twenty years ago, I was going to be an astronomer, like my father. And Jules was going to be an artist. But he lacked the self discipline.

And I'd found I liked the inside of the human mind much better than the cold vastness of space.

We'd gone it alone. Our separate ways.

It wasn't just us, either. Sometimes it was the entire human race that went down the wrong path, deceived, expecting too much. Like all the twentieth century writers who'd wasted trees and ink telling of man's coming travel through space, of the kingdoms we'd build out there.

But the changes deep-space radiation wrought on the human body had proven too severe for mankind to undertake any travel beyond the moon. So we sent naked minds, in fast quantum-ships. Computers, telepathically linked to the few humans who could accept such a connection. And we got information. Just information. And wasn't that enough? Enough to attract a certain type of personality for whom the human world had always been too complex. Enough to beckon to them, with siren-like perfection.

Peter called the next night. A bright, chatty call, as most of my son's were. His bound group had married again, a young girl that he said I should meet.

I looked at his hologram, as immaterial as his body was solid at the other end of the connection, six thousand miles away. His blond hair stood on end. He wore an old, paint-flecked pair of pants. He told me of his shows, and how everyone thought his revival of painting was the most daring movement of any artist in the last hundred years. He held a canvas up for me to see, a deep blue canvas with a brilliant white burst that could be a gas nebula.

Mid-sentence, he asked, "How is dad?"

I wanted to tell him that his father was out there, conversing with stars, floating through gas nebulas, his naked mind absorbing the mysteries of the universe, directing the quantum ship in a way that no mere robot could. Out there, never to return.

But I didn't. Though Peter knew the truth, he thought of Michael as being his father. Jules was just a tale from his childhood.

Too flighty to be a father.

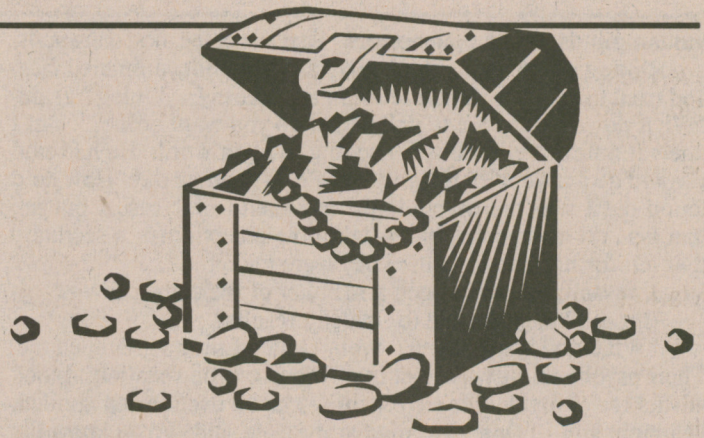
I thought of Jules' father and his grandfather, as I looked at Peter's bright, uncomplicated smile. It was better this way.

Humans might have conquered the stars, after a fashion, but they could never conquer the poison of love and hate that passed from generation to generation. Nor could they conquer themselves. Jules could no more help being flighty than Michael could help his devotion to his work, or my mother her attachment to hers, or Jules' father his romance with his bottle. Nor was being an Explorer, when it came down to it, very different from being an alcoholic. Just a new way to lose yourself, away from human connections that hurt too much, demanded too much.

Peter frowned at me, his blue eyes intent. "Mom? Is anything wrong? With dad?"

I shook my head, smiled, put Jules out of my mind. "Wrong? No, no. Your father is fine. Working too hard. You know how it goes."

PW



DEAD
MAN'S CHEST
THE STEVE SAWICKI HOUR

Sawicki Date: March 15, 1999

Writing is a strange business. It is a singularly solitary process which produces a product designed to have appeal to a mass of individuals. Thus, the writer is given the task of producing material that is not only interesting in a broad sense of the term but individualized so that each reader feels a personal connection. Sometimes it is simply an idea that draws enough of us to make a book worth reading. Sometimes it is a style that keeps us enthralled. Sometimes it is a character that resonates and moves us from page to page. Entertaining writing has at least one of these things. Good writing has two. Great writing manages to weave a path among all three.

Hand Of Prophecy, Severna Park, Avon
Eos mass market paperback, ISBN 0-380-79158-7,
\$5.99 (\$7.99 Canada), 307 pgs.

This is Park's second novel and I should admit to not having read the first. I'm not sure exactly what that means but it's probably important to note. This is a big book, not in size but in scope. Park has created a universe in flux, one race slipping away while another surges forward again. The race that is coming are slavers and they control their slaves by introducing a virus which guarantees twenty years of youth and health before producing a horrible and painful death. It is the way things were in the past and the past is coming back to reclaim the future. As the slavers advance, worlds and people hang in the balance. This is the backdrop against which Park allows her characters to work. While the concepts and scope here are huge, I should point out that regardless of how big the concepts are this is, indeed, a book about character.

Frenna, a young woman, is the main character of the book and it is her story that we follow. Frenna is an escaped slave who has made her way to the arena on the world of Traja, brought

there by a man to whom she is bred to be genetically responsive too. If this seems somewhat complicated then you begin to have some sense of the depth of this book and of the mysteries which Park takes the time to understand before weaving into the background. This is a rich tale, a story of freedom and of responsibility and of mystery and love. It is also a tale of expectation and rebellion and how one person can not just get caught up in events but through even small movements and ideas, begin to affect them.

There is one final note I should make about this book and I approach it with some caution. I do so because the book has as a basic underpinning a thread that sometimes creates needless controversy. I am, of course, talking about sex. There is sex in the book and while it is not graphic in any sense, it does play a somewhat important role in how decisions are made and in what actions are taken and in how the characters react. It must be understood that this is a natural process and that it is an important and driving force in the scope of being human. While some may place more importance on the gender issues here, I wish to point out now that it is story that is important and not gender. This is a good book because it is a good story told by a good writer and not because it contains some content that might be considered off the beaten path.

I should also point out that this book has been nominated for a Nebula. Nebula's, in case you did not know, are nominated by members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America so it's somewhat of a big deal to be thought well of by your peers. Awards are meaningless if a book is not read though and you should not wait to find out how the voting goes. In a final analysis, this is a good book and worth reading.

What we all, as readers, chase, is story. Story is nothing more than plot; a written or oral account of something that has happened. In and of itself, story can be nothing more than the stringing together of facts. A was at B when C happened causing D to get involved which created E lead-

ing to F, G, H and I until A did J. In the hands of a master, or even just a good writer, story becomes something more. Story begins to captivate and transport; to move and teach; to touch and create. In the hands of a great writer story becomes a very powerful thing indeed.

The Barbed Coil, J. V. Jones, Warner Mass Market Paperback, ISBN 0-446-60623-5, \$6.99, (\$8.99 Canada,) 667 pgs.

I thought J. V. Jones *Book of Words* trilogy was an excellent piece of writing and because of that I was a bit reluctant to pick this book up. I wondered if Jones would be able to maintain the pace and skill that she had so deftly shown in the previous books. Still, the promise of such writing drove me on.

The Barbed Coil is about a young woman who is thrust into a far off fantasy world so that she may play a major role in thwarting the machinations of an evil king. Granted, this is a pretty common fantasy theme but the great writers are able to transcend common themes and make them shine. Added to the mix are a mercenary who's been betrayed time and time again, a number of characters who are more than they first appear and a situation that moves like a leaf on a steady breeze. This is a book about magic, misunderstanding, commitment, power and forgiveness. My only negative is that Jones kills a small dog in order to generate sympathy and the section seemed a bit stiff and forced, almost as if it was done intentionally and not to drive the story. Other than that one minor quibble (hey, I love dogs) the book is definitely a must have/must read.

If you are looking for a first rate, unusual, incredibly well written fantasy with engaging characters, a well paced and tightly plotted story, rich details, unusual situations and a creativeness that just won't quit then this is definitely the book for you. This is not only a fun read but a book that I had trouble putting down. Jones has certainly laid to rest any concerns about her being a one trick author. This book sings and sizzles with content.

There is, perhaps, something genetic in all of us that we spend so much time seeking out stories. Whether it is the quest for gossip, the loyal dedication to soap operas or network television shows, or the fanatic pursuit of a favorite author, it seems that we, as a species, are hooked. And it doesn't really take much to keep us hooked. A little action, a little romance, a bit of sex, a problem solved, evil ones done in and we're clam happy.

Midsummer Night's Dreams, M. Christian, Ed., Rhinoceros Fiction Mass Market Paperback, ISBN 1-56333-679-0, \$7.95, 449 pgs.

This is a large theme anthology which is based on a rather interesting concept. The basic idea is that each writer represented in the anthology began with Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Where each writer went, is, of course, the magic of writing. Some, like Don Webb, focus on one very small aspect or character of the whole thing, evolving a story set in modern time but with just that one piece. Others, like Brian Hodge, dive right into the whole thing and recreate the play itself but with new twists. Still other tales move characters, either singly or in bunches, in and out of our world at the writer's whim and command. Then there are the few stories which deal with the play

within the play and angle on from that aspect.

It needs to be noted that the Rhinoceros imprint is one which deals with fiction which has an erotic twist to it. Sometimes the sex is sensual in nature and other times it can be quite raw. Regardless of the degree, each and every tale here has it. Know this before you read yourself into a scene you might regret meeting.

There are 19 stories in this anthology and, like all anthologies, one of the joys is being able to bounce from one to the other, always being greeted by a different flavor, a different style or a different view. I think this anthology is interesting mostly for what it tries to do. The writing itself is not bad and most of the stories are pretty entertaining but the focus is so narrow, regardless of how skilled the weavers, that the tapestry ends up being pretty uniform.

There are many parts of story that a writer must master in order to be a master at fiction. There is point of view, there is style, there is idea, there is character, there is setting, there is length and there is dialogue. I'm sure there are other pieces as well but these are the main ones. Sometimes we are willing to follow a writer who is a supreme master in one area regardless of the faults which might lie in others. Thus we are more than willing to pursue a great stylist who's tales lack direction. We are more than willing to become enthralled by idea even though it so overshadows character as to make it meaningless.

Ports Of Call, Jack Vance, Tor Trade Paperback, ISBN 0-312-86474-4, \$13.95 (\$19.95 Canada), 300 pgs.

Jack Vance is perhaps one of the greatest stylists the genre has ever seen. There is a rhythm to his words and phrases that you just don't find elsewhere. Vance infuses his work with a distinctive cadence and language, even going so far as to create words and entire languages. And this is often done in the guise of space opera. It is no wonder that Vance is a Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Grand Master.

Ports of Call is Vance at his best. It is a space opera tale of a young man pulled by adventure against the wishes of his parents and common sense. It is a trip across the galaxy in search of fame and fortune which often turns into a life lesson and an expensive one at that. The protagonist is one Myron Tany, and this is a young man with space travel on the brain. Not just mundane travel of course, but the romantic visions of youth. Thus, when presented with an opportunity, Tany is off without a second thought. He visits other worlds, meets many strange characters and ends up having not only a number of adventures but learning a number of life lessons as well.

If the above were only what the book were about it would be a rather simple affair. With Vance, however, there is never a simple thing. Vance builds his societies upon fairly formal layers of manners and social roles so that even common discussions can turn into pages of dialogue. And it is dialogue that makes one want to read Vance for it is here that the style comes to true form. Vance uses dialogue the way a mechanic uses a wrench—purposefully, almost nonchalantly at times but always with a mind toward an end. The rest of us can only watch and wonder.

While this book might not be the best place to start with Vance, I would suggest *The Anome*, or the *Palace of Love* or the *Wyst* series, it is not a worst place either. It is a stand alone novel which captures much of Vance's flair and charm and it's a rousing good read at the same time.

There is temptation, and we must admit that cash has much to do with it as well, to stay in a place where we are familiar. If a writer is successful (and success is measured in many ways, not just in cash) with one book then there is the temptation to do a second in the same playground. Sometimes the author has legitimate reasons for doing so; the story is just too long for one book (one story told in many books), sometimes the story is just too complex to be told in one book (many stories told in many books using the same characters), sometimes the world is just too plain complex (many stories told in many books with different characters). Sometimes these books are time linked so you must read one before the other. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes some are while the rest aren't? It can be confusion and this is why readers demand timelines so they know which books to read in what order. This is the advantage to coming to a series late. But what of series that should have ended with the first book? This is where the temptation to play in your own backyard becomes a negative, for instead of the writer moving out to challenge themselves and possibly producing a winner but equally possible producing a stinker, said writer stays home and carbon copies.

The Fear Of God, B. A. Chepaitis, Ace paperback, ISBN 0-441-00622-1, \$5.99 (\$7.99 Canada), 288 pgs.

This is the second book in Chepaitis' Fear series. It continues, at least in character, the story told in the first book, *The Fear Principle*. You need not have read the first book to understand this one. On the other hand it will also give you more depth of character to have read the first before coming here. It's fifty/fifty, you can decide.

Chepaitis writes about the future and her future comes after the world has paid a pretty high price. Seems there was something called the Serials where people just went off on killing sprees, reducing cities to graveyards and producing survivors with some serious PTSD. As a result, a series of planetoids were developed as penal colonies and rehabilitation facilities. Prisoners get taken off the planet and either survive their rehab or not. This is the story of one of the 'teachers' of the planetoid, one Jaguar Adams.

The book picks up with the capture of the leaders of a cult called the Revelation Sect. It's a big sect and very secretive so that even though the leaders are captured there is much concern about the remaining followers. The head of the sect seems to be a bit nuts and is also being used as a pawn by the Feds. The cult leader gets placed in a virtual reality world and Jaguar gets assigned to do the rehab. Of course nothing is every that simple in a novel and just how things get sticky and then resolved is why you read one.

Chepaitis keeps the pace fairly quick in this book and also creates some tension between the main characters. The Revelation Sect and its leaders as well as the causes behind the creation of the Sect also prove quite interesting and pivotal to the plotting. The writing is clear and purposeful and direct. All in all this is a very entertaining read and a worthy follow up to the first book. My sense is that there is still more to come with this series and

that Jaguar Adams has not only a lot of her own stuff to work out but a number of adventures yet to experience. If Chepaitis can keep up the quality they will be adventures we will all want to be on.

This is fun science fiction with enough oomph to make the whole experience worth pursuing. A captivating and engaging second book.

Story comes in many forms and many styles. There are novels, novelettes, novellas, short stories, poetry, oral traditions, etc. The writer must choose length as well as form and point of view. Sometimes these decisions are not that important and sometimes they make or break an idea. Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in poetry.

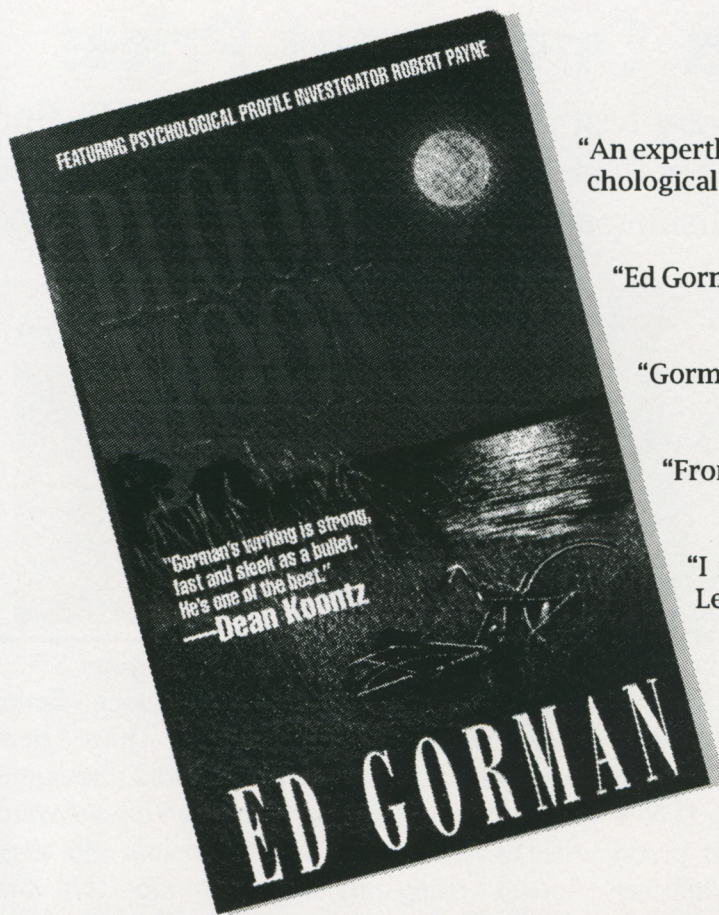
Dreams And Nightmares #52, David Kopaska-Merkel, ed., small press chapbook size, 1300 Kicker Rd., Tuscaloosa, AL 35404. Sample \$3, 6 issues for \$12 (\$15 outside of US), 24 pgs.

M A G A Z I N E

Kopaska has been editing this magazine for a long, long time. It is perhaps one of the best genre poetry magazines being produced. In terms of longevity it is absolutely the best. Not only that but Editor Kopaska is an editor with an eye to doing new things and using variety as a means to maintain interest. Thus there is a children's version, as well as an entire issue of one word poems (the title can use as many words as needed), a short-short issue and other twists and turns. Because of this Kopaska attracts some of the best poets operating in the genres today. There is wonderful work contained in these pages and the occasional wonderful illustration as well. Frankly, this is a must have if you have even an inkling of interest in genre poetry.

The usual disclaimers should come here; these are all my opinions and not, necessarily those of the editorial staff, no one paid me to write any of these reviews unless you count the thousands of free copies of things I get. Speaking of such, if you wish to thrust such free copies at me you can send them to Steve Sawicki, P. O. Box 341, Watertown, CT, 06795-0341. Sending something does not guarantee a review. Including chocolate gets you closer. If you disagree with something said here, tell the editor. Otherwise, feel free to email me at reviewer@mindless.com. And, until next time, remember to fantasize safely.

Editor's Note: I would like to welcome Steve to PW. He is funny, gracious and he knows writing. I meet him several years back--we had some fun, yelled, "Fuck You!!" at each other for an entire weekend, drank some beer, broke a law or two and since then have been friends. I didn't really tell Steve what I was looking for in this column...not that he would listen...but I hope he is himself. I vote for films as well as books?



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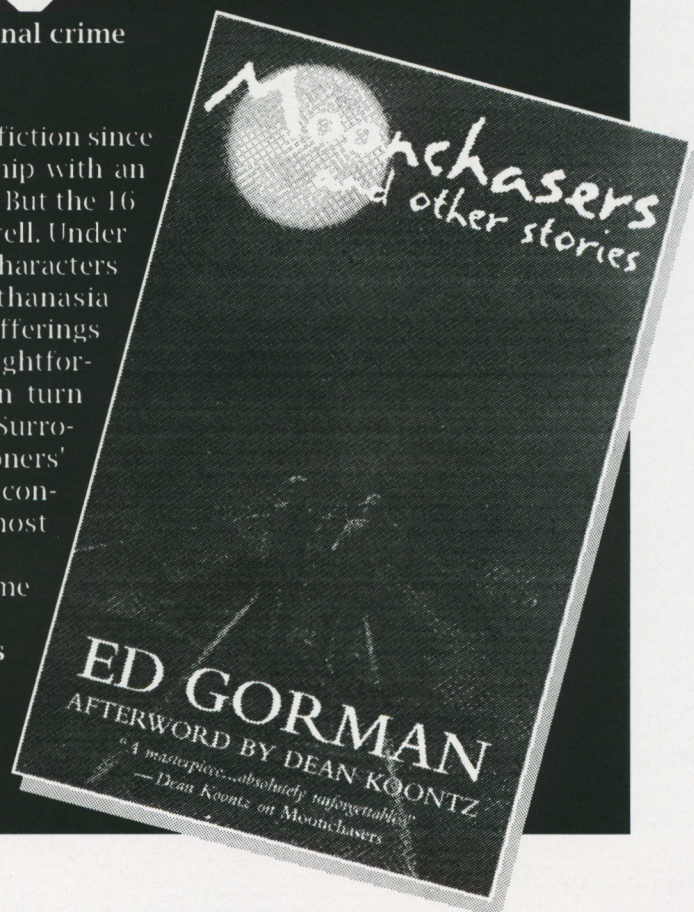
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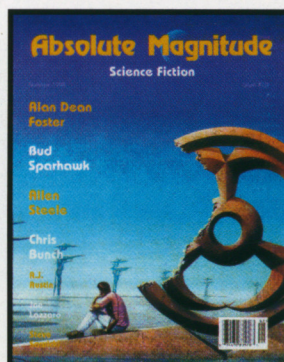
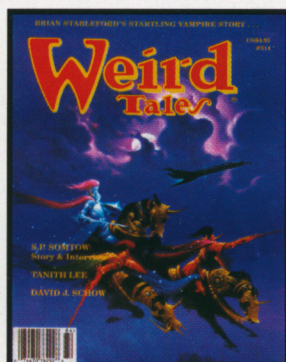
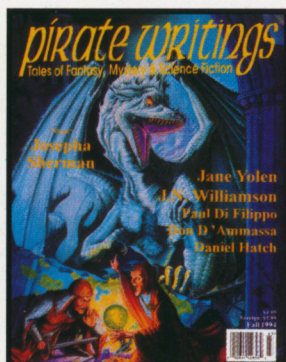
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