



Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

THE BORDELLO IN FAERIE by Michael Swanwick

Plus:

Robert Edric

Matthew Hughes

K.W. Jeter

Gene Wolfe

and others

POSTSCRIPTS

AUTUMN 2006

NUMBER 8



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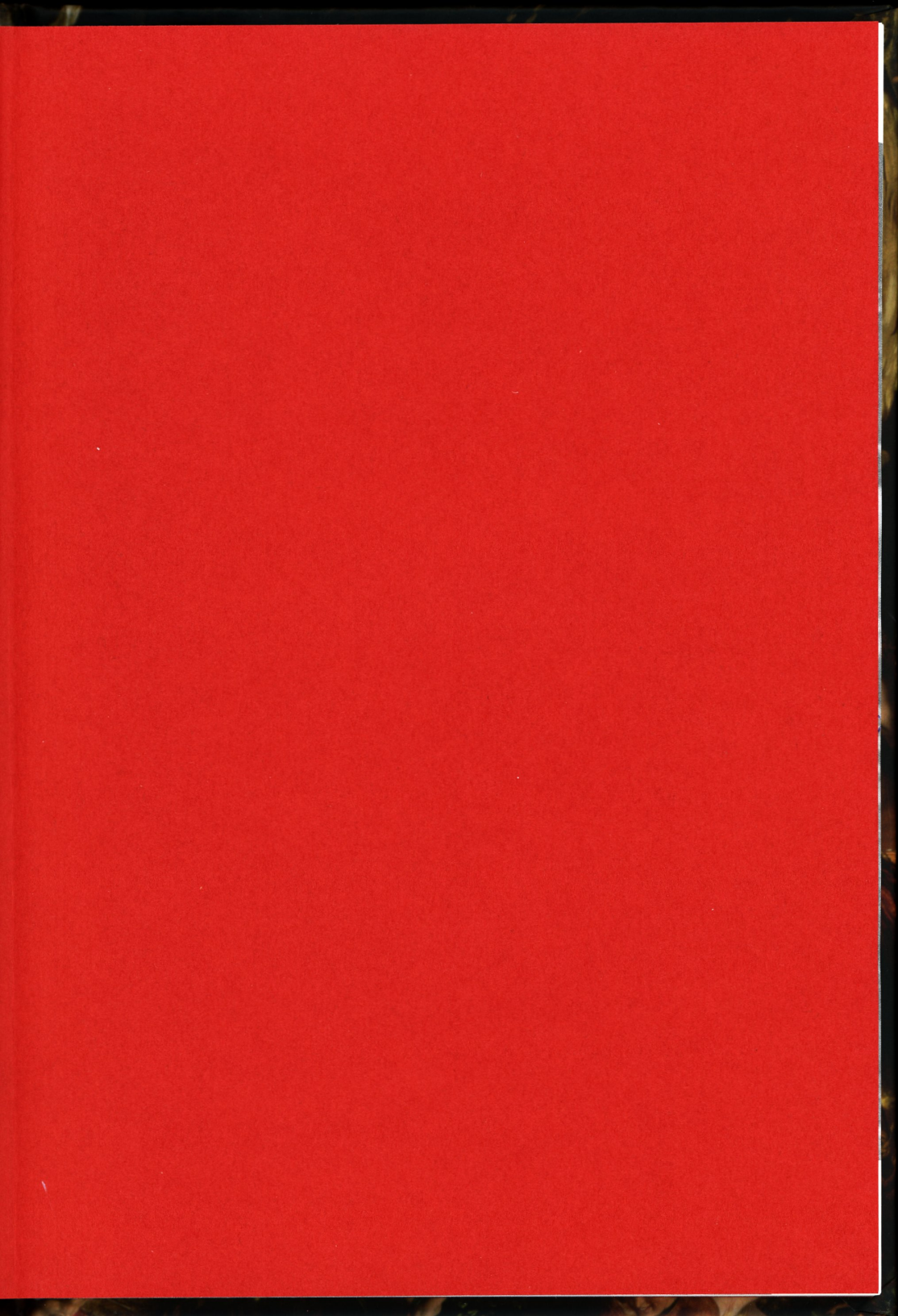
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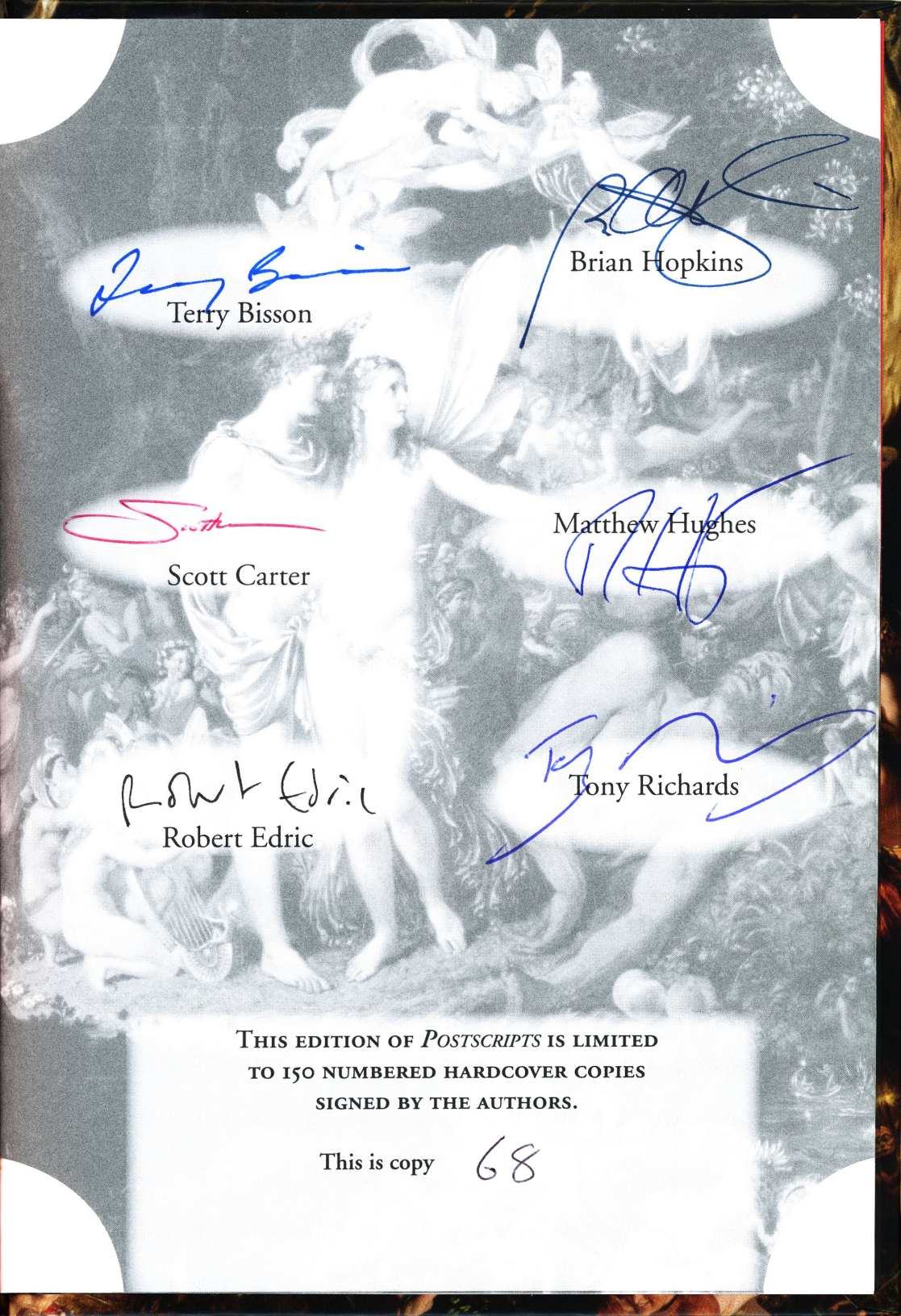
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Terry Bisson

Terry Bisson

Brian Hopkins

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Matthew Hughes

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Robert Edric

Robert Edric

Tony Richards

Tony Richards

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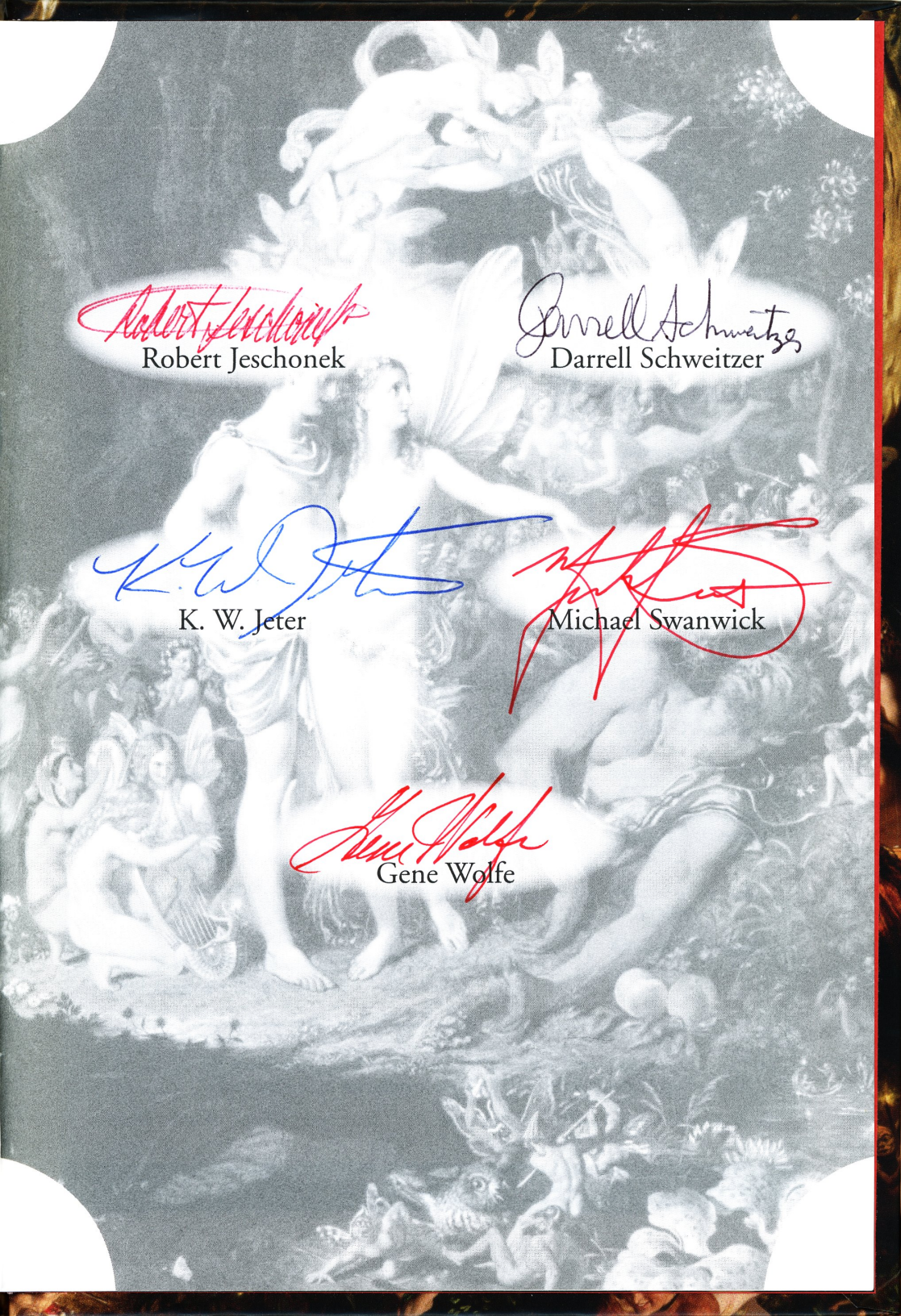
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Robert Jeschonek
Robert Jeschonek

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K. W. Jeter

Michael Swanwick
Michael Swanwick

Gene Wolfe
Gene Wolfe



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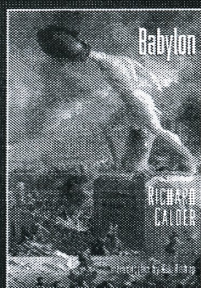
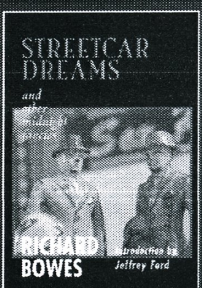
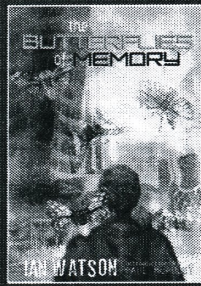
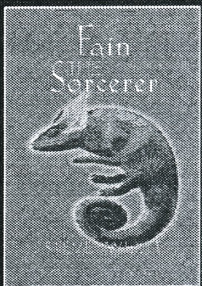
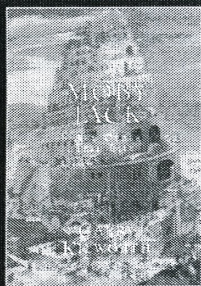
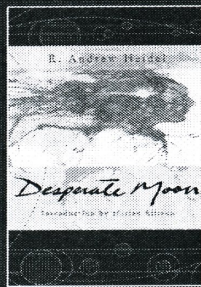
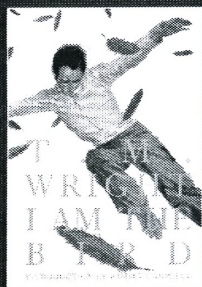
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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

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Terry Bisson says of his Editorial, "The background to my thinking here is the incident in the car I describe, plus a general resistance to millenarian thinking. My PS novella, Dear Abbey, was an argument against apocalyptic dystopian SF (or so I thought, though not recognized as such). Charlie Stross, Vernor Vinge et al are doing good work though with their visions of an upcoming Singularity, reinvigorating SF which always needs an Impending Event. Here come the robots!"

Terry is currently working on a short parody of the Left Behind books with Patrice DuVic.

Editorial: The Singularity

Terry Bisson

The Singularity has already happened.

We missed it.

We will die, you and I, in the world we were born into; not so my mother, your grandmother, our great uncle Jim. They were born in a world lit by fire, pulled by horses or steam at best, and they died in a world knit together electronically, in which no two cities, however remote, are more than a long day's travel apart.

The curve that seems to us to be steepening so dramatically, has already formed its S, and is flattening toward the top.

The curve began 500 years ago, with print and the discovery of the "New World," then with the telescope and the microscope, and it steepened steadily, if slowly, until the 1850s, and then shot straight up at the turn of the last century.

Radio, the telephone, the airplane, the automobile, television: all this is familiar now, so familiar that we forget how drastically it altered everything.

All that was solid has melted into air.

My mother, born in a small town on the Green River in western Kentucky, lived thirty miles from the nearest city. So did most of the people in America. It was an overnight trip on a steamboat, a comfortable trip (the curve had steepened that far) taken once a year, when the tobacco crop was sold. Entertainment at home was sheet music, on the piano in the parlor. Jane Austen could have read it.

Caruso was a name. If my mother had gone to New York, or even Cincinnati, she might have heard him sing. She had read about him in the papers that arrived (by boat) once a week. Or in the cities, by train, once a day. The curve had steepened that far.

Then one day she heard him sing. His voice arrived on a record, wound with a

crank, shipped by steamboat from Louisville. You and I can hear him sing the same aria today. He had been off-loaded into our cultural memory, immortalized.

The curve was steepening; heading straight up.

My mother was still a little girl when the phone rang. It was Uncle Jim, in Sorgho, twelve miles away. By the time she was a teenager it could have been anyone in the world.

Of course it wasn't, but it could have been. Then FDR turned on the lights, and spoke to her live on the radio, and to a million others. A million, all at once! The war came, and Churchill spoke as well. Uncle Jim bought a Ford and the nearest city, Evansville, was only an hour away (still is). Mother got married and saw Milton Berle mugging on the TV, live from New York. He is still mugging (on disk) today. Immortalized. Downloaded into our cultural memory.

Middle age held bright new wonders. Mother brought country ham to my wedding in New York, but she could have brought ice cream, for she flew (flew!) in an aluminum tube at a high fraction of mach one. The whole trip took three hours.

Two weeks before she died the phone rang and it was my sister in Thailand.

Since then, the curve has flattened. The Saturn V was in the Wright Flyer; the 777 in the DC3; the iPod in the Victrola; the internet in the phone on the wall and the TV that replaced the piano in the parlor. What we mistake as the coming Singularity is but enhancements, refinements, modifications. Computers get smaller and faster and smarter but they are still just off-loads of ourselves, memory and math. They will never tell us anything that we haven't told them to tell us.

Computation is not consciousness. Memory is not intelligence.

Before she died my mother's mind often wandered, and she reverted to the same little girl who had marveled at Caruso's actual voice. One night I took her for a drive on the bypass that now encircles her small town: Walmart, McDonald's, 7-11, all ablaze with neon signs. The traffic flowed like a river of light, and Elvis was on the radio, twenty years after his death. The car phone rang; it was my wife, reminding me to pick up ice cream.

My mother sat up suddenly, looked around, delighted, and asked, "What happened here?"

What happened was the Singularity. It happened in an instant of historical time, and it created a world unrecognizable to the little girl who saw it begin. It was and is truly wonderful, and it's ours to finish, to refine, to enjoy, and hopefully to learn to control and use.

Not ours to create, ours to inherit.

The Singularity has already happened.



Regarding his outrageous small masterpiece *"The Bordello in Faerie"*, Michael Swanwick comments, "Perhaps it begins in Vermont. The weary old factory town of Ironbeck is surely a slander—but not much of one—on the weary old mill town of Winooski, where I spent most of my adolescence. Or perhaps it begins with my almost reflexive contrarianism. 'Isn't that an oxymoron?' my wife asked when I told her I was writing a story with lots of hot elf-sex. 'Not any more,' I told her. But the proximate cause was a recurrent series of dreams in which I crossed over into Faerie and visited the bordello there. Night after night, I gathered material, the fruits of which may be read herein. When I had enough to write the story, the dreams ceased."

Michael adds, "As for current projects, I'm working single-mindedly on my desecration of everything that is good and decent about genre fantasy, *The Dragons of Babel*. Excerpts from it include "King Dragon," published in *The Dragon Quintet*, and "The Word That Sings the Scythe," "An Episode of Stardust," "Lord Weary's Empire," and "A Small Room in Koboldtown," in Asimov's, the latter two forthcoming soon. The book should be done soon, fingers crossed."

The Bordello in Faerie

Michael Swanwick

*How many miles to Babylon?
Three score miles and ten.
Can I get there by candle-light?
Yes, and back again.*

Ironbeck was a weary old redbrick factory town located on the west bank of the Porpentine up in the northern marches along the border of Faerie. Ned Wilkins was an Ironbecker bred and born and, like everybody he knew, had graduated from school at age twelve and gone immediately to work the day after. He'd been a breaker boy at the colliery, a scrap sorter at the boiler works, a grease gunner in a machine shop, and a shit laborer more places than he cared to remember, and the one constant in his life was that if there was no other work for him to do,

somebody would hand him a broom to keep him busy. He had a thick head, no imagination to speak of, and he could handle himself in a fight if the need arose. He considered himself one of the lads, and took it for granted that they accepted him on those same terms.

So it was a shock when, having come of an age when such knowledge suddenly became urgent, Ned discovered that no one would tell him the location of the bordello across the river.

The bordello was one of those things that nobody spoke openly of yet everyone made smutty slantwise reference to, like the men who hung out at the quarry and would suck the dick of any boy who let them or the clapped-out whore at the Bucket of Nails who'd

do it for a beer. Ned had never actually laid eyes on the Bucket of Nails doxy and rather doubted she existed, but almost every night at sunset, once he knew to look, he could see the dim figures of men furtively slipping across the trestle railroad bridge to Faerie, where no honest business awaited.

"You've not got experience enough," Boyce told him, though Boyce had barely two years on him, and they'd shared the same sixth grade. Boyce was an apprentice steam fitter at the turbine factory where Ned was little more than a gofer. "Wait a bit, and when you've gotten your stick wet a few times . . . well, we'll talk about it."

"Bastard!" Ned cried and punched Boyce so hard the cigarette flew out of his mouth. Which, given the size of Boyce, meant that it was inevitable Ned would be in no shape to go to work the next day. But there are things a man must do regardless of consequences. Just to keep his self-respect.

That spring, Ned took up with a girl named Rosalie who worked in the canteen at the wire-works. One astonishing night, she took him and a blanket to the woods out beyond the commons and taught him everything he'd been most desperate to know. For a season they lived together, coupling at every chance, and then, after two weeks in which nothing he did pleased her and everything he said provoked an argument, she moved out.

When he learned that Rosalie had gone directly from his flat to that of a mechanic's apprentice named Rusty Jones, Ned sharpened up his biggest knife and went hunting for him. But rumors flew faster than birds in Ironbeck, and when he finally located his rival's place, Rusty and four of his mates were waiting there. They took the knife away from him, blackened his eye, and spoke a few calm words of reason into his ear. All things told, they were decent to him. There were men who'd had their nuts crushed for less.

In the aftermath of which, Ned found himself thinking again of the bordello in Faerie. So, of a warm summer night, he waited in the woods by the tracks on the far side of the river. In the distance a signal light glowed red and green. Overhead, three moons shone. When finally Boyce came striding up the tracks, jauntily whistling "The Continental Soldier," Ned stepped out into the open and quietly said, "Yo."

Boyce stopped. "Yo," he said warily.

"I'm taking you up on your offer. Show me the way."

"How much money d'you have on you?"

"Enough." Ned had brought along his entire week's pay, knowing it was far too much but not wanting to risk the humiliation of being caught short.

"More than you need, in any case. Give me a bank note and I'll show you the way there and back again." It was extortion, and they both knew it.

Knew, too, that the wisest thing was for Ned to pay without argument. Which he did.

Boyce grunted and turned away. Ned followed him down the gentle curve of the railroad tracks a quarter-mile or so and into a silvery stand of aspens. There, a trodden path took them down the verge and into the woods. "So what's the big secret about this place?" Ned asked, trying to hide his nervousness with conversation. "Why all the mystery?"

"Shut your hole. You'll know soon enough."

By twisty ways they went deep into the moonlit forest, across one creek on a red lacquered Chinese bridge and over another on a fallen log whose top had been trod clean of bark by travelers. A mossy road of timbers laid down in the mud took them though a sulfur-marsh where night-haunts beckoned and corpse-lights burned blue in the water. Up slope then they trudged into a dark grove of oaks where fireflies gently sifted upward through the leaves. Ned was far from certain he would remember the path in all its intricacies. He worried that perhaps Boyce had taken him by roundabout ways, so as to demand more money on the return trip. "How much farther is it?"

"We're here, asswipe. Look."

At Boyce's gesture, Ned lifted his gaze and saw a massive darkness beyond and among the oaks, the silhouette of a great house, impossible to make out in any detail and relieved

only by the occasional glint of candles in its windows like so many distant stars.

"It's enormous."

"It's the World. That's what it's called. There's only one bordello to service all of Faerie and its entrances are everywhere and its name is the World. You take the left-hand path here. When you're done, return to this spot, and I'll guide you home."

"Aren't we going in the same way?" Ned asked, surprised.

"Every man enters by a different door. House rules. It's that kind of place." Boyce threw his cigarette down, ground it underfoot, and strode away.

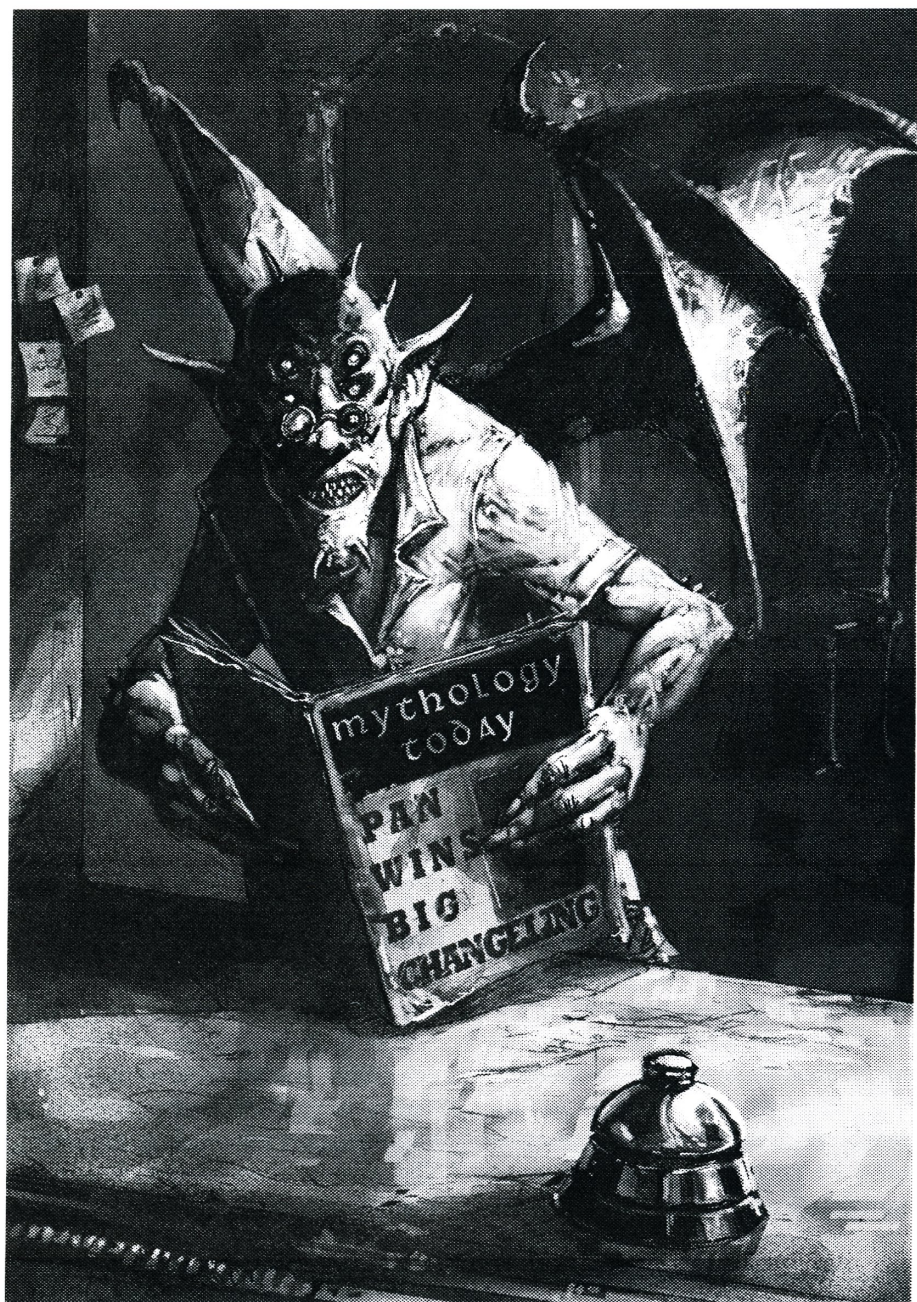
Heart pounding, Ned let the path carry him to his entranceway.

The door was ordinary enough, but the frame it rested in was carved in graceful curves, like the lips of an enormous vulva. Wonderingly, Ned reached up his hand to touch the clitoris. Even by moonlight he could see it had been polished by many such casual rubs. The instant he touched it, the door flew open.

He went in.

The reception room was paneled in oak and lit by brass lanterns. Leather chairs were scattered here and there. It was posh, but surprisingly mundane. The only otherworldly touch to it was the imp who sat at the reception desk, his nose buried in an issue of *Mythology Today* while a barbed tail lashed back and forth behind him, as regular as a metronome.

The imp had a pince-nez at the tip



of its nose, a sharp-toothed grimace beneath it, and three pairs of eyes above. All but the middle pair were shut. "A new one, eh?" The tail froze. He opened all six eyes wide and studied Ned for a long, silent moment. Then he closed the bottom four. "You'll do, I suppose."

Ned cleared his throat, unaccountably embarrassed. "I'd like—" he began.

"Oh, don't you worry about what you'd *like*. Gilbrig has a good one for you. Excellent for your first time, I assure you! Up the stairs and to the left. The green door. She'll be waiting there."

"I . . . uh, haven't been here before. How much will this be?"

The imp picked up his magazine again. "Take it up with the lady afterwards!"

Anxiously, Ned climbed the stairs, clutching the rail to keep from falling. It seemed a long way to the landing at the top and then, all too soon, he was there. He looked right and left. Though the hallway stretched on forever, there was only one door. It was green as a leaf in springtime. He pushed inside.

An elf-woman lounged naked upon the bed. She leaned up on an elbow, studying him thoughtfully. Her face was lovely but impassive, and her skin was palest blue. She had four breasts whose color gradually drained away at their tips, so that her nipples were white as mushrooms.

"Take off your clothes," she said at last, "and kiss my breasts, one by one."

But when he obeyed, the elf-woman snapped, "Not so fast! You treat them as if they were a quarryman's lunch! Linger. Fill your mouth with them. Suck on the nipples. Use your tongue." Ned altered his approach in accord with her directions. "Yes, that's better. And your hands as well. Yes. Mmm. Now, if you were to very delicately take one nipple between your teeth and gently pull . . . Ahhhhh."

Slowly, slowly, then, ran the chariot-horses of night. The elf-woman was as fragrant as a spice garden, redolent of wild thyme in the crook of her throat, of ginger and nutmeg beneath her breasts, of cinnamon further down. Her nipples tasted not of mushrooms but of honeydew. At times Ned felt his senses reeling from the intensity of sensations. Yet always he wanted more.

Though all the provinces of her flesh were duly visited, ever did the woman demand that he pay especial attention to her breasts. Nor was Ned loath to do so. Until at last, with him frantically working his yard back and forth between her lower breasts, which she pressed tight about him, and with his hands squeezing her upper breasts while pinching hard her nipples, he spasmed and spent. At which very instant she came as well, as though they two were ensorcelled to achieve orgasm at the same time.

There was a basin of water on a stand by the bed. With preternatural

grace, the elf dipped a washcloth in it, wrung it out, and cleansed her breasts of his seed. Supplely, she slid into a tight pair of trousers, pulled on high, red-leather boots, tucked in her silk blouse and, one-handed, tied up her hair with a ribbon. Over her blouse she strapped a sword harness so that the scabbard lay diagonal across her back with the blade's hilt peeking up over her left shoulder.

Ned fumbled for his trousers. "Um . . . How much do I . . . ?"

Contemptuously, she tossed him a gold coin. He stared down at it in astonishment. When he looked up again, the elf-woman was gone.

Gilbrig snickered as Ned came down the stairs. "You see? That wasn't so difficult, after all! You are a true *sprutluder* now, eh? Come back next week and I'll have something special for you. Ohhh, yes. Something nice, something nasty, something like nothing you've ever had before." He stuck his fists in his armpits and, pumping his elbows like wings, threw back his head and crowed. "We'll make your rooster sing!"

Ned found Boyce waiting outside in the three-shadowed moonlight, as he had promised. The man threw down his cigarette and ground it underfoot. "I'm giving you good weight here," he said. "You should've been done an hour ago." Then, before Ned could speak, "Turn slowly in a circle. You feel how when you're facing toward the place,

there's a little stiffening, a little rise down there? Eh? Well, that's how you get here. Follow your prick. After your first visit, it knows the way. Going home, you just take whichever path it's most reluctant to go down. It's as simple as that." He started down the path.

"Boyce, that woman *paid*—"

The apprentice steam fitter spun around, seized Ned by the collar, and shook him angrily. "All right! Now you know what the big secret is. Let's see if you have wit enough to keep your fat mouth shut about it, shithead."

The next day, at lunch break, Ned went to the bog and, standing inside one of the stalls with his back against the door, spat into his hand and, eyes closed, jerked off to the memory of the four-teated elf. The lingering scent of her, woman-smell and cinnamon commingled, rose up from his cock.

Ned was neither an introspective nor a reflective man. But the sudden reversal of expected roles last night had disturbed him. He had gone looking for whores, not to be one himself. In some way he couldn't logic out, it had tainted the experience. Now, however, in the warmth of the day, the memory of illicit flesh was sweet. He called forth specific memories of the little grunting noise she'd made when he entered her from behind and of how, when she'd leant over him to take his willy in her mouth, he'd stroked her moist cleft with his big toe. Always returning, of

course, to those fabulous breasts, blue as a strangled man for most of their plumpness and white as corpse-flesh at their tips.

Other workers came and went as he stroked himself, so Ned was careful to maintain the strictest silence, even when he came. But it made him feel good to have such memories and a secret he need share with no one. Even the fact that the wooden stall was painted an industrial green, in crude harmony with the leaf-green door at the top of the bordello stairs seemed auspicious. He walked back out onto the factory floor with renewed willingness to work and work hard.

The good mood this furtive act engendered lasted until, coming off shift, he remembered the gold he had been paid, stuck a hand in his pocket, and discovered that the fairy coin had overnight turned to a disk of soft dung.

“It’s the new *bögyörö!*” Gilbrig whooped when Ned slouched in. “How’s your *kurva’k fasza’t* hanging? In good form and looking for some action? Locked, loaded, and ready to go, I bet.”

“Fuck off.”

“Your joan’s upstairs, waiting for you. If she hasn’t started already.” The imp drew his middle finger under his nose, sniffing ostentatiously, as if it were a fine cigar. “Vintage *fitte*, nice-nice-nice! Ooh, baby, you’ve got a hot one tonight.”

On first entering the room, how-

ever, Ned thought not. The woman therein was tall and homely, and was dressed in the dun, utilitarian garb of a cavalrywoman. “Strip down,” she said brusquely, “and put these on.” Drawing items one by one from a worn-looking pack, she dressed him in a silken under-sark, with over that linen, then leather, and finally chain mail. Yet from the waist down she left him naked. Critically, she looked him over. “You have the height. And as for the face—well, I can always close my eyes.”

But when she put aside her gear and clothing, the body beneath them was as trim and strong and sweet as that of any girl he’d ever fantasized over in Ironbeck. Ned’s shaft hardened at the sight of her.

“Not so fast. First I must anoint you.” Now the cavalrywoman dabbed up three fingers’ worth of ointment from one of several chased-silver boxes on the side table. Strong and callused hands slathered it onto his tool with the same practiced sureness with which she would have carried her steed or oiled her sword.

Finally she knelt on the bed, legs apart, then leant down and placed the side of her face against the sheet, so that her rump stuck up in the air. “Take me as you would your stallion,” she commanded.

For a moment Ned didn’t understand her. Then, when he did, he flushed, and made such a fumble of his attempt at entry that she reached behind her and scornfully guided him into her lesser orifice. This was a lib-

erty Rosalie had never granted Ned. He began slowly, marveling at the tightness of her nether place and the strangeness of finding himself performing such an act at all. But then the warrior reached a hand behind and slapped him on the haunch so hard that it stung, crying, "Faster, damn you—ride me for all you're worth!"

So he complied, grabbing her hips with both hands and thrusting into her as hard and fast as he could. In response, she ground her cheeks pink against the chain mail. "Give it your all!" the warrior cried. "For the Mark!"

Up hill and down they galloped. Now Ned knew for certain that there was a *geas* placed upon the room that he would not come before his client, for he lasted far longer than ever he had before, more than he would have thought humanly impossible, even. Despite all the bumping of bodies and squeezing of his prong, his physical energy did not lag, nor did he surrender to his own pleasure.

Until at last, of course, he did, she did, they did. He thought then to simply lie there and never move again. But the warrior had other ideas.

"Lie as if dead." She crossed his arms over his chest so that the tips of his forefingers touched his shoulders. "If you moan, if you move, if you try to put your arms about me, I'll kill you. Do you understand? My knife is here on the table, and I know how to use it. One way or another, you must be a corpse."

"Lady. . ."

"Shhhh. I'll give you something that will help." She drew a pinch of dust from one of the silver boxes, placed it on the back of her thumbnail, laid it under his nose as he was breathing in, and blew it into his nostril. A cold and wintry numbness spread through Ned's body. Sensation faded from his flesh. He tried to raise an arm and could not. "Wait!" he tried to say, but no sound came from his mouth. But then, as if in obedience to some compensatory principle, his pecker tingled with heat and began to grow. Which told him that, whatever poison he had been given, at least he was not dying.

The elf-warrior straddled his body, seized him by the root, and then rose up and impaled herself upon him. "Ahhhh, sweet liege," she sighed, "at last you're mine."

She rode him like a trooper.

If there is lust after death, Ned discovered that night, if corpses couple in the grave or damned souls fuck in Hell, then it is a dark and wild mating indeed, compounded of ignorance and desire, abandon and despair. The warrior-woman's riding of him was tireless, and it went on until she'd worked herself into a frenzy. He, meanwhile, experiencing no sensations but those of his cock, felt her madness overwhelm him, body and thoughts, so that he was nothing but urge, rage, and primal need. Until at last, crying, "Ah! My prince! I die for you!" the rider burst into tears and collapsed upon Ned's supine body.

Their gallop over, his joan rolled off

him, sighed, and lay for a time motionless. Eventually, she blew another drug into his nostrils to undo the effects of the first and stripped him of the war-leader's costume. While sensation slowly returned to his body, Ned watched her pack away the gear and then dress herself. That pretty body disappeared beneath a cavalrywoman's practical garb. It was like watching the moon disappear behind clouds. A shirt obscured her breasts and then was tucked into her breeches, eclipsing the last sliver of belly and waist and plunging the world into darkness.

With a groan, Ned sat up. The warrior woman finished cinching up her harness, then paused before donning her tabard. On it was embroidered a cockatrice silhouetted against the sun, surrounded by runes Ned assumed were of mystic import, though he could read not a one of them. "Do you recognize my livery? Do you ken what prince I have sworn allegiance to?"

"Lady, I do not," Ned replied. It was only the truth.

"That's good. I would not have wanted to have to . . . Well, never mind. Take this for your efforts." She upended her purse on the side-table. Gold coins bounced and went rolling across the hardwood floor.

"This is too much!" Ned cried. Had he been able to take it home with him untransformed, he would not have lacked the wit to keep such counsel to himself. But it was useless to him, and so he would not see it thrown away.

The warrior lady's face was stern and

stoic. "There is no place to spend it where I am going. I have betrayed my prince, my oath, and my company, and tomorrow we will all fall in battle together. Such is my weird. It is a sad and tangled tale and one that no bard shall ever sing." She took Ned's chin between thumb and forefinger and studied his face. Fleeting, her harsh expression softened. "You've been a good whore. In another time and fate, perhaps we could have . . . Well, no matter."

She kissed him hard, hoisted her pack, and left.

Ned got dressed. Out of tidiness, he gathered up the gold and dumped the coins back in their bag. Out of frugality, he searched the room until he found a floor-board that might be pried up, and hid the bag beneath it. He had no specific reason to do so. But he reasoned that fairy gold might well stay constant in Faerie, and that if so it might prove useful someday. He had grown up in a household where nothing so utile even as rags or straw was ever thrown away.

Such were the experiences that brought Ned more and more frequently to the bordello beyond the world as he knew it. No man could visit that house every night and hold down a job as well. But he was young and strong and could manage two, three, sometimes even four visits in a week. He serviced fox spirits, fire women (here they were properly called

salamanders), shape-shifters, a sphinx who scratched him raw and licked him rawer yet, women whose flesh was as cold as the grave though their passions were not, and nymphs with ivy growing in their hair and madness in their eyes. His work suffered, but he did not notice. Nor if he had would he have thought it important. Though he spent hours in Faerie and days in the mundane world, the latter weighed against the former as moonlight did to granite.

Diverse though his experiences were, some things were as unvarying as natural law: Gilbrig always leered at him on the way in and taunted him on the way out. He was always sent to the room with the green door. And not once did his joans treat him like a real man. Sometimes they looked on him with soft pity afterwards. Sometimes they favored him with avaricious smiles. But never did one smile at him in a kindly way. The doomed warrior who had paid him all her gold came as close as any did to regarding him fondly, but even she had not looked upon Ned himself but at a fantasy of what he might have been to her.

He could not have explained why this bothered him—he would not have treated a whore any better himself—but it did.

Deep in the sunless winter, when it was peril to attempt the railroad trestle and yet the river beneath the ice was so swift and treacherous that no sane man would try to cross the Porpentine afoot, Ned trudged that well-worn

path to the World, and found Gilbrig anxiously awaiting him.

“Oh, why does it have to be a *lerppu* like you?” the imp fretted. “You’re docile enough, granted, but . . . Sweet fucking Freya, why couldn’t it have been somebody with a *brain*?” Gilbrig kept opening and closing his eyes, pair by pair, as if trying and failing to find a perspective from which he might like what he was seeing. “Listen up, *uskumru*. Tonight’s client is important. You’ve never served anyone like her before, nor will you ever again. Understand? She might ask you to do something you don’t want to. Do it! Or, by Lemminkainen’s rosy anus, I’ll rip off your balls and feed them to you.”

“*Póg mo thón.*” Ned had picked up a few useful phrases in the fairy tongue. He repeated this one in English. “Kiss my ass.”

Abruptly, Gilbrig changed tack. Climbing up on top of the desk so he could stand at eye level with Ned, he said, “Look, lad, I’ve always been good to you, eh? Given you a nice clean room and all the twat you could eat . . . I’ve said a few harsh things, maybe, but what are words? Air! Farts! Nothing!” He tugged worriedly at his goatee. “Give me this one thing in return. Treat this bitch as if she were Venus Coelestis herself, okay? You won’t be that far wrong if you do.”

“Why are you so worked up?” Ned demanded. “What’s the big deal?”

“This one has power, boy. Power enough to burn down the World and everyone in it.”

Warily, Ned climbed the stairs and entered the room.

The woman within was clad in a burka so that every least trace of her body was hidden. Veil and hood were all one piece, with a heavy mesh between. Not so much as a strand of hair showed. Her head turned toward him when he entered. "Lock the door," she said, "and make certain the window is securely shuttered. When that is done, you may strip yourself naked."

Item by item, he obeyed. Though he felt her gaze upon him constantly, she did not move at all. "Will you take off your clothing as well, Lady?"

"Douse the lights first."

One by one he blew out the lantern candles, until all was darkness. *What monster is this*, he wondered, *who dares not expose herself to the light?* For an instant he was filled with dread. Almost anything could lie hidden beneath that shapeless cloth. All he knew of this joan was her voice, dulcet and mild. She could be ugly as a toad, slimy as a frog, foul-smelling as a shift supervisor. She might well have tentacles, claws, unfortunate appetites . . . It was the appetites that worried him most.

There was a rustle of cloth, and then soft light blossomed into the room.

It came from the woman's body.

There was no describing that body, for it was Beauty incarnate. Had her breasts been a gram heavier or her hips a hair slimmer or had her stomach not swelled exactly so, she would have been merely ravishing. As it was, her loveliness was such that it hurt Ned's eyes

simply to gaze upon her. Yet he could not look away. Her hair streamed down behind her, bright as comet tails. The burka lay at her feet like a spurned lover. A swath of black silk was wrapped around her head in a blind-fold.

Involuntarily, Ned fell to his knees. "Lady," he whispered, "what *are* you?"

"I am perfection and power and gentle light," she replied. "I come from a distant land in the sky. Barefoot I trod the airy places and by forbidden ways descended to this house." Then, as if confessing to something shameful, "I am a star."

The goddess approached him on naked feet, until the fearful power of her body was but a single pace from his mouth. He inhaled. Her privities were hairless, and smelled of clean, distant lands, of winter air on midnight mountaintops, of the purity of the sky. "Worship me."

It was a delight to do so. The mere presence of the star-woman filled him with strength. Though he was still nothing before her greatness, briefly Ned became more than human. He lifted his voice and, in a clear high tenor he had not suspected he might possess, sang:

She walks in beauty, like the night . . .

Where the words and tune came from he did not know. Perhaps they'd been pulled down out of the sky. Bathed in the radiance of the star-lady, he felt the power of the music flow through and from him, as if he were one of the wizards who, at the dawn

of time, had sung the universe into being.

*And all that's best of dark and bright
Meets in her aspect and her eyes . . .*

On he sang, until finally the song rose to a triumphant crescendo:

*A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*

The goddess took one small, sure step closer. Now her body was all but touching him. Naked, numinous, perfect, she said, "Stick your tongue in my cunt."

Hesitantly, Ned did, and from her throat escaped a small, shrill cry, like that of a night-bird flying low over a lake. She clutched his head, pushing it into her crotch for a minute or two, while he fervidly sought to please her, and then shoved him away.

Slowly as the evening star sinking below the horizon did she then recline onto the bed. Crooking a beckoning finger, she said, "Abuse me. Degrade me. Make me feel like filth."

"How shall I do that?" he asked fearfully. He did not think he could bring himself to use her harshly. He did not believe it possible.

"Be as kind and gentle and loving to me as you know how. That will suffice."

As she commanded, so did Ned pleasure her. It was an experience and an evening unlike anything he had ever known. He was as worshipfully

respectful of the sky-woman as he could be. Never was any man more considerate of a woman nor so attentive to her desires. Yet she shuddered when he touched her, gasped with horror when he delicately kissed her shoulder, and cried out with humiliation when he entered her. Then, when he reflexively drew back, she grasped his shoulders and yanked her to him.

Her body was a delight beyond measure, yet possessing it gave him no real pleasure. He felt like a snail crawling across a marble statue of a goddess and leaving a trail of slime behind him. His every caress defiled her, his every kiss was a lecherous foulness. Had he broken into a cathedral and crapped on the high altar, he could have felt no more vile.

At last his client said, "Enough!" and he sprang away from her. She rose from the bed, went straight to her burka, and put it on. Darkness poured back into the room.

"Lady," Ned said humbly, "why do you wear a blindfold? And how, blindfolded, can you find your way about?"

"I cannot bear the sight of the Lower Realms," she replied. "Yet so repulsive are they to me that I can sense their every detail, even with my eyes shut and swaddled." She walked to the door, and with every step the sole of her foot briefly filled the room with light.

Ned followed her outside where, for the first time, he saw other clients of the bordello than his own, and other whores than he himself. Faces stared

from all the windows. Elven warriors, courtiers, merchants, and craftswomen thronged the oak grove outside, stamping their feet in the snow and exhaling small puffs of white into the winter air. Of the women's varying heights, snail horns, hooves, extra limbs, high or low estates, he paid no mind. All his attention was on the star as she walked steadily up the path through the trees and then, by an unseen trail, into the sky.

The star's naked feet traced a dotted line high into the dark. There was a flare of light as she threw away the burka, to float forever in the interstellar aether. Briefly, the errant star wandered. Then she found her place and was still.

"She is one of the Pleiades," murmured somebody nearby (Ned looked down and saw Gilbrig by his knee), "and of high estate indeed."

Silently, then, all went home.

Ned came away from that night convinced that he would never look at another woman again so long as he lived, for they could not stand the comparison. But memories that are born in Faerie are frail and fickle things, quick to fade and quicker to lose their meaning. By early spring, Ned was eager to visit the bordello again.

"D'y'think you can pleasure two women?" Gilbrig jeered. "Well, hold on to your pizzle, boyo, because I'm giving you three! They're sailors,

raftswomen from the upper reaches of the Porpentine, where it flows out of Ultima Thule. They've been weeks without a rogering, and their *vittujen* need a good workout."

"You're a tiresome little turd, Gilbrig," Ned wearily said from the stairway.

"At least I'm not a *kikkeli* like you."

The raftswomen were passing a bottle around when he entered. They were all of a racial subtype, superficially identical, blond and braided. One had already unbloused herself. They cheered when Ned entered the room. "It's the slut!" cried one. "Come here, slut, and let's see what you've got."

She thrust a hand down the front of his pants and seized his crank.

The semiclad elf pulled his head back by his hair and slapped his face with her breasts. "Do you like these, slut? Do you?"

Then he was wrenched away by the first elf or the third, he could not tell, who yanked his shirt out of his trousers and shouting, "Show us your chest, slut!" ripped it open. Buttons flew through the air.

The raftswomen howled with laughter. One of them shoved the bottle in his mouth, almost chipping a tooth. "Drink up, slut!" Ned tasted blood; she'd made him bite through his lip.

"Ow! Stop that, damn you! I don't like being treated like that!"

One of the raftswomen pinched his thigh, hard enough to bruise. "Shut up, slut. *We'll* tell you what you like and what you don't." Another pinched his

butt. "But you like this, now, don't you, slut?" The third slammed her elbow into his stomach and said, "But even if you don't, you'll put up with it." She smiled. "Because we want you to."

So began the most terrifying and humiliating night of Ned's life to date. He was stronger than any one of the elven women, weaker than any two, and helpless before all three. With slaps and pinches and the occasional hard punch, they bullied him through their pleasures, unheeding of his miseries. The bed was shoved aside and Ned forced to the floor where one squatted astride his yard, humping up and down, and a second impaled her orchid and anus upon his thumb and forefinger, while the third straddled his face and almost smothered him with her yoni. Every now and anon, they changed places. Always, they kissed and caressed each other in the empyrean above his contested body in a manner suggesting they greatly preferred each others' affections to his own.

When the three were done, they left a single silver coin on the dresser—though that were an ungenerous guerdon for even a lone woman—and lurched drunkenly down the stairs, singing a river-chanty and waving Ned's undershorts in the air like a flag.

Raging, Ned clattered down the stairs to confront Gilbrig. "You six-eyed little piece of shit! You set me up."

Gilbrig made an impudent face. "So?"

"So I don't cost you a copper, nor do I get anything out of this but an evening's entertainment. Which means I don't have to put up with being mistreated."

"You didn't mind the birch dryad, and the little games she liked to play with switches."

"That's not the same thing."

"Or the wench who stuck her tongue a good six inches up your—"

"*Not the same!*" Ned stuck his fist under the imp's nose. "If you do this to me again, I'm gone! I'm out of here!"

"Why wait? Go away now, little girl! If you can't take it, just get up on your high horse and fuck off into the sunset! But don't pretend you didn't like it. Your *mulkku* did, didn't you, little fella?" Gilbrig grabbed Ned's crotch and squeezed, then laughed when Ned knocked his hand away. "Oh, yes, you did! You loved it! You loved it! You know you did!"

The next day, bruised and sore, Ned could barely hobble to work. His supervisor chewed him out three times that morning and sent him home at noon. "You've been drinking," the supervisor said, "Or worse. Whatever it is, if you don't stop soon, you're going to be out of a job."

To Ned's astonishment, he didn't much care. All he could think of was the bordello called the World, and

what had happened to him there last night. He was certain that Gilbrig had said he'd enjoyed it only to offend him. But he wasn't at all sure the creature was entirely wrong.

Two days later, he was back in Faerie. "Green door, asshole," Gilbrig growled.

"Yeah, yeah," Ned replied. "And the same to you." Without paying much attention, he went into the room at the top of the stairs.

Something was wrong.

The room smelled of decay and the window had been smashed to flinders, along with half the furniture. The only light came from outside and, with but one moon above the horizon, it was faint indeed. "Hello?" Ned called uncertainly. "Is anybody here?"

Then there was a scraping noise, and a low, throaty, not entirely sane laugh. Something pulled itself out of the shadows into the half-light. It had curling horns, like a ram, an apish form, and two cold pinpricks of light for eyes.

"Who *are* you?" Ned cried.

"Have you forgotten me so soon, little Ned?" The creature was short, bandy-legged, big-butted, and had one dead hoof that dragged on the floor after it. Its clothes were all rags and mud and could not hide the fact that its teats were covered with fur. "I have many names. Some call me the Mother of Goats." A chill breeze from the window blew from her to him. The stench of her body was astonishing. There was stale piss in there for a foundation, strongly accented by fresher ordure

and enhanced by grace notes of sweat, spent seed, carrion maggots, and other, less identifiable things as well.

"I . . . I don't know you!"

That dark shape bent over almost double, squinting. "I see," she said. "You've wandered here from out of the past, have you? Gone through the wrong door and here you are?" That laugh again. "Well, can I do less than meet you halfway?"

She limped forward and with every step the stench lessened, the room brightened, and the repulsiveness of her aspect faded. Halfway to him, the limp was gone and her body was convincingly human. Her hair was long and greasy but it no longer covered her body. She still smelled gamy, but Ned had known girls who smelled worse after a double shift at the factory.

"You like me better now, don't you?" The goat-woman cocked her head and smiled flirtatiously. "I can see that you do."

Ned nodded wordlessly.

Smiling, she put aside her gown, which was rags no longer, to reveal a body as young and pleasant as any other woman's. Slowly, seductively, she lay back on the bed and spread her legs. To Ned's horror, a mouse squirmed its way out of her quaint. It ran down her leg and into the darkness.

With a cry of disgust, he stumbled back from her.

"A forfeit! A forfeit!" cried the Mother of Goats. "If you deny me what I came for, you must give me something of equal or greater value." Her

broad yellow teeth gleamed. "Those are the house rules."

It was so. Though Ned had never heard such a thing spoken of before, he knew the truth of her words the instant they were spoken. Knew, too, that having come here penniless and without treasure of any kind, and lacking anything else the fey folk valued, he would be expected to cede something better. Such knowledge had been woven into the web and woof of the World at the time of its creation, and none who dwelled therein could avoid it.

He knew that the forfeit she wanted was his soul.

Yet all was not lost. For she would have to accept gold, if he were to offer it, and there was a bag of the stuff hidden under the floorboards of this very room.

The goat-woman's screams of rage still echoed in the air when Ned confronted Gilbrig.

Rather than shrinking from his wrath, however, the imp climbed up on the reception desk and thrust his face almost into Ned's. "The green door, the *green* one, you daft and fucking fool!" he shouted. "How hard is that to understand? How the fuck could you go through the black door? *Dati go fukne konj*, damn you! I'll spread your ass for the horse myself."

"She *knew* me." Ned could barely contain himself. "She said she came from my future!"

"Big fucking whoop. The black door

leads forward. All that means is that you'll want her when the time comes. Maybe a decade, two at the outside. Quite possibly less."

"Never!"

"Sooner than you think, Missy. You're coming along nicely. You're not so far from felching Our Lady of Filth as you'd like to believe. We'll have you groveling at her feet, trout in hand, before you know it."

"Not without my cooperation, you won't! I told you I wouldn't put up with this kind of crap and I meant it. I'm done here, done for good, and you can just piss up a rope for all I care, because I'm never returning."

"Go, then! You'll be back! Once you get a taste for fairy flesh, you can never return to human meat. You're my stump-broke *cow*! When I tell you I want cream, you're going to haul out your hose and say, 'How many quarts?'"

With a roar, Ned grabbed Gilbrig by the neck. Maddened with rage, he choked and choked and choked the imp until the grotesque creature's face turned first red and then blue. When he stopped struggling, Ned convulsively released him.

Gilbrig's body fell to the floor, dead.

Horrified, Ned staggered back from the small corpse. All six of its eyes were blank and staring. He felt behind him for the door, seized the handle, and pulled it open. But when he turned to leave, Gilbrig laughed behind him.

"Oh, you don't get off as easy as *that*, Neddikins!" the dead imp cried.

"You're one of my girls, now and forever. You'll return! If not this week, then next. If not then, the week after." The voice followed him as he fled down the dark and wind-swept path away from the World. "Three weeks! Three weeks, tops, and you're mine forever."

A week went by, then two. Every day Ned fought down the urge to cross over the river into Faerie. Every night it rose up again, stronger than before. Until eventually he was certain that sooner or later he must inevitably give in to it. But even then he resisted. Not yet, he thought. Not today. Just one more day.

Soon.

Not now.

The lads on the factory floor told each other that Ned was "elf-shot," that he'd gotten a taste for fairy snatch and it was only a matter of time before he disappeared across the river forever. It was an open secret that they'd formed a betting pool around the exact date that happened. He was passed up for a promotion to tool-maker's assistant, though he was apt with his hands, and he couldn't bring himself to care.

Such was his condition on the day of Barrington Turbine's annual picnic. It was held on the commons, with tables of food and wine and a small band for dancing on the green, on the theory that it was good for morale. Which it was, though only briefly, for it made

the lives of the company's workers more pleasant for a day and no more.

Afterwards, he learned that the young women had been talking about him. "Elf-shot and fairy-whipped," said one, "and limp and useless to boot."

"He's a cold fish for certain," said a second. "Imagine kissing Ned. Ugh!"

But the third—Red Molly—said, "I can bring corpse-boy there back to life. Watch and see if I don't." And, seizing a half-emptied bottle of wine from a tub of melting ice, she walked firm of purpose toward Ned Wilkins.

All this he was to learn later. Now he happened to look up from the ground and saw a buxom red-haired woman walking straight toward him. Her breasts were lovely, though there were only two of them and they decently covered. Her skin glowed, though it did not shine of its own light. Her eyes were the green-or-gray color of the Northern oceans.

"Would you like a drink of wine?" she asked, a mischievous diabolus dimpling in her cheek.

But when Ned nodded and reached for the bottle, she held it away from him. Then, lifting her chin in a way that made her chest follow and her breasts rise to his attention, she put bottle to lips and hoisted it high, filling her mouth with wine. After which, she grabbed him by the back of his hair and yanked, forcing his head back and his mouth open.

Her mouth descended to his, and she squirted it full of wine. In astonishment, he swallowed and blinked, and realized that she was already walking away from him. "Wait!" he cried, and ran after her. "Would you . . . I mean, I'd . . . Could we dance?"

To his absolute confusion, all of Molly's girlfriends simultaneously broke into laughter.

Thus were Ned's eyes opened again to the beauty of human women. For a long season, he chased after Red Molly. And though he never came close to catching her, somehow in the course of trying, he took to seeing other women and discovered that, to differing degrees and with the occasional exception, they were all desirable and worthy of his respect as well.

Nor was that the only change in Ned's life. Not long after the company picnic, he took a deep breath and went up to his supervisor and said, "Mr. Murcheson? That opening for a machinist's mate—I want it."

Murcheson looked at him in surprise and said, "Do you think you're steady enough for the work?"

"Aye."

For a long still moment, the supervi-

sor studied him shrewdly. "Then it's yours."

So Ned Wilkins got his promotion and, some years after that, became a machinist and then head of his entire division. By slow degrees he became known as a reliable man and the day came when only his oldest cronies remembered there had ever been a time he had slipped the traces and almost been lost to a certain place across the river. Meanwhile, he'd fallen in love with, wooed, and won his own dear Marion.

The borders of Faerie are not constant. They ebb and flow like the tides, though no man can chart them. As he grew older, Ned found that Faerie receded further and further from him, while at the same time his love for his wife grew more and more comfortable, until they were as fit for one another as a pair of old shoes. By which time, he could have walked around the world and never once caught a glimpse of those fey lands. Nor did he care. He and Marion reared five children and were content.

And when his sons came of a certain age, they all hared off to Faerie, as young men inevitably will. But what his daughters did, he never knew.



The Empty Pool comes as a dying echo of Robert Edric's acclaimed Song Cycle trilogy of noir crime novels set in Hull . . . an homage more to Hammett than to Chandler in its delivery and surface notes; more to Arthur Lyons than to Michael Connolly in its setting and its subtleties; and more to Jim Rockford than to Lou Archer in its pacific-washed, self-deprecatory tone.

Longlisted for the Booker Prize for both *Peacetime* (2002) and this year's *Gathering The Water*, Edric lives by the cold North Sea in East Yorkshire and has never been to San Diego. "But," he says, by way of atonement, "I did once take one of life's many wrong turns on Crenshaw Boulevard and came pretty damn close."

The Empty Pool

Robert Edric

Let me try to explain: it's like you know, like you really know, like you really *really* know that everything's going smoothly and according to plan, that everything's been taken care of, that there isn't anything left that can possibly go wrong.

And then something does.

Something big.

Something that comes up and catches you square in the face, like it's laughing at you for not having seen it all along. Like you're half-way down from the high-dive board into twenty feet of clean blue water with your eyes closed and you just *know* that your twenty feet of clean blue water's there and you don't intend opening your eyes to make sure it's there because half the thrill is jumping off the board with them closed and then going in with them closed. Like your hands are together praying, just knowing that they're going to hit first and that the water's there and that it's going to melt away round you.

And it takes what, a second, second and a half, before you know for certain, before you can taste it and your hands are in and everything's being sucked out of you as you go under, and even then, even as you feel like that, you're starting to curve back up to the surface to fill out again.

It's like that, like knowing how everything should be, every perfect detail, and then knowing about all those other details when everything isn't perfect, when the leaf floating on the surface of the pool is twenty feet down and sitting dry on the bottom. Like that. Like a prayer that can't get itself started because it's not so much a prayer, but a confession of something you'd rather not admit to, like your own stupidity in having climbed up on to the board in the first place. It's a high board, you ought to feel good, and everybody's watching you. And perhaps there's a pattern in the pool, dolphins, mermaids, and you're aiming at one, planning to touch it at the bottom of

your curve. It's like you know where you'll go in, know how you'll move, and know precisely where you'll come back up and break out into that thick warm air again.

You know, that's all I'm saying: you *know*.

Like Shapiro's third wife said she knew Shapiro had been dipping his married toes into someone else's pool-side situation. Like she knew that since his return from Puerto Rico he'd been forever coming home with his neck-tie a millimetre out, his excuses missing by a mile and his feet wet. And so her good friend the lawyer tells her to get proof, photographs, film, receipts, more photographs, sworn testimony of somebody reliable, somebody like me, somebody professionally reliable, somebody who knows the mean, cold running order of these things.

First thing she said to me was that she didn't want to have to listen to anything clever, and I added fifty a day to the five hundred. She looked like the kind of woman who might appreciate paying more because she thought she was getting more.

"Dirt" was the word she used. The more shots of him dipping his toes, the better.

It was a nice Bel Air house. Everything up there was nice, and everything that was nice was in its place.

"Nice pool," I said. "Nice house."

"The other's nicer." Big, bigger, biggest.

"Oh?"

"Oh." She'd worked leisure into a fine art. This woman would panic leisurely. God, in His wisdom, could unzip the San Andreas by another three hundred miles, put her to the test and still lose.

Signing cheques was indoor business. Vacation-bought Indian rugs and statues; giant plants that were professionally "refreshed" for each new dinner party.

She said she hoped I wasn't too smart for my own good. I promised her I wasn't. I drew a cross on my heart. A line appeared between her eyes. She paused, then tore out the cheque.

I followed him for three days, to and from his office. There might have been something going on inside, but I doubted it. Too much glass. He worked as an insurance broker. A man like that is careful with money, and she'd spent a week with a calculator before her hour with me.

So I watched him. I've had the outline for years; this is just filling in the details. I call in a daily report, and the first thing she asks me is where I am. I give her time to compose herself. She'll break a conversation to put fresh ice in a drink. I let her do it, wait, thinking about how I don't even have one small plastic pool and she has two giant real ones. Two pools, two homes, two lots of everything.

She was born in El Paso, moved west, rooted. There is some connec-

tion in her mind between El Paso and a difficult birth, like she's a snake, sloughing off one skin, leaving it behind and then crawling away to wait for the shiny new one to toughen up.

I time it so I'm in place before Shapiro arrives, and again before he leaves. That way I know where he is, where he's going. In a week he's seen no one, and by then he probably knows I'm watching him. In a few days he'll wave to me and I'll have to pretend I'm stupid and he's clever. Trouble is, he knows as well as I do and as well as she does that from here on, nothing is going to be easy to avoid. She'll find out, he'll know she knows, and I'll turn up at the end of everything with a manila of ten by eights and slap it down by the side of the pool. She'll start rattling with delight and her tongue will flicker at the taste of all that coming money. By then he'll be up on the board and she'll be tossing olives trying to hit the leaf. What bothers me, what always bothers me, is that he knows it's coming. He's up there looking down and knowing it's the only way to go. He could try backing off to the steps and coming down that way, but he won't.

They never do.

State and Union Insurance, covering all the ground. Shapiro, apparently, is big in Risk Management and Assessment. Movie work. A good man to know if you're in possession of a big

idea that gets itself dashed to pieces on the rocks of someone else's missed down-payments.

I picked all this up from his loveless wife on my second summons. She wanted to be sure there was nothing I was missing from the start. I told her I didn't think I was, but in this business a bad smell is always a bad smell.

A pool-cleaning service man arrived while I was there. She told him to go away and come back later. He called her by her first name and she corrected him to Mrs Shapiro and made too much of it for my benefit. I told her she had the cleanest-looking pool I'd ever seen, but she was distracted, listening to him drive away, growling his engine and kicking a rubber heel into the pink driveway gravel.

She wanted results, *quick*, and then, No, take your time, no rush. She'd been talking to her good friend the lawyer and they were after a percentage settlement in direct proportion to the dirt, the ten by eights, of which so far there were none.

"I want him out there *doing*, understand, no mistakes." She wanted him in five-colour action. She even suggested the make of a DVD camera, asked me if I knew how to operate one, said she knew everything there was to know about them. I declined. You can win a case like this with a blur at fifty yards or a bead of sweat at one. A solitary bead of sweat or a single stammered word wins more cases in this state than anything that was ever slapped down in court in an envelope.

Today's the day, and Shapiro's taken the time to let me know it. He might have been waving, he might have been calling a cab, he might have been shielding his eyes from the sun. Looking up at the sky, down at the water, seeing the same blue and white, one still, the other broken, making all his guesses about that second and a half in between. He's making it easy because now I only have to wait for him to come over and say Hi. So what do I do? I can casually lift my fingers from the wheel, let him know, and drive away. Or I can sit and look right back at him like I'm plucking up the courage to go in and insure my resolve. I can tell him, Look, I've come out to the end of the board, and as far as I can see, someone drained the pool, that how you see it? And he'd be thinking, How much was I getting, how much did I already know, how much more did I want or need? The way I saw it then, they were scoring off each other and making it too easy for me.

What happened was he came casually over and crouched down, leaning on the hood. I was winding the window before he started speaking and he appreciated that. He had on a yellow necktie and a yellow fleck in his jacket you might have picked up if you fell on him. He was smiling in at me, telling me that we were already friends, that he'd be ready with a hose while I tested the board.

"You've seen her," he said. "You want to embarrass me. What she wants, she gets. That how you see it?"

Oh, I thought, it's a high, high dive. I'm an Oh man because it suggests thoughtfulness, reasonable assessment. I told him he was right.

"You know where this is going?" he said. "Directly nowhere, full speed. Let me explain."

He'd taken out insurance against being sued for unfaithfulness and the forty or so other names it goes by these days. He even gets a discount on the premiums.

He asked me, confidentially, if I knew how, say, nine out of ten cases of this sort—his and hers—how they ended.

I told him about the eight by tens and he said he didn't think that kind of thing still went on any more—out in the real world, he meant. I told him a good photograph would always increase percentages, and he understood that. I told him I'd learned ninety per cent of what I knew by avoiding the real world, told him I even dreamed in black and white. The other ten per cent I'd picked up from peering through hedges and bedroom windows, motel shutters and windshields so thick with dust they were alive. I told him that avoiding the real world was the best part. He asked me if I had anything on him already, and what could I tell him? I told him he had one too many houses for an insurance broker, one too many pools. He laughed at that, but it was a dry laugh, and by the time he stopped laughing I probably knew as much as I was ever going to know.

All this time he was still crouching at the kerb and we were trying not to look too hard at each other. They say hostages should always try to “personalise” the relationship with their kidnappers. It might still end badly, but so what, perhaps it was always going to, perhaps getting there is somehow made a little more bearable. It was how I felt talking to Shapiro. He straightened up, said he was late for a client. He gave me his traffic-dodging, man-without-a-care-in-the-world walk, and I wished he hadn’t; I wished he’d saved it for his entrance into the court-room and then tried it against the glossies mounted on a board. He tipped a fine balance with that walk.

“So he knows, so what? So let him know, perhaps it might cool him down. Who is she? We know yet?”

We might have done; I didn’t. It should have been her first question; instead it was her last.

I asked her why she didn’t get back to her lawyer and start proceedings to collect on the insurance. She did know about the insurance?

“You think I’m stupid?”

Everything in the house was insured. Every thought, every emotion, every kind word that had ever passed between them. They got two dollars every time a bird shit on the window, a dollar for the black, a dollar for the white.

We were back beside the pool, full clean and blue, and she was wearing a

tiger-skin print two-piece that would have looked embarrassing on a tiger. She was back-dropped with raggy palms, palms that blew over and were replaced whole in the night when everyone was asleep.

What it was, she had these ideas about suffering, about standing at the side of the empty pool and shouting *Emp-ty!* and then pretending she’d tried to avert the disaster, tragedy, whatever. What hurt her was the fact that Shapiro was the first to start making it obvious, and because he’d paid up his premiums and she hadn’t. That’s what really hurt. She’d get to keep one of the houses and one of the pools. She’d get to invite fifty pool cleaners on a contract basis and have one over for every working hour of the week. I suggested all this to her, but only in my mind. I promised her the photographs.

“Something you’re not telling me?” she said. “I get to find out, you’re off the case.”

“Listen,” I told her. “When I worked in San Diego I spent nine days out of ten in the Stingaree watching wayward men with wayward women having the times of their wayward lives before the big drop. Except they don’t want to call it the Stingaree any more. They scrub everything down and start calling it the Gaslight District. They even bring in the gas lamps to try and make the name stick. You believe that? They could light *and* heat that place from the static coming off the sheets. I’ve sat out there at nights and listened to half a square mile of crackle.”

I left her after that, and on the way out I saw the empty pool, another blond guy brushing it out, whistling something too fast for the echo from the walls.

"You can go in now," I shouted down to him, and then watched while he pretended not to know what I was talking about. See you in court, I thought. She was watching us both from the window. Some looks you don't need to see; some you can smell; and some you can feel like a fingernail from ear to ear.

Next day, Shapiro was waiting with an address, name, age, camera angles, focal length, the lot. Asked me if I needed a Steadycam mount and had I worked out his best side yet, all a big joke.

"Whatever happens," I said, "you'll still get dragged into the machinery."

"I like machinery. That kind of machinery." Meaning he could work it and she couldn't. "Let it happen." State motto.

"Okay." I watched him walk back through the traffic again to S and U.

The address he'd given me was on the back of a woman's face. She looked about twenty years behind his wife and as clean and perfect as a doll in its wrapper. It stopped being a sharp and clever thing that I was doing.

A professional portrait with the name and address of the photographer attached. All the clues lead to a settlement. But sometimes you can be up

there and the sun can play a trick on you and put in twenty feet of clean blue splash before you've bothered to look twice as you walk forward. I was still being given too much in addition to the five hundred a day.

I was growing tired of the Shapiros' play, the brochure talk, of forever being pointed in the right direction. It wasn't what I was used to.

I followed the address to a door.

Count to three and the peep-hole opens and somebody says, "What you want?"

A door in a run-down warehouse district. A lot of mesh fencing and empty spaces, screaming jets overhead.

I held the photograph up to the hole. The girl smiled in. Silence. Silence is useful. Silence means yes, no and everything in between. Better than that, it means what I want it to mean, or, in this case, what the Shapiros wanted me to want it to mean. Some investigations are like that.

"She's not here," the somebody said.

Now my silence was more useful than his.

"Can I come in?"

The big voice laughed at me. "You auditioning?"

Some days, waking up was like stepping into a bad film. "What you got?"

More laughter.

Pornographic films, stills, private screenings, get to talk to the stars, take them home, a little private screenplay, cut and start again.

"We're a long way south of the big letters on the Hill," I said.

The voice appreciated this. One bolt.

"But will she be back? Soon?"

Another bolt and there was the voice. I was pulled in.

"Will I go out a star?" It seemed like a smart thing to do to keep the voice laughing.

Through one room, then another, along a corridor, two long knocks, one short, into another room, avoid snarling dog on chain, another corridor and we were home, perhaps even in another country.

There was a man wearing a director's eye-shade sitting in a director's chair holding a joke cardboard megaphone who was not Cecil B. de Mille. In front of him was a set out of old Sodom. Four men, two women, a thousand historic grunts and half as many long, edible moans.

"Keep it up, keep it up, keep it up—*shit!*"

Everything stopped. The women lit cigarettes. The cardboard director turned to look me up and down.

"Crowd Scene. *Ben Hur*," I suggested.

Only the big voice behind me was still laughing.

I took out the photograph and held it like a shield. Good odds.

"She works here. So what? You her Mormon fucking brother come to take her home?"

One of the women on the set wiped her ear with a tissue.

The director had had enough.

"What happens?" I said. "They come into the studio up front wanting a shot for their folder to take back up the Hill? You show them a short cut. What's your take-up, fifty/fifty?"

The director laughed. "More like ninety-nine/one. And the one only goes home to talk it over with her mother."

On the set, one of the men shouted that he was ready again. Everyone looked. He was. The big voice showed me back to the street. At the door he told me I hadn't seen him. I gave him fifty dollars for the name of the operation. Tour over, I went.

I went first for a drink, and then back to the sun-lounge queen who was paying for it all.

She already knew what I knew and she relaxed.

She enjoyed calling me by my first name.

I enjoyed showing her the girl's face and listening for the bells.

"This her?" she said, telling me it could have been any one of a hundred she already knew about.

"That her," I said.

A hard look and then she gave me the picture back.

"What I don't get," I said, giving her time to prepare an answer, "is that you know about the insurance and yet you still want to go ahead the cold, hard, dirty way."

No answer. What *didn't* she know about?

She could probably quote the con-

tract clause and sub-clause to him as they went through the motions of late night husband and wife.

"Do you have a copy?" I said. It felt like backing down, both hands on the rail, one step at a time. She had several, all hidden. She gave me one and told me to keep it. I'd disappointed her in taking so long to ask.

Then I asked her why she was running me round in circles, why they both were; why there wasn't going to be a nice long sigh of satisfaction at a job well done when I slapped down my bill and her name dried on the settlement cheque. There was that word "nice" again.

I always like to park somewhere with a view.

Beneath me, everything was in smog, the La Brea graveyards, the little bits of Europe, everything.

I read the contract three times. I read letters so small and lines so thin that I thought I was losing hair. I read it a fourth time and found what I was probably looking for.

At some point everything has to go down on paper. The blackboards and photographs stay in the films for the benefit of the people at the back of the cinema.

She knew what was happening.

He wanted it to happen. He'd gone to the trouble of finding a girl and making it happen. They were all getting

what they wanted and paying next to nothing for the privilege.

The tiny writing in the contract talked about dividing his verifiable earnings once S and U had handed over the figure trailing zeroes.

So Paramour Pictures was Shapiro's private investment plan, or partly his, and the poolside Madonna knew as much about it as she did about drinking slowly. The business of grunting and moaning would not enter the courtroom calculations.

Two Buts:

But she didn't seem too surprised when I showed her the face.

But what made Shapiro think I wouldn't run back and tell her about everything I'd had pointed out to me?

Perhaps because there were ten thousand other photographs doing the rounds and she really didn't care one way or the other.

Perhaps because he didn't think I'd tell her, that I'd keep things simple and then take the bonus *be* was likely to offer me for keeping the dirt piled low.

Some days, living in that bad film was preferable to trying to get out of it.

I confront Shapiro opposite S and U. He tells me he takes his hat off to me, that he'd figured on another day, perhaps two. He asks me what next. I tell him what I know.

He makes on average sixty times more per year from his short-cut classics than he does from the paste-up premiums and dotted lines. Half of

which is a lot to give away to someone you would much rather leave a long way behind you when the fan gets switched on. On that kind of money, the houses and the pools start to look like a hand-out.

I understand all this, but there's still that tiny part of me refusing to believe him. Perhaps it's the way he changes course without testing the wind. Perhaps it's the way he still leans on the car and keeps glancing around us while we're talking.

"So, how about the pictures?" he says.

We make arrangements for later that afternoon. He tells me he's got an all-over tan, a birthmark on his left calf I shouldn't miss. I tell him not to let the girl moan too loudly, ask him to double whatever he's already giving her. I pull away from him knowing I'm doing all the wrong things.

I've stopped liking him. He wants everything too straightforward, too easy. I'm still being manipulated by the pair of them. A locker-room divorce, something to talk about to the wrong kind of people. The girl is a smoke-screen, someone to keep the proceedings away from the film business and well inside the contract, the machinery he can handle. She's the little something his creased and faded poolside beauty has to watch out for while Shapiro and the cardboard director are chumming it up in the projector room dubbing the funnies in their laps.

I decide not to do what I've been told to do.

Instead, I drive round the block, come back opposite S and U and sit in a new place.

An hour later, he comes out again and walks to a waiting car, somebody else driving. I follow.

I follow them back to that run-down place where the screaming jets continue to pull down the real estate prices.

I see Shapiro climb out of the car, click.

I see Shapiro's wife climb out of the car, click.

The voice in that bad film told me that the dirt I'd seen so far had only been little dirt, and that the big dirt was only just beginning to slide down off the Hill.

I waited, that same insistent voice whispering to me, wrong, wrong, wrong.

You think that voice doesn't exist? Some days it's the only thing I hear. Some days I feed it drinks and let it go and then collapse under the weight of what it tells me.

She banged on the door and shouted and it was opened first time. She pushed her husband in ahead of her, holding his neck as though she wanted to break it.

Eleven days on the case. Think about all that moaning and groaning in that dark back-room. Think about all the dead and dying chances that place had seen come and go.

I just couldn't make her as a mother

figure trying to comfort someone who was hurting so hard she was already used up and through, another face in the frame waiting to knock on a motel door. I tried, but I just couldn't see it.

Three hours later I turned up for my town shoot. Arrows leading from the car to where I should stand. A hole in the hedge that had been recently cut out, and thirty yards away, sitting on a blanket, Shapiro and the girl. Perhaps he was waiting for me to shout "Action". The blanket would cut down on background glare. He was wearing Bermudas around his ankles, and she was sitting in half a bikini, thinking she was on her way to her first feature.

I was early. I could have walked over, introduced myself. Instead I skirted the garden to get a better look at the house—the one he'd keep if his wife got to keep the other.

A four-car garage. One little rooftop window looking down into it, giving me one little peek at the car she'd used to pick him up outside S and U. Click.

No sign of her, inside or out. Perhaps she was waiting somewhere else. Perhaps she was pointing clicks of her own at me. People who are accustomed to doing it, too often take stupidity in others for granted.

There was the pool, and the pool was full, and what it was full of was that same clean blue water which scares me in my dreams and causes me to wake up swimming through my sheets bathed in sweat.

Looking back at Shapiro and the girl was like looking at a Spot The Difference puzzle. Three clues, two hers, one his. The cameras in her head were already rolling.

I watched them, but that was all.

When they'd finished I took pictures of them sitting together, saying those things people say to each other at times like that. The girl was brushing grass from her chest and studying her lips in a mirror.

Easy easy easy. And then the sky came in. A twenty-four hour, month-long season of bad films: the girl running towards me, screaming, behind her Shapiro, something small and shiny in his hand, and then more sky falling in, another scream, this time from behind me, and then nothing except more of that same heavy nothing.

Later, when the sky stopped coming in, I found myself flat out on the lawn with Shapiro's wife looking down at me and pouring a long cold jugful of water over me. It hurt her to pour anything away, even water. Ice cubes hit my scalp. I was Nelson Eddy and she was Jeanette Macdonald. When she'd finished pouring she started swearing, but not at me.

I asked her if I was still officially on the case. The swearing continued.

From beside me I picked up my shattered camera and its unwound film. I asked her how much of the main feature I'd missed. Beside the camera was

a baseball bat. When the sky had moved far enough back for me to stand upright, she showed me the two bullets in the tree behind me.

"Where is he?" I said, neither wanting nor waiting for an answer.

Stumbling to the edge of the cool clear pool, I stood and looked down into it. I tried to remember which one was empty and which one was full, made a quick calculation, and let myself fall.

The pair of them ran the studio together. Divorce had raised its greedy wet head and forced them to settle the cuts and profits between them, and all as far as possible from the nearest courtroom. The minute the real world found out about the films they were over, finished, finis, fin. One of them would have to be paid off and leave the business. That was why he'd taken out the insurance in the first place, and why, in the first place, she'd gone along with the idea. But that was before she knew how much she stood to lose, and how inadequate, in the long term, the insurance was likely to be.

What was a justifiable homicide in this state? Catching your husband with a starlet of the pornographic film industry, young enough to be his daddy's-girl daughter at some Midwestern college, the film to prove it, the testimony of a reputable private investigator to back it up?

I guessed at nothing custodial. She said I guessed right, that public sympa-

thy counted for a lot, that she'd lost her mind, how did that sound, crazy with worry, with love gone wrong, angry at her betrayal, that she hadn't known what she was doing when she'd found the pair of them together like that.

When she stopped trying to fill in the blanks, her silence was a great big But, the biggest.

I was still floating in the pool, grappling with the sky and watching my heart sink to the bottom.

He'd had a similar idea—to lure her along to somewhere private using the girl to make sure she showed, and then to give her a few rounds of his own winning argument, perhaps give them both a few rounds and me along with them. Something small and shiny will beat a baseball bat any day.

The shot tree would survive.

The pool was a good place to think.

My useless film was destroyed, but she was still likely to have more than she needed of her own.

Shapiro and the girl were gone. Perhaps gone as in "gone home" in the first case; perhaps gone as in just "gone" in the second.

Perhaps the girl had screamed and run at the sight of the gun, or perhaps at something he'd whispered to her at the point of no return.

Perhaps the baseball bat had been intended for her before it got to work on Shapiro.

There were still countless thousand

square miles of nothing out in the desert where blind fish lived in their own impossible pools, and where you could bury a town, let alone a starlet, and no one would ever know.

I climbed out of the water.

Having knocked me out to ensure there were no witnesses to what she was about to do, she had then panicked when she saw Shapiro coming at her pointing the gun with the screaming girl between them. She said she'd put the cost of the camera on my final cheque. She added a tight, sharp emphasis to the word "final".

There had been too many shots, and the girl's screaming had been too loud. Someone had heard and shouted over the hedge on the far side. Then it had been Shapiro's turn to panic. He'd grabbed his Bermudas, run for the car and gone. But the police hadn't arrived, and a minute later there had been nothing left to see.

Shapiro's wife sat beside me and sagged, like she was losing weight, deflating, like everything she'd ever owned was suddenly worthless.

"It could still be clean," I said, trying hard and failing to keep the girl out of my calculations. "Call your good friend the lawyer, pick up the insurance with your own photos."

"And give him a free hand on the back lot?"

"A private settlement?" I told her I didn't see any other way. I once knew a man who broke his wife's back. They divorced and then remarried while she was still in traction.

We drove away from it all in my car.

She picked up the towel, and apart from the hole in the hedge there was no way of anyone ever knowing we'd been there. I dug the two bullets out of the tree and stuffed bark into the holes.

When we arrived at the other house, Shapiro was already beside the pool, listening to music, reading a book, very casual, still in his shorts.

They could sort it out between themselves from there on. All I wanted to know about was the girl.

"What girl?" he said.

When I felt for the photograph in my wet jacket it wasn't there.

"What girl?" he said again.

His wife passed behind me. She didn't want to look at me. "Yeah," she said, "what girl? You telling me he's been playing around?" It was the voice of a woman who'd had a gun pointed at her once and who was looking out for it again. "You got proof of that?" she said. They both laughed.

No, no proof. "You give her a lift home?" I said, sitting beside him.

"Took her *all* the way."

Now they were looking hard at each other, trying to convince themselves that they were back to square one, that they'd played their game of chicken and that they'd both backed out somewhere between the gun and the suffering tree. Now all they wanted was to start again and do it the easy way.

I left them after that. Took my cheque and went. I looked at the amount and tried to decide what I was being paid for.

At the gate I looked back. She was sitting beside him, pretending nothing had happened. It's easier to do than you might think, especially when you've seen that little black hole at the end of the silver. He made a point of letting me see him kiss her, and when she turned to him her eyes were closed. His too, probably; there can't have been much either of them particularly wanted to look at.

A fortnight later, thirteen days, I'm looking down into the empty pool at Shapiro's broken body. His arms are out and his head is folded into his chest like a crushed can, like a busted flush of hearts. Just another drunk diving into an empty pool to split himself open and spill out on to the tiles.

I was there to confirm some story that I'd been working on gathering the evidence for their divorce. The lawyer was ahead of me in the queue talking about imbalance of mind, grief, distress, depression, all of that. Two detectives asked me if this was true. I told them it was. That was all they wanted from me. In their eyes, *I* was the dirt sliding down off the Hill.

She was distraught, couldn't speak, the doctor was with her now, she'd been sedated, more than she could bear.

And Shapiro lying crushed and awkward in the same Bermudas, nice touch.

The pool had been empty for ever. The pool cleaner would come in soon and tell them all about the problems he'd been having with the filter. Tell how he'd warned them both to stay away from it. I bet myself he could tell the same story fifty times over and be word perfect every time.

She still had her own photographs. It was a different kind of insurance, but it was still intact, and somewhere under those straining jets the cameras would still be rolling.

I looked again at Shapiro swimming the dry tiles. The photographers were still down there working on him, every crashed angle, thinking they'd get everything they needed and start sorting it all out from there, confusing the beginning with the ending.

There was a puddle of bright blood around Shapiro's head, something his arms were holding on to like he was a god and it was a sun on his shoulders. On one side of him was a dolphin, on the other a mermaid.

I stopped looking down and walked away from the edge.

It's like that, the voice began to explain to me. You go into that second and a half of space with your eyes closed, and somehow you just know that the only way to lose, that the only way for it ever really to end, is for you to open them the instant before you hit. ☒

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When a town is wrecked over and over again by natural disasters, how do the people who live there manage to keep rebuilding . . . and should they? It's a question that Robert T. Jeschonek has often asked about his home town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which was ravaged by three major floods in less than a century. Robert wrote "Fear of Rain" to explore the indomitable will that drives the residents of places like Johnstown . . . and also as a tribute to small towns and backward places everywhere that resist the march of progress.

Robert's stories have appeared on websites such as Abyss & Apex and ScienceFictionFantasyHorror.com. He has written Star Trek stories for Pocket Books, including the grand prize winner in the Strange New Worlds VI contest, "Our Million-Year Mission." His serialized Star Trek 40th anniversary adventure, 40 Days & 40 Nights, appears weekly on StarTrek.com. Visit his website at www.robertjeschonek.com for news, original fiction, and The Flog, a fictionalized blog with an emphasis on fantasy.

Fear of Rain

Robert T. Jeschonek

Mr. Flood bangs his fork on the side of his plate, and thunder rumbles outside the restaurant. He winks one watery, sky blue eye at me and peels back his smooth, white lips in a dirty joke smile.

"Won't be long now," he says, his voice a gravelly tenor. "Not long till my retirement party."

If you didn't know better, to look at him, you'd think he was just another little old man hobbling around downtown Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Just another Central Park bench sitting, Social Security check cashing, prescription picking up, stumbling on the curbs, taking too long to cross Main Street old timer. You'd never know the kind of power that boils inside him.

Maybe you'd see him bang his fork on the plate a second time, and you'd

hear the thunder, louder than before, but you wouldn't connect the two. You wouldn't realize that he'd made it happen. You wouldn't know what he was about to do next.

But I know. I know all about what's coming.

It's the Big Night. He's wearing his lucky suit for the occasion—a powder blue leisure suit from the 70s with white piping around the collar, lapels, and pockets.

He's the closest thing I have to a father, and I'm part of this, too. Tonight's his retirement party and my graduation party wrapped up in one . . . though the people of Johnstown will call it something different altogether.

The ones who survive, anyway.

"I just hope I'm ready," I say, picking

at the gray, gravy-drowned meat loaf on my own cracked plate. Mr. Flood has wolfed down his turkey dinner like a teenage football star and chased it with a double slice of graham cracker pie, but I'm way too nervous tonight to be hungry.

"You're more ready than I was in '36, Dee," says Mr. Flood, wagging his chicken hawk head on a neck so wish-bone scrawny it looks like it ought to snap in two any second now. "I wasn't nearly as good a student as you, and look how that turned out! Seventeen feet of water!"

I shrug and sigh and twist my curly, black hair around my index finger. I know my whole eighteen years of life have been leading up to this night, but now that it's here, I kind of wish that it wasn't. "Stressed out" doesn't begin to cover the way I feel.

You'd be stressed out, too, if you were about to help destroy a city.

"Now drink up," says Mr. Flood, refilling my water glass from the pitcher that he had the waitress leave at the table. The ice chips tinkle as he pushes the sweating glass toward me. "It's almost time."

Him and his water drinking, I think, but then I do what I've done all my life, which is what he tells me. I already have to pee like crazy, but I still gulp down half the glass.

I can't even think about slipping off to the ladies' room. A full bladder is part of the magic, Mr. Flood always says. Filling yourself with water till you're ready to explode.

And then you do the same thing to the sky.

Mr. Flood refills my glass to the brim, and I roll my eyes, but I have another big drink. He just lifts the whole pitcher to his lips then, and it's maybe half full, and he chugs it.

Except for a little bit left in the bottom, which he swishes around a few times and then slowly pours out on the table.

The water trickles from the rim of the sideways turned pitcher and patters on the sticky, dull wood of the tabletop.

And at the same moment, the same exact moment, I hear it start to rain outside.

"One two, buckle my shoe," says Mr. Flood. "Three four, let it pour."

And that's how it starts. No one will ever know except me and Mr. Flood, but that's exactly how the whole thing starts.

The fourth Johnstown Flood.

"Check, please," he says to the ragged waitress.

Outside, I pop an umbrella, because it's really coming down, but Mr. Flood takes it away from me.

"Now who ever heard of a Flood using an umbrella?" he says disgustingly, and then he holds out my umbrella to a passing woman. "Here you go, Miss."

The woman is tall, with dark hair and a navy blue dress. She's holding her purse above her head in a lame attempt to block the rain. "I couldn't, thank

you," she says with a smile, shaking her head. "You two need it as much as I do."

"We'll be fine," says Mr. Flood. "We don't have far to go. Please, take it."

The woman looks at me for approval, but I just shrug. She looks back at Mr. Flood and shakes her head again. "I really couldn't," she says.

But she doesn't walk away.

Mr. Flood steps toward her and presses the umbrella handle into her grip. "Go ahead," he says. "You're going to need it."

I can tell she feels guilty, but she doesn't try to hand the umbrella back to him. "It's really coming down, isn't it?" she says. "And they weren't even calling for rain tonight."

Mr. Flood nods and backs out from under the umbrella. "They'll really be kicking themselves after tonight," he says.

"Oh, they're always wrong anyway," says the woman. "What's the difference tonight?"

"A couple hundred million gallons," says Mr. Flood, and then he turns and hustles me off across the street.

"An umbrella. What were you thinking?" he says to me angrily. "Get your head in the game, girl. You're supposed to be welcoming the rain, not hiding from it."

I know he's right, but I still pull up the hood of my red raincoat. So I don't like rain, so sue me.

He's lucky I'm out here getting drenched at all, because I *really* don't like rain. In fact, you could say I hate

it . . . which, I know, is totally bizarre given what I'm about to do. Given the power I have.

But hey, you wouldn't like it so much either if your parents died in a flash flood.

As he leads me down Main Street, Mr. Flood taps his twisted cane on the wet sidewalk. It's a special cane that looks like two snakes slithering together, and it has a forked tip at the bottom. Mr. Flood says it's like a divining rod, which he needs to help make the big rains come.

Whenever he walks under a street light, it gets brighter, then goes back to normal when he's past it . . . though, I don't know, it could be partly because of me. I've got some power, too, even if it's not as much as he has.

Not till later tonight, anyway.

At the end of the block, Mr. Flood drifts over to the corner of City Hall and looks up at a bronze plaque set into the stone wall. The plaque shows the high water mark of the third Johnstown Flood, the one in 1977. It's a couple feet above our heads, and he swings up his cane and taps on it.

HIGH WATER
July 20, 1977
8' 6"

"Still my favorite," says Mr. Flood, and then he sighs. "More water in '36, but this one will always be near and dear to my heart." He shakes his head and runs the tip of his cane back and

forth over the raised letters on the plaque. "They say it was a once in ten thousand years rainfall. Twelve inches in ten hours.

"Quite an accomplishment," he says, smiling proudly. With his free hand, he plucks the lapel of his powder blue leisure suit with the white piping. As much rain as is dumping down on us both, his polyester jacket and slacks look as dry as if they were still hanging in a closet at home. "Now here I am, wearing the same suit I had on that night back in '77. Getting ready to do it again, and I can hardly wait. How about you?"

"Oh, sure," I say, nodding, though I don't feel anywhere near as pumped as he sounds.

That chicken hawk head of his bobbles a little for no reason, the way it does sometimes these days. "So, how much do you think we'll manage tonight?"

"No idea," I say with a shrug.

"See that plaque up there?" says Mr. Flood, pointing his cane at a plaque mounted much higher than the first.

I nod as I stare up at it.

HIGH WATER
March 17, 1936
17'

Grinning, Mr. Flood jabs my shoulder with his bony elbow. "The fourth flood will be higher than that," he says. "See the next plaque up?"

"Yeah," I say, looking at the third

and highest plaque, set a few feet higher than the second.

HIGH WATER
Mary 31, 1889
21'

Mr. Flood shakes his soaking wet head. "Higher," he says, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Up there," says Mr. Flood, poking his cane at the roof of City Hall. "We'll cover the peaks of the rooftops tonight, and then some. This bowl of a valley down here will fill up like a lake."

I can't take my eyes off the roof. I get a shiver up my spine, and not just because I'm cold and wet. I knew this was going to be the Big Night, but I didn't know just how big it would be.

Mr. Flood chuckles. "Actually," he says, "I guess I should say that the water *would* cover the roof *if* City Hall were still standing after tonight."

"It won't be?" I say.

"Nosiree Dee," says Mr. Flood, and then he swings his cane down and sweeps it in a circle around him. "Matter of fact, not a single thing that you see around you will still be standing in the morning.

"Except that one." With a flourish, he swirls his cane in the air like a sword and points it across Market Street. Right away, I see what he's got in his sights.

When we cross the street to get to it, we're almost run over by two young

guys blindly charging full tilt through the rain. One has a newspaper over his head, the other has nothing, and they're both as soaked as if they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

Mr. Flood and I stop at the chain link fence around the little grassy square on the corner of Main and Market. The streetlamps brighten when we get close, lighting up a red-painted statue of a big bloodhound inside the fence.

It's Morley's Dog. That's what's going to survive.

A damn statue of a dog.

"I love this dog," says Mr. Flood. "It reminds me why I do this job."

He's lost me with that one. If anything, that dog reminds me of stupidity. People think it's in honor of some hero dog from the 1889 flood, but it's really just a lawn ornament that washed out of some guy's yard.

"This is the true heart of Johnstown," says Mr. Flood, waving his snaky cane at Morley's Dog. "It is battered by the elements again and again, but it survives. It does not surprise or impress, but it endures.

"Just like my perfect little Johnstown," says Mr. Flood. Seemingly as an afterthought, he spits in the grass . . . and the rain comes down a little harder.

Mr. Flood takes a deep breath like he's drinking in the sweet air of a sunny spring morning, but all I can smell is the rubber-and-soap stink of wet streets.

"God, I love this town," says Mr.

Flood. "Always behind the times. Always on a different wavelength than the rest of the world.

"An oasis in an ocean of crap," says Mr. Flood. "And we're the ones who keep it that way." He pats me on the shoulder. "Every forty years or so, we give this town a bath. We wash away its hopes. We wipe the slate clean of so-called progress.

"And Johnstown stays backward and God-fearing, because who knows when the next flood might come around? Johnstown stays small.

"Small as a raindrop." Mr. Flood looks up, straight up, and waves his cane over his head. Just like that, the rain stops falling on us.

I still hear it spattering on the streets and sidewalks, and I still see soaking wet people running past with jackets and newspapers over their heads. I still see it pouring down in sheets through the light of nearby streetlamps . . . but now, in a circle around us, the rain is frozen in midair. Trails of glistening drops hang suspended between us, shimmering in the glow of streetlamps and headlights.

As much as I hate the rain, this is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. I catch my breath, and this time it's not from nervousness.

I never knew. Never knew he could do

This.

One, two, thirty, forty. I can count them. Just hanging there between the sky and the pavement as if someone had paused our tape in the VCR.

As Mr. Flood reaches out, the droplets part around his arm like a curtain of crystal beads. He slides a pale fingertip under one and holds it there, balanced like a perfect teardrop of blown glass.

"Small as a raindrop," he says. "One raindrop in the midst of a storm."

I reach for my own droplet then, and I catch it on a purple-painted fingernail. I can still hardly believe my eyes, can hardly believe Mr. Flood's frozen the rain. I guess it's not such a stretch, since he and I have some kind of magical rainmaking power.

But still. For some reason, this strikes me as the most incredible thing I have ever seen him do. It amazes me.

It also confuses me. How can he do something amazing like this and then turn around and wipe out a city and its people?

It makes me sad, too, because I can't help thinking about how this man who can do something so beautiful will be dead before this night is over.

Mr. Flood unfreezes the rain around us with a snap of his fingers, and the two of us walk down Market Street to Vine Street. By the time we get to the stairway at the end of Vine Street, I have to pee so bad that I'm about ready to wet my pants . . . but I know better than to ask if I can pee before a flood.

We walk up the concrete steps to an elevated walkway. As we cross over the expressway that loops around the edge of downtown, I'm just glad that the

walkway's covered, and I'm out of the rain for a moment.

On the other side of the walkway, we cross a bridge over the murky, brown Stonycreek River. At the end of the bridge, we enter a little station, and Mr. Flood buys us tickets for the World's Steepest Vehicular Inclined Plane.

"The Incline," as everyone in town calls it, looks like a boxcar that runs up and down the side of a steep hill on railroad tracks. Besides the three floods, the Incline is Johnstown's other claim to fame, though it's not much of one, if you ask me.

"This is some storm we're havin'," says the old man who sells us our tickets. "It's rainin' cats and dogs tonight."

"I heard it'll be raining elephants and dinosaurs before long," says Mr. Flood.

"Might not be a bad idea, headin' for higher ground tonight," says the ticket seller, hiking a thumb toward the top of the hill. "The weatherman on the radio says not to worry, but my rheumatoid knees are tellin' me otherwise."

"I agree with your knees," says Mr. Flood with a wink.

Mr. Flood and I board the Incline passenger car. As the car climbs its track up the hillside, the two of us stand at the window and look out at the rainy city unfolding below us.

Johnstown doesn't look different from most any other night of the year. Rain is one thing that's hardly ever in short supply around here.

Not that it seems to clean the place up very much. I guess the city was a lot

dirtier back in the old days, and it must be cleaner since the steel mills shut down in the '80s . . . but if you ask me, it still always looks like it has a grimy film over everything. It's like the rain can never wash off this bottom layer of soot that's been stuck to all the buildings and houses and trees and streets since the turn of the century.

Of course, if nothing in town is left standing after tonight (except Morley's Dog), like Mr. Flood says, that grimy soot will finally get scrubbed out the hard way. Unless it all just floats up in the air and comes down and sticks to whatever new buildings are put up after the flood . . . which, knowing Johnstown, I think is more likely.

When we're midway up the hillside, Mr. Flood elbows me and points to the left and down. I'm not sure what he's pointing at until he tells me.

"The Old Stone Bridge," Mr. Flood says solemnly, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Eighty people died in debris that washed up against it in 1889. They burned to death when the debris caught fire. Died by fire because of a flood."

I've heard the story before, but I can't really picture it. All I see is a railroad bridge over the river and expressway on the edge of downtown, an ordinary looking bridge I've been under about a zillion times.

Mr. Flood squeezes my shoulder. "That won't happen tonight," he says. "Drowning only. A merciful death. A peaceful death."

As he says this, I think about my

mom and dad, who drowned when a flash flood washed out a bridge under their car. I wish it made me feel better, thinking they might have died peacefully. Unfortunately, I think Mr. Flood is full of crap on this subject.

Sometimes, I can't figure him out. Here's a guy who's about to kill God knows how many people in a so-called natural disaster, and he's patting himself on the back for not burning them to death.

And the messed up part of it is, how much better am I? I can't even stand the thought of my own parents drowning, and here I'm getting ready to help kill hundreds or thousands more in the same exact way.

It's all for a good cause, according to Mr. Flood. Like he said at Morley's Dog, he thinks we're saving Johnstown by wrecking it. He claims that the deaths are the price we pay to protect this place he loves from the craziness in the rest of the world.

It would be nice if I could believe all that like he does. It would be easier if I could convince myself that he's not as crazy as he is powerful, and that I'm not going along with this whole flood thing just because I always do what he tells me. Because I don't want to let him down.

It would be even nicer if I could honestly say that the thought of drowning all those people bothers me more than the thought of one single person dying tonight.

The person who raised me after my parents died. The person who home-

schooled me and gave me my powers and taught me to use them. The person whose place I'm supposed to take tonight, just like he took the place of the one before him.

Mr. Flood.

It's funny, because we have kind of a love/hate relationship. He's never let me live my own life. All he's done is push me since Day One to learn the "family business" and take over for him.

But he's never hurt me. I never had to do without. I'm pretty sure he's treated me the same way he'd treat his own kids, if he had any.

There's another reason, too . . . another reason I don't want to see him die.

When you get right down to it, he's all I've got.

The rain hammers the roof of the boxcar, falling harder than ever. As we climb toward the upper station and the hilltop borough of Westmont, I dread the thought of going out in that downpour.

Mr. Flood swings his cane up and raps the forked tip on the window. As soon as he does it, a lightning flash illuminates the town like an instant of daylight creasing the darkness, blowing back in time from tomorrow morning.

Not that tomorrow morning will be all that bright for Johnstown.

Thunder cracks in the distance, and Mr. Flood chuckles. He raps his cane again, and lightning flares like before.

"Water, water everywhere," he says. "And no one's got an ark."

He yanks back my hood and tousles my hair and brings the lightning and thunder with more raps of his cane, and I wonder.

I wonder if I'll end up crazy like him when I get to be his age.

And I wonder what life will be like without him after tonight.

The rain is blasting down as Mr. Flood leads me out of the station at the top of the hill. Pushing through the wind-driven sheets is like being hit in the face with one bucket of water after another.

Walking sideways to cut the resistance, I see the old lady who runs the gift shop lock the shop's door and plunge into the downpour. People stream out of the adjacent restaurant, diners and waiters and waitresses alike rushing out to their cars. The conductor who brought us up the hill dashes past us, soaked to the skin after just a few steps.

Everyone's getting out and hurrying home as the storm gets worse. At this rate, the entire Incline station and restaurant ought to be shut down and empty within minutes. Evacuating the place doesn't make sense, because the high ground up here is one of the safest places to be if a flood hits the valley . . . but I guess no one really knows for sure what's going to happen next.

Except Mr. Flood and I, of course.

Squinting against the rain, I follow Mr. Flood out onto the cement obser-

vation deck that juts out of the hilltop beside the station. I'm all slouched over, but old Mr. Flood just about breaks into a run on his way to the railing at the edge of the deck.

When I come up beside him and look down, I see that the flood is about to begin. The Stonycreek River at the base of the hill is rising fast, filling with rain faster than the current can carry it off.

"We're about to make history," says Mr. Flood, drumming his fingers on the metal rail. "How does it feel to be a part of something that people will still read about and talk about hundreds of years from now?"

I turn to him then, and his eyes are wet with what I think are tears of joy as well as rain, and his pale cheeks are flushed with excitement, and the breath catches in my chest.

"I don't want you to go," I say to him. "Please don't leave me."

Mr. Flood smiles warmly and pats my back. "Thank you," he says. "When my predecessor passed on, I was glad to see her go. It does my heart good knowing that you don't feel that way about me."

As usual, I'm not getting through to him. "Call off the flood," I say. "Let's go home."

"The people of Johnstown are counting on us," says Mr. Flood. "We have to save their way of life."

"Then run for mayor or something!" I tell him.

Mr. Flood tilts his head back and laughs loudly, letting the rain fall into

his open mouth. "Hey, I like that!" he says. "A flood elected mayor of Johnstown! That's good!"

"I'm serious," I say, getting more frustrated because I know his mind's made up and it always has been. "Don't do this. Don't go."

"You'll see," says Mr. Flood, brushing my cheek with his fingertips. "When it's your time to pass the torch, you'll understand."

I feel tears in my own eyes, but they aren't tears of joy. I know people would say he's evil and crazy because of what he does—and I guess I couldn't really argue with them—but he's the closest thing I've got to a father. To anyone, actually. I've led a sheltered life, being home-schooled and spending all my time training to flood the city of Johnstown.

"So let's get this show on the road," says Mr. Flood with a giant grin, and then he unzips the fly of his trousers.

Howling like a wolf, he proceeds to pee off the observation deck at the top of the Incline.

As soon as Mr. Flood pees, the rain really cuts loose. It's been raining hard for at least an hour, but that was a trickle compared to the ocean that dumps down now.

When he's done peeing, Mr. Flood tucks himself back in and zips up, then whacks his cane hard against the railing. Immediately, a jagged bolt of lightning lashes down in the heart of the city.

Thunder explodes overhead. As it echoes off the walls of the valley, every electric light in Johnstown except the headlights of the cars on the streets winks out at once.

For a moment, the city is mostly silent and still and dark. Then, through the gushing of the rain, I hear a rising chorus of shouts and car horns. A lone fire siren wails, and then it's joined by another and another. The flashing red and blue lights of fire engines and police cars strobe along the rows of darkened buildings.

This is it, I realize, and my stomach does a somersault.

History in the making.

Mr. Flood whacks his cane on the railing again, and another blast of lightning leaps into the city. As thunder crashes louder than before, he swings the cane up and jabs its two-pronged tip at the sky.

I swear, in the next triple-flash of lightning that sizzles down, the two snakes carved into the cane seem to squirm with a life of their own.

The force of the rain intensifies. The Stonycreek River surges out of its bed, spilling over the sloped, cement flood-control banks that are no better controlling a flood tonight than they were in '77.

Whooping with joy, Mr. Flood begins to dance.

In the middle of the observation deck, he kicks and gyrates like he's twenty years old instead of ninety. He does the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, the Jitterbug, then shuffles a soft shoe

and spins like a whirling dervish. He bobs and stomps like an Indian circling a campfire, shaking his cane like a ceremonial lance.

He twirls the cane like a baton, tosses it in the air and catches it, bouncing the double-pronged tip off the cement. He does a Gene Kelly dance step and slings the cane over his shoulder like an umbrella, singing a song about singing in the rain.

With each move he makes, the rain falls harder.

"Rain, rain, don't go away," shouts Mr. Flood, doing what looks like a cross between the Hustle and a football player's end zone strut. "Give us fifty feet today!"

His magic is strong. I can't believe how fast the flood is growing.

In the valley below us, water rolls from the Stonycreek in wave after wave. Cars slam into each other and strike guardrails and buildings, drivers either blinded by the rain or panicked by the swiftly rising tide.

People and sirens scream like shrieking fireworks. Geysers erupt from the sewers, belching up manhole covers that crash back down onto pavement or parked cars.

And Mr. Flood keeps dancing like a wild man.

Beaming blissfully, he shakes and twirls and jumps and flaps his arms. The rain comes down harder when he flutters his fingers, and the thunder booms when he stomps his feet.

Looking over the railing, I see that the water is rising steadily down below.

Already, the level near the river is higher than car tires, halfway up car doors. Pavement quickly disappears as the streets become canals.

I hear the sound of distant glass shattering. A child screams and dogs yowl like it's the end of the world. Lights flashing and sirens wailing, emergency vehicles hurtle down the expressway from the townships and boroughs in the surrounding hills.

From somewhere far away, I swear I hear the crack of a gunshot.

I feel a tap on my shoulder then, and I turn to see Mr. Flood bowing deeply, reaching out a hand.

"Will you join me?" he says with a charming smile . . . too charming for someone about to give up his life.

If I don't help him, I wonder, will anything change? Will he live through the night? Or will he finish the flood without me and die anyway?

It would be easy not to take that hand. It would be easy to refuse to help him kill himself.

It would be easy if I hadn't spent my whole life preparing for this night. If I didn't feel compelled to make him happy.

Especially if whether or not I cooperate doesn't matter, and this is the last night I see him alive.

So I take his hand.

He tosses his cane over the railing and encircles my back with his arm. I follow his lead, looping one arm around him while he raises my other arm high, interlacing his fingers with mine.

Only headlights and the flashing beacons of cop cars and emergency vehicles remain in the valley, but our dance floor on top of the hill is still lit by streetlamps. Windblown curtains of rain pelt down in the lamplight as Mr. Flood leads me in a waltz.

Our feet splash in the water as we glide in a circle, stepping one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three. Mr. Flood's sky blue eyes lock with mine, and he laughs out loud and picks up the pace.

Soon, we're moving so fast that the waltz becomes a polka. Mr. Flood steps on my feet once or twice, but he's light as a feather.

I get dizzy from spinning around, and I try to slow down, but he won't let me. I close my eyes for an instant as we keep turning, but it doesn't help. I still feel light-headed.

When I open my eyes, I realize that spinning around isn't the only reason for my light-headedness. As I look down, I see that my feet no longer touch the wet deck.

Mr. Flood and I are dancing on air.

We're floating three feet above the cement. There's nothing under us but air and rain.

I shoot Mr. Flood a look of surprise, and he just winks and keeps hauling me in circles like this is something he does every day. Then, he slows down the polka and tightens his grip on my hand.

"Aphrodite," he says, using my full name and raising his voice over the rushing of the rain. "I give you my

power! Use it to continue my sacred work!”

First, I feel a tickle in my fingers, like the start of pins and needles. Then, I feel a mild shock like static electricity buzzing into my palm.

Then comes the real juice. A sudden, searing jolt burns its way up my arm and explodes in my chest like a firework and shoots out into every inch of my body.

I feel like I'm on fire. My entire body quivers and hums like a power line.

And it keeps coming.

It's too much for me. My vision whites out, and my heart jackhammers like I've just downed twenty espressos. Everything seizes up at once, and I can't take a breath.

Then, the current slows, and I start to come out of it. My muscles unclench, and the racing engine in my chest becomes a heart again. I choke down a breath, and my whited-out vision jitters back into color and form and light.

It is only now that I realize we're still waltzing, even though I've stopped moving my feet. Mr. Flood has been carrying me ever since the first shock of the power transfer crashed through me.

I realize something else, too.

I never knew it before, but until this moment, my senses of sight and hearing and smell and touch and taste have been blocked to the beauty of the rain. Though I've had more sense of rain than other people, and even some influence over it, I've been wrapped in

layers of plastic and bound with chains compared to how I am now.

I can see every shimmering pearl of rain as it falls. I can smell the difference between them, tell the exact altitude and part of the country where the source water evaporated to form the cloud that gave birth to each droplet.

I can feel the size and shape of each drop as it hits my skin. I can taste the acid mixed in with the water and pinpoint the air pollutant that produced it.

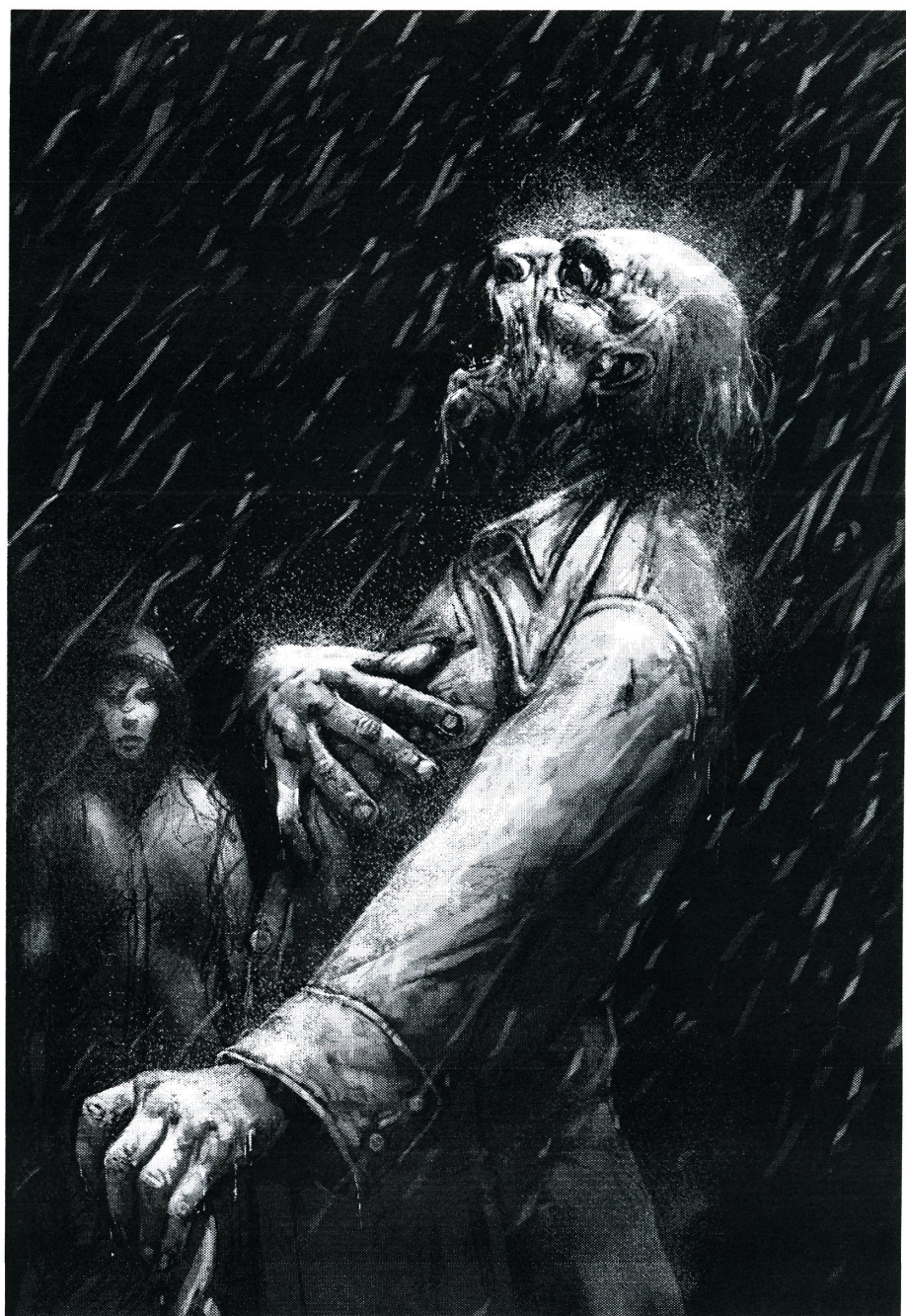
And I can hear the true song of the rain—not the staccato pattering of showers striking cement and wood and metal, but the vibration of droplets as they stretch and blow and collide, the secret shivering music like millions upon millions of violin strings all playing different notes at once in one heavenly, keening chord.

For the first time in my life, I can see and hear and smell and touch and taste. Everything around me is more amazing than I ever imagined.

And this, I realize, is how Mr. Flood feels every day of his life.

“This is it, Dee,” says Mr. Flood, the sound of his voice snapping my focus back to him. He smiles sadly, and I can tell that the rain running down his face is mixed with tears. I know exactly how many raindrops and exactly how many tears. “One big push. The two of us.”

This is the moment he's been getting me ready for all my life. The moment when he pours out the last of his power into me, and together we bring down the full force of the flood on Johnstown.



The moment when I lose him.

I know I'm supposed to go along with his plan like I always do. Take all the power and let him drop dead like he did his own predecessor. Watch as our flood drowns the city and feel all proud of myself for making history and saving a way of life.

But what can I say? I guess he didn't do such a good job raising me, because my priorities are all screwed up.

Drowning hundreds of people just doesn't do it for me. My heart just isn't in it.

And as for letting the person I care most about die, well . . .

Forget it.

Especially now that I'm surging with power and I know how to use it and I finally have a plan of my own.

"Goodbye, Dee," says Mr. Flood, and he pulls my hand in and kisses the knuckles. "Don't let me down."

"I won't," I tell him, though I mean it in a different way than he does. "I promise."

"Then let's show 'em how it's done!" he shouts, thrusting our joined hands high in the air.

Mr. Flood shuts his eyes and knits his brows together in concentration. Electrical arcs spark from his shoulders and arms like tiny bolts of lightning.

Our clasped hands glow blue-white in the rain, then disappear in a flare of light. At the ends of our arms, where our hands should be, all I see is a pulsing ball of energy like a dwarf star dropped down from the heavens.

Once again, I feel the full current of power surging out of him, but this time, it doesn't overwhelm me. My heart races, but I don't convulse, and my vision doesn't white out like before.

This time, I sense the extent of the charge he contains. I know exactly how much he has left and how long it will take to deplete at the rate it's draining into me. In other words, how long until he empties out and dies.

We continue to turn slowly in the air above the deck. At the other end of the crackling circuit we've formed, I feel Mr. Flood reach out with his mind, coaxing me to focus my energies upward.

I do as he wants, extending streams of power like glistening fingers toward the sky. All the while, I divide my attention between the heart of the storm and the level of life-sustaining charge still remaining in Mr. Flood's body.

Together, we massage the clouds like dough, wringing out more water. We reel in fresh clouds from afar and knead them into the thunderheads, heaping up mountains so heavy with rain that they burst at a touch.

The rain blasts down like an emptying ocean. I hear the screams of sirens and people from below, the crash of waves, a distant explosion, but I can't look down. The rain keeps growing stronger, just as Mr. Flood grows weaker and weaker still.

When I feel that his reservoir of power has nearly gone dry, I take control.

His eyes shoot open as he realizes what has happened. Desperately, he reaches through the link and tries to snatch back the reins, but it's too late. I'm too strong for him now.

I take a deep breath.

As I draw the air into my lungs, I pull all the power back inside me. I press it into a ball and hold it there, burning and buzzing and straining against my chest.

I count to three.

Then, I blow out my breath and let loose the power, flinging out a billion sparks in all directions.

Mr. Flood makes a hopeless grab for them with the flicker of strength he has left, but it's not enough. The sparks race everywhere like hypercharged fireflies, leaving glittering trails that hang in the air.

And every single one of those sparks carries a piece of me. I send them whizzing through the rain, chasing off the hillside and out over the valley. They divide again and again as they go, endlessly multiplying, spraying out twinkling constellations under the stormclouds.

Then, when the sky over Johnstown is full of tiny, dancing stars, I pour my power out through them. I do something I saw Mr. Flood do earlier tonight, something amazing.

But I do it on a much bigger scale.

All at once, every falling drop of rain freezes in mid-flight.

The hammering of water on pavement and metal and water suddenly stops. The droplets hang like billions

of crystal beads, winking in the strobing red-and-blue light from the cop cars and fire trucks and ambulances. It's just like before, when Mr. Flood froze the rain around us at Morley's Dog . . . only I've stopped a major storm over an entire city.

And I'm not done yet.

I wait for a handful of heartbeats, touching every single suspended drop with my mind. Turning them.

And then I let them fall again.

Upward. I let them fall upward.

With a roar, every hanging drop of rain pours straight up. Then, every drop that's already hit the ground rushes upward, too.

The flooded streets and parks and rooftops empty into the sky. Geysers gush up from the windows and doorways of waterlogged buildings. Point Stadium dumps up its watery load like an overturned bowl.

Every drop that has fallen ascends. What came down must go up.

I laugh out loud as it happens. I almost can't believe what I've done. It's like a miracle.

And speaking of miracles, I don't have to pee anymore . . . even though I never did go to the bathroom.

Here's history in the making. Here's something people will read about and talk about for hundreds of years.

A backward flood. An upside-down flood.

A flood of the sky.

Now *this* is something that will save a way of life. People will want to preserve and study this place, try to figure

out what happened without disrupting whatever delicate balance enabled this miracle to occur.

This will save Johnstown. I didn't have to destroy the city and drown hundreds or thousands of people to do it, either.

And I saved someone else, too.

Mr. Flood looks at me, and the tears in his eyes this time are tears of betrayal and confusion and disappointment.

But he'll live. I left him more than

enough strength to survive, whether he likes it or not.

He might not be happy now, but sooner or later, he'll come around to my way of thinking. It only makes sense, right? I mean, why destroy the city every forty years or so when there's a better way?

Here's what I'm thinking:

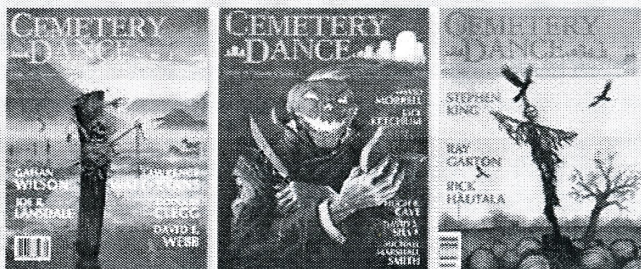
This might be the first flood of its kind in history.

But it won't be the last. ☒

Coming Soon In *Postscripts*

Coming up in #9, John Grant invites you to visit 'The Unforbidden Playground' while, in 'King of the Mountain', Jack Dann moves sideways in time once more to a world where James Dean lived on through the Sixties. Accompanying this will be our second free-to-subscribers Christmas story chapbook, a brand new novelette by Elizabeth Hand, winner of the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards. Further ahead, our tenth issue will be a special World HorrorCon tie-in, featuring powerful original stories by Michael Marshall Smith; and beyond that, for #11 and after, we have first-rate fiction lined up from Lucius Shepard, Brian Aldiss, Patrick O'Leary, Kealan Patrick Burke, Steve Aylett, Richard Paul Russo, Scott Edelman, Thomas Tessier, Rhys Hughes, and Sarah Monette. So subscribe now to what Gardner Dozois, the former editor of *Asimov's* magazine, calls "the most promising new magazine of the 21st Century."

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"I got the idea for this story on the deck of a cruise ship, Holland America's MS Zuiderdam," says Gene Wolfe. "There is nothing like relaxing in a deck chair and staring out at the sea to spark ideas. In my imagination, other ships moved through the twilight, and there was the spiky flare of fireworks. You know the rest."

Gene adds that he's completed "Memorare", a novella soon to be featured in Fantasy & Science Fiction's special Gene Wolfe issue. His most recent book is Soldier of Sidon, and he's at work on a time-travel novel: Pirate Freedom.

The On-Deck Circle

Gene Wolfe

Standing near the on-deck circle with the rest, Scooter Scarlata, late of the Pirates, watched the ball come in—a ball with roaring engines and blazing blue lights. A ball that was in fact a big speedboat.

"Fast ball." The tall man standing next to him spoke in the portentous tones of the self-anointed expert.

Scooter nodded absently. The fast-ball was almost straight up, its creamy white wake more visible than its blue aura from where they stood. "I hate night games," he muttered.

The player in the on-deck circle lisped, "Don't you thee?" She was a blonde in a capacious pink halter and white shorts. "Ith got to be at night, Thcooter, for live TV. We're in prime time."

"We could play somewheres else." He had played winter ball in Japan in . . . ? The year had slipped quietly away. Forty-five, maybe. Or forty-four. Could have been forty-three.

"Fog's closing in," the expert said.

"I hate fog, too," Scooter told him. He had played in fog. Nobody hit except by dumb luck. Nobody caught a fly either, except by dumb luck. Pop-ups plopping out of a dirty-yellow cloud so close you could almost touch it.

"Tho we've got to have the gameth," the blonde in the pink halter began. Then the ball raced into the brilliant, plate-shaped sea created by spotlights below the surface. The player in the batting box flung his bat at it, failing by twenty feet to lead the flying blue boat sufficiently. Everyone sighed. To his surprise, Scooter discovered that he had sighed, too. "Stupid game," he muttered.

"STRIKE THREE!" boomed the speakers of the huge screen forward. "NUMBER SIXTY-SIX, LISA LOCKLIN, WILL BE OUR NEXT BATTER!" Obediently, the blonde jiggled away.

"Scarlata?" It was an assistant director, the tall one who wore polo shirts.

Scooter turned to him. "She's got as much chance as a pigeon with a peanut shell out there."

"Get in the circle, Scarlata." The assistant director was looking toward the pitcher's mound, where the stately *M.S. Charlotte Amalie* readied the next pitch while rolling ever so slightly on a column of rising water. After a moment he added, "She's window dressing—big blue eyes and tits. You can't have a hit show without sex."

"The World Series—"

"That's different. This was the top-rated show last season. Did you know that?"

People had said the same thing at least twenty times; Scooter said nothing.

"This year the ratings have slipped. Do you know why?"

Scooter watched the blonde's bat fall short by fifty feet and waited for the speakers to announce strike one before he said, "Yeah."

"There isn't a team in the league that's getting enough hits," the assistant director continued gamely. "That's why we've enlisted the help of people like you, Scarlata. Famous baseball players." His pause lent his next words weight. "That's why we're paying you the money we are. You're going to get a hit."

"I'll try," Scooter said.

"*No.*" The assistant director's voice sounded as firm as the voices of assistant directors ever get. "Let me say it

again. You. Are. Going. To. Get. A. Hit. The first pitch will be a slider, not too fast. Understand?"

Scooter nodded.

"If you miss it—and you won't, I know you won't—the next will be a change-up."

Scooter nodded again.

"I'm going to let you choose the third. I'll have plenty of time to set it up, so what would you like?"

Scooter spat over the rail. "I guess you never saw me play."

"You were before my time." The assistant director sounded happy about it. "What would you like?"

"Fastball, in on the hands."

The assistant director looked dubious. "A fastball? Are you sure?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Okay I'll tell them. Have you met Jack Keech?"

Scooter shook his head, but the expert who had told him the fog was closing in said, "We've been chatting."

"Good. Jack's our boat man. He's worked on all the balls and raced speedboats."

Keech said, "I'm the ball boy, in other words."

Scooter nodded. "I got it."

"After you get your hit, you take the wheel so we can show you there. Then you get out of the way and let Jack do it."

"I'm a singles hitter." Scooter spit at the rail, wishing that it had been in the assistant director's face. "That's what I

been hearing all my life. Just a singles hitter. In forty-six—”

“We need a home run,” the assistant director put in.

Scooter ignored him. “I hit for the cycle. That’s a single, a double, a triple, and a homer, all in one game. You ever go to Cooperstown?”

“STRIKE TWO!” blared the loudspeakers.

“I have,” Keech said.

“You see me there? My picture? My number?”

Keech shook his head. “Maybe. I don’t remember.”

“You didn’t, ‘cause I’m not in there. To get in, you gotta be a slugger. You gotta hit lotsa homers. Nothin’ else matters, see? Four gold gloves? Don’t matter!”

“We understand,” the assistant director said. “Now for God’s sake shut up and listen. We have to have a home run from you. Not a single, not a double, not a triple. A home run. And the last thing in the world we need is for your hit to be caught in the infield. You know the rules.”

Scooter shrugged. “Sure. And I know this cruise boat’s no burner.”

Keech said, “Ship, Scooter. This is a cruise ship.”

Scooter wanted to spit again. “Not a fast one it ain’t.”

“You’re correct,” the assistant director told him, “It isn’t. If you’re caught in the infield, the *Sunrise* will be out. Out automatically, under the rules. If you’re caught in the outfield—well, it won’t take them long to get their team

on the ball. The *Sunrise* might easily be thrown out at first. Even if it isn’t, we don’t need a single. We’ve got to have a home run. It means the ball has to touch land—”

Keech put in, “Over the fence, Scooter.”

“Correct. Without being caught. It can beach, or tie up at a pier. That doesn’t matter. As soon as a single member of your team steps ashore, that’s a—”

The loudspeakers blared, “STRIKE THREE.”

“Put on your earphones, Jack,” the assistant director whispered.

“YOU KNOW HIM FROM THE WHITE SOX, THE BRAVES, AND THE WORLD CHAMPION PITTSBURGH PIRATES! OUR NEXT BATTER WILL BE ONE OF BASEBALL’S LEGENDARY SHORTSTOPS. I MEAN NONE OTHER THAN OLD NUMBER EIGHTEEN HIMSELF! NONE OTHER THAN THE GREAT SCOOTER SCARLATA!”

The bat was papier-maché, but surprisingly heavy at the head where the firework was. Scooter took a few practice swings for the TV cameras, as he had been told he must, feeling his shoulder muscles loosen with every swing. What would the first pitch be? A slider?

Then it was time to walk the narrow gangplank (with nearly invisible black nylon railings) away from the ship’s side and into the eternally nodding bat-

ter's box twenty-five feet on the wrong side of the rail. A light flashed overhead as soon as his foot crossed the line, a signal to the *Charlotte Amalie* that she might launch the ball when ready.

"One thing for sure," Scooter muttered to himself, "I'm not gonna get hit by no pitch."

For a moment he rested the bat at his feet. Then the ball was on the way, blue lights blazing, coming fast but not too fast. He threw as it faded toward the edge and off the bright plate, his bat vanishing in the shining water a yard or more in front of the ball's prow and a yard or two short.

Someone passed him a new bat.

There was a wait that seemed interminable until the next pitch. At last, the glowing blue boat rushed at him like a fastball—only to slow at the final moment. He threw, and the frantically waving arms of the team aboard the ball knocked his bat to one side and into the water.

Strike two.

A solemn bat boy brought a new bat, reminding Scooter that the assistant director's boat expert had called himself the ball boy. Smiling grimly, Scooter gripped the new bat and took a few more practice swings.

The fastball was practically standing on end by the time it crossed the plate. It swerved in, on the hands, as promised, and he had only to toss the bat in front of its streaking hull.

For a split second, ball and bat seemed frozen in time: his bat a scant yard above the golden water of the

plate, the dark hull framed in blue about to strike it.

Then the bat exploded with a bright, harmless flash and an impressive bang, showering ball and plate with glittering confetti.

Behind him, the loudspeakers went crazy, hysterical in their synthetic excitement. Behind him, his teammates were cheering, or diving, or jumping from the rail into the warm Caribbean. The batter's box had no nylon rope railing. He had not swum or dived for years before being picked for this; but there had been three days of frantic practice before he boarded the *Sunrise*, and practice every day in the big salt-water pool on the Lido Deck while he and his team waited for the game to start.

The ball boy held out a life vest. Scooter stuck his arms into it, and the boy pulled its straps tight and tied them expertly. Kicking off his shoes, Scooter stepped to the edge of the batter's box and made a creditable dive, knowing that some two hundred millions watched.

He saw the boat's soft blue aura as soon as his head broke water. It was moving toward him, not fast. In a moment more the expert he had spoken to on deck was pulling him out of the water. "Grab on, Scooter!" Like everyone else on board, he was dripping wet.

"I been picked up by a ball a lot," Scooter remarked, pushing his hair

away from his eyes. "Only this's the only time it happened after I got a hit."

"Right. Take the wheel. We've only got a couple more seconds before the end of the break."

Scooter did.

"Pulling it toward you will speed us up, but don't try it too fast. Get the feel. Push it forward to slow down. Way forward will reverse the engines, so don't. I'll take it as soon as the camera's off us. Get into position."

Scooter did, half sitting in the tiny seat behind the wheel, both hands on the rim.

"Great." There was a long pause. "Now go."

He jerked the wheel back, and a woman shrieked. The blue lights blazed again, and the whole boat shuddered and leaped as if flung forward by an explosion. In a moment more, the bow had risen so high that he could see only by peering around it.

"I told you not to do that!" the expert shouted.

Scooter scarcely heard him. He had discovered a small screen to his left. In it, the *Island Princess*, the *Palm Coast*, and the rest of infield were closing in.

"Expectin' a dribbler, were ya?" Scooter grinned and headed for the third base line, still holding the wheel all the way back and glorying in the deafening clamor of the engines.

"Okay! I'll take it now!" The expert beside him put a hand on the wheel.

Scooter knocked it away.

"I can do it! You can't!" There was so much wind noise, so great a thunder

from the engines, that the expert could scarcely make himself heard.

The *Island Princess* had been playing third wide; now she was churning water to get on the line. At shortstop, the *Palm Coast* had almost stopped moving altogether. Scooter chuckled.

"We lost two or three people!" the expert yelled.

"They got jackets! Umpire'll pick 'em up!"

The blonde who had struck out was at his left elbow. Saying something he could not hear, she linked an arm through his. Her pink halter looked black in the boat's blue light. It was soaked, and clung like paint.

"Ever see a hit split short and third?" Scooter shouted to her. "Watch this!"

An overhead view in the small TV screen showed a dozen men hurriedly readying a glove on the *Island Princess's* big foredeck.

Scooter edged over the wheel until their boiling wake diverged from the base line, then edged it over a quarter turn more. "They're gonna be scared they'll run into each other! Watch!"

The blonde's reply was inaudible, but she smiled warmly and tightened her grip on his arm.

"I never hit lots of homers! Only this's the first hit I could steer!"

The boat expert rushed him, shoving him aside and clawing at the wheel. Scooter's knee caught his groin a split second before Scooter's fist landed a hard, hooking left just below his chin. Grabbing the expert's headphones as he went down, Scooter tossed them

over his shoulder into the boiling wake.

"They're gonna thmash uth!" Terrified, the blonde made herself heard.

"Naw!" Scooter shook his head. "They don't wanna hit."

As lofty as beetling cliffs, the sharp prows of the cruise ships were closing on them—already nearly closed—when Scooter steered between them. A second later he heard the grinding crash of their collision, too loud for even his roaring engines to drown out.

The blonde was pointing ahead and shouting.

"Sure! I see him! That's *Martinique*, left field."

The expert was standing again. "You moron! We're going right to her!"

"You bet we are!" Scooter grinned. "Ain't no ball so hard to catch as one coming straight at you fast."

It was perhaps thirty tense seconds later when the *Martinique* fired her glove, silver rockets spreading a wide and gleaming net. They raced under it, and most of the team turned to watch it fall into the sea.

The white line of breakers appeared long before the rocks—long, in this case, being seven seconds at least. In

those seven seconds, the expert made one last desperate attempt to take the wheel, and failed.

A home run! He had hit a home run! What did the Hall of Fame matter now? Yet he would be in the Hall of Fame. He would be there because he would have to be there. He would have to be there because every visitor would want to know where he was.

It seemed to him then that the water was sinking below him. Eight or ten stories down, though wisps of fog, he could see three teammates stumbling ashore—see himself, still wearing the orange life vest the bat boy had strapped on him, rolling in the surf. See his body, and hear the cheers that shook the stadium.

Higher, until the circle of the horizon was visible on every side. Had he not waited in circles like this before?

Far away, where the dark sky met a darker sea, they were coming for him. Coming, and they shone, filled with a white radiance brighter than their spotless uniforms. They were coming, and he knew them—he, who had studied their photographs so often: Ernie Banks and Pee Wee Reese.

Both waved, and the cheers were louder than ever, cheering that felt as if it would never end. ☒

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Of the protagonist of "Nature Tale"—the far-future rogue also featured in "The Farouche Assemblage", in Postscripts 6—Matthew Hughes remarks, "Sometimes you create a temporary character who just won't go away. Meet Luff Imbry, art forger, confidence trickster, urbane master criminal of the Archonate. A blend of Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Ustinov, he was fashioned as the cynical and worldly foil for the unlikely hero of a book called Black Brillion. I fully intended to kill him off in the last chapter, but my editor wouldn't let me. And then another editor named Nick Gevers suggested he would do for a story or two, and now Luff's taken up permanent lodgings in the back of my mind."

Further, Matt says, "I have three more Archonate novels forthcoming in the next year-and-a-bit: *Majestrum* (Night Shade Books, October 2006); *The Commons* (Robert J. Sawyer Books, June 2007); and *Template* (PS Publishing, Fall 2007). And I've just started researching a heavyweight historical novel."

Nature Tale

Matthew Hughes

What Luff Imbry best liked about Quirks, beyond what emerged from the club's magnificent kitchens, was that it left its members alone. The members not only appreciated this virtue but, in turn, practiced it amongst themselves. If a senior denizen chanced to expire in the sitting room, as did happen occasionally, his corpse remained undisturbed in one of the overstuffed armchairs until his changing condition became apparent even at a distance.

It was possible for the hours Imbry spent in the dining or reading rooms to aggregate eventually into years without his ever being afflicted by unwanted conversation, let alone intrusive queries about how he might have happened to acquire the considerable funds it took to settle Quirks's annual fee. He had made a lifelong habit of

avoiding such questions, not merely from principle but guided by the practical rationale that answering them honestly would have earned him a lengthy term in the Archonate's contemplarium.

As one of the ancient city of Olkney's most accomplished criminals, Imbry's existence alternated between two phases, one relatively short and the other long. In the shorter periods, he undertook operations requiring rigorous planning that culminated in swift and decisive action carried out with clear-eyed attention to detail and no small degree of courage. During the long and leisurely second phase, he spent the lavish proceeds of the first, much of the expenditure going toward things that tasted wonderful and digested well.

In his young adulthood, he had

often dwelled upon the unexpected directions in which life had taken him. Now, approaching middle age, with the years contributing depth to his experience and width to his waistline, he occupied himself less and less with *why?* and more and more with *how?* and especially *how much?*

Thus he was startled at his own unconscious reaction when, at ease in the Quirks reading room, idly perusing the columns of the *Olkney Implicator*, his eye fell upon a small item on an inside page. Suddenly, the chair's embrace was no longer restful, the anticipation of a superb dinner no longer a pleasant tug at his innards. He straightened up and spoke to the club's integrator.

Imbry was only recently launched upon his latest period of leisure, one that had promised to extend several months, so profitable had been the most recent of what he liked to call his "exercises." He had resolved a thousand-year-old dispute between two disputing factions of a mystery cult, each of which claimed rights of precedence over certain mementos of the long dead prophet that both revered. His strategy had been to steal the venerated items then cause them to reappear suddenly during a contentious synod of the mystics. The manner of the revelation indicated that the objects' physical nature had been reabsorbed into the spiritual body of the cult's beatified founder. This epiphany opened up grand new vistas of doctrinal disagreements for the faithful to argue over,

and scarcely had Imbry's pyrotechnics faded before they fell to the business with the fierce joy that only the holiest of acrimonies can provide.

In reality, Imbry had sold the bits of bone and gristled flesh to a competing cult. He suspected that their new owners undoubtedly intended to visit unsavory indignities on the purloined relics, perhaps even to reanimate an avatar of the prophet and use the poor old sage for unspeakable purposes, but his conscience was eased by the ridiculously large amount he was paid.

Imbry had moved into a suite at Quirks for an extended stay. He meant to treat himself to its paramount chef's most renowned gustatory speciality: the Progress of Amplitude, a succession of spectacular meals spread over several weeks, climaxing in the belly-straining feast known simply as the Mortality. Yet, though he had reached only the stage called the Lesser Enlargement, the moment Imbry saw the few paragraphs in the *Implicator*, he told the club's integrator to cancel the rest of the series.

"Chef will be discomfited," said the device's bloodless voice.

"It cannot be avoided," Imbry said.

"He will view it as a reproof. His nature does not allow him to take criticism gladly."

Imbry remembered the luncheon at which a notoriously cantankerous member named Auzwol Lamenev had sent back a bowl of the chef's Seven Spice Soup, claiming it was defective in piquancy. He shuddered at the rec-

ollection of how Lamenev had soon after been led from the dining room, eyes and nose streaming, inarticulate apologies blubbing through blistered lips.

"I understand," Imbry said, "but nonetheless." He bid the integrator book him a first-class passage on the next liner leaving for Winskill, a planet more than halfway down *The Spray*. When the device reported back that he was expected on the *Vallorion* and that it would lift off from Olkney's spaceport in two hours, Imbry rose to depart. But before leaving the reading room, he carefully tore from the *Implicator* the item that had caught his attention. He read it once more, then placed it in his wallet.

As a little boy, Imbry found himself consigned to the care of two aged aunts who met any questions as to where his parents might be with evasive replies and offers of cake. The cake was always very good, but he did not fit smoothly into their household, which was organized around practiced routines and a great deal of quiet. As soon as he reached an age at which education seemed to offer benefits for all concerned, he was packed off to Habrey's, a residential school run by a philosophical society whose primary tenets descried merit in self-denial and strenuous physical activity.

The young Imbry, though his opinions were still largely unformed, was soon able to reach a conclusive judg-

ment as to the merits of the school's regimen. Within days of his arrival, he took forthright action to separate himself from the place, but his aunts just as resolutely returned him to its cloister. They brought him to understand that the time of their close association had come to an unalterable end. They did, however, pack a plum-rich cake for Imbry to take with him.

Habrey's had a complete staff, many of them well qualified to instruct children, or at least to govern them effectively while they learned at whatever pace suited their natures. But the true core of the school's mode of operations was its integrator, a device of such antiquity that it had acquired that subtlety of intellect that is often difficult to distinguish from madness. Its dicta were sometimes obscure and, in those cases, could be circumnavigated, but experience had long since taught Habreyites that to ignore its expressed wishes was to tempt an unfortunate outcome.

Thus when the integrator assigned Luff Imbry to share a small room with Hop Mizzerin, the latter's shrill complaints that he had not come halfway down *The Spray* for his schooling only to be confined with a ragamuffin noncome went unrewarded. Imbry might have voiced an even bitterer grievance, once he discovered just how unsatisfactory a roommate Mizzerin made, but he already understood that no heed would be taken.

They settled in. Mizzerin was older and larger than Imbry. He had come

into existence equipped with an aggressive disposition that had been sharpened by an infancy in which he grew accustomed to having his wishes fulfilled. Being caged against his inclinations with a social inferior, especially a younger and smaller one, could not bring out the best in him, even though his best was well down the scale of human empathy.

He drew a line across the floor, separating the room into two territories. Imbry said, "The portions are unequal."

Mizzerin's response was nonverbal. It left Imbry with a swollen cheek and a discolored lower eyelid. The younger boy discussed the matter with the Habrey's integrator but its only response was to relate an obscure story about two beasts of dissimilar natures that had to share a forest. Imbry was too upset to recall much of the detail or even the moral of the tale.

The bully then tried to make Imbry his lackey. He expressed demands and issued instructions, reinforced by physical means. Unable to defeat Mizzerin breast to breast, the younger boy found that he had an ally in his intellect, which was both broader and deeper than the would-be tyrant's. He did the chores that were thrust upon him, but did them badly and endured the punishments that ensued.

In time, Mizzerin grew tired of being brought burned soup or smudged shirts and paid one of the school's servants to undertake these tasks. Imbry's burden lightened, but he remained the

butt of the older boy's verbal barbs; though these were not sharpened by much wit, they were honed by Mizzerin's innate viciousness.

In time, however, they came to ignore each other. Mizzerin's interests lay in sports and games of chance, while Imbry was drawn into the pursuits of the mind. He discovered that he had a good eye for line and form and could produce creditable drawings after only a minimal instruction in technique. He also became adept in analyzing logical constructs and showed a flair for being able to isolate telling details that illuminated complex situations.

His work brought him notice from the senior staff and it was decided to offer him sections of the Class A curriculum, even though his aunts had only paid for the B. Habrey's observed a tradition of acquiring its faculty from within, the governing board seeing no purpose in watching its most brightly plumaged birds fly off to adorn other nests. But scarcely had Imbry been introduced to the study of elemental consistencies and asymmetrical persuasion than the incident of the tote burst over his head.

Imbry was in a sketching class, one of his favorites, rendering a complex still life in pastel shades, when the integrator summoned him to the proctor's office. The official regarded the boy from the other side of a desk strewn with notebooks containing columns of figures and tables of odds and permutations. After a lengthy silence, the

proctor said, in his least compromising voice, "What are these?"

Imbry looked at the materials and said, "I do not know."

The proctor's brow compressed. "They are the records of a betting system based on intramural competitions within the school."

Imbry spread his hands. "I know nothing of such matters."

"Worse, they indicate that several competitions have somehow been interfered with, so that the owner of this betting system may be enriched."

"I know nothing," Imbry could only repeat.

"They were found in your room."

"It is not only my room," Imbry said.

"They were found between your mattress and the struts."

To that, Imbry could make no answer but the truth. He did not know what the things were nor how they came to be in his bed. He suggested that some of the letters and figures were so ill formed that they might be the product of Hop Mizzerin's penmanship.

Mizzerin was summoned and questioned but denied all knowledge. Pressed, he argued that his allowance was so substantial that he had no need to go to all the trouble of operating a tote and rigging sporting events. "What is my motivation?" he said.

Imbry would have suggested an intrinsic maleficence but his opinion was not sought. He steadfastly maintained his innocence.

The proctor's face grew long from stroking and tugging at his chin beard. Finally, he said, "The preponderance of evidence points to Luff Imbry. He will be sent off."

Imbry protested to his tutors. Three of them made representations on his behalf only to meet rebuffs, but the proctor quietly divulged to them a relevant issue: Hop Mizzerin had come to Old Earth from Winskill, where his father was not only socially prominent but a leading member of the thagonist caste. Its tenets required him to receive any slight, real or perceived, against a child of his household as equivalent to a slur upon his own honor. There could be no answer but blood.

"Apparently, young Hop stirred up disaffection at a number of institutes on Bowdrey's World, to whose schools the elite of Winskill usually send their progeny," the proctor informed the tutors. "The father was required to meet four principals and two head teachers, resulting in five deaths and a maiming. It was felt that the boy was less likely to cause offense on Old Earth, since both the Winskillers and the Bowdreyites consider us lackadaisical."

"So if we expel Mizzerin," said Imbry's art tutor, a slim man with delicate hands, "a sword wielding moustacho will come to fillet us in the outer quad?"

"It is quite likely," said the proctor. "The situation will ease once the boy reaches the age of fourteen; thereafter his honor is his own concern and we can send him back."

Imbry was transferred to another school, where standards were less exacting. He arrived under a cloud and was not made overly welcome. Before departing Habrey's, however, he asked for and was given the materials that had been found under his bed.

"Why do you want them?" said the integrator.

"They are supposed to be mine," the boy said. "Besides, if I'm to be unjustly punished, I should at least know what I am suffering for."

The integrator said, "Consider the Brashein Monument."

Imbry was familiar with the celebrated statue of the conqueror Ordelam Brashein that stood in a dusty square not far from the school. Seen from one angle, it represented a proud victor bedecked in laurels. From a different vantage, another image emerged: that of a vainglorious fool.

"You're saying that justice is distinguished from injustice by the angle from which it is viewed?"

"Am I?" said the integrator. But it supplied Imbry with the records and charts of Mizzerin's tote and the ratios he employed to wring a profit from his bettors. Imbry studied the materials in the chilly dormitory of his new school, saw the patterns and opportunities inherent in the system, and how it could be adapted to the sporting life that was such an important part of education.

Hop Mizzerin had been unable to command a sophisticated understanding of the elegance with which the matrix of odds and permutations could

be arranged. He had clumsily cheated his fellow students, out of a perverse delight in taking advantage. Imbry brought more insight to the complexity of the system and when he felt himself the master of its ins and outs he applied it to his new surroundings. In a little while he was doing quite well, and after another little while he did even better. He also received more than simple profit, carving for himself a unique niche within the culture that surrounded him. After a year or so, he fitted that niche without chafing.

Winskill was a stark planet, a dry world of gritty deserts and jagged mountains, shrunken seas and narrow rivers. It offered few graces and even less forgiveness, and those who had come to settle it had grown to be like their world. Winskillers were a hard and uncompromising people, living in scattered towns whose livelihoods depended on the discovery and export of rare crystals occasionally exposed by the constant winds. A handful of villages had grown up around remote communities of contemplatives who found the harsh conditions a useful insulation: few visitors arrived to disturb their meditations.

In most parts of the planet, one day was much like any other, except during Regatta Week. Then, for eight days, a large portion of the scant population descended on the town of Jant, in the center of Northern Continent near the thirtieth parallel, to compete in the jib

aces, or to bet on their outcomes. Streams of high-grade crystals passed from one purse to another as the results of the preliminary races came in. By the time the Final Four were flying across the dead level salt flats that extended in all directions from Jant, fortunes were on the line.

A jib was a lightweight windsailing craft. It consisted of a narrow board from which arose a thin, whip-like mast that supported a triangular sail braced on the bottom by a movable boom. At first glance, it seemed a simple construct, but considerable ingenuity had been applied to its design and development. The sail was made of an ultra-thin laminate shot through with narrow tubes called spiracles that connected to the boom. The boom, too, was hollow, as was the mast, which fed into a dense network of more spiracles in the board that was the craft's hull.

All of these conduits were precisely arranged to capture the wind striking the sail and to propel some of its energy downwards, creating a cushion of air beneath the board on which the operator stood. The rest of the wind's power was used to propel the craft forward. By judiciously varying the angle at which the wind encountered the sail, combined with the tilt of the board's nose relative to the horizon, a skilled jib sailor could maximize both the uplift of the ground effect and the forward motion of the whole assemblage.

The finest racers at the Jant Regatta could induce their jibs to eye-watering

speeds across the vast and level salt flats. They were undeterred by potentially lethal danger, though horrific tumbles were not unknown, the hardpan surface being as unforgiving to human skin and bone as the Winskillers were to anyone who applied unfair modifications to a racing craft. For such crimes as incorporating into a jib's hull a gravity obviator or an energy field to lower wind resistance, the punishment was to be "set free" in the desert, a long way from water or shade.

Luff Imbry alighted at the spaceport at Cheff on the Brass Coast, the nearest city to Jant. He hired an aircar and trusted it to find its way across the barren landscape. It set him down beside the main gate of the tent city that annually sprang up for the Regatta and, before flying back to its base, advised him on the available lodgings. He found acceptable accommodation at the Blackrock Inn's temporary regatta annex. This was a collection of inflated pavilions linked by soft-walled corridors to the inn proper. Imbry tried the local ale, finding it bitter but increasingly interesting after a few swallows. He also sampled a Winskill delicacy: a savory pastry baked around the abdomen of a hand-sized segmented creature that lived in crevices on the rocks of the sea coast. It had a subtle, nutlike flavor and he ordered another.

Along with the food, he requested a copy of the *Jant Hortator*, finding its pages dense with news, analyses and

prognostications regarding the Final Four of the current Regatta. It was to take place the day after tomorrow, the contenders spending the intervening time resting after the rigors of the Semifinal, which had seen spectacular feats of jibmanship by the leaders of the field. Imbry read the coverage closely and made some notes.

Late that night, after taking measures to render himself unnoticeable, he visited the lightly guarded compound where the jibs for the next day's race were kept. He returned to his room in the pavilion and slept well.

“I know nothing of this,” Hop Mizzerin told the umpires.

“Is this not your jib?” said the presiding officer of the Regatta.

“It is.”

“And is this not a gravity obviating substance adhered to its base?”

“If you say so. I did not put it there.” Mizzerin turned and appealed to the watching throng, his eyes sliding without recognition over Luff Imbry. “I am the favorite. Why would I do it?”

The crowd was not swayed. Many within it had seen friends and loved ones fall foul of Mizzerins, who were quick to take offense and even quicker thereafter to draw.

“We cannot take time to examine motives. There is a race to be run and the deed speaks for itself.”

Mizzerin's hand went to his hip but found nothing to grasp. Regatta Week in Jant was, necessarily, the sole time

and place on Winskill where the Code of Dignity did not pertain.

The race began late, but with four contestants: the jibman who had placed fifth in the Semifinals was promoted to the Final Four, blinking and shaking his head while wearing a look of delighted surprise. A flurry of odds-changing ensued, with crowds of Winskillers and off-worlders shouting and waving betting slips at the totesmen, trying to get their wagers altered before the warning horn blew.

Luff Imbry did not bother to bet. He returned to the Blackrock Inn for an early lunch and a quiet nap. Arising, he packed his belongings and paid his bill. He inquired of the helpful desk clerk where he might see about the importing of the segmented creature whose flesh carried such a unique flavor, and was disappointed to learn that they did not travel well.

By the time he boarded his aircar, the jib race was a plume of dust far out to the west. Imbry lifted off and turned the craft in another direction. He flew at good speed for a long while until finally he saw a small figure in the distance, marching steadily across the salt. As he drew closer, he realized that the custom of “setting free” was all inclusive: Hop Mizzerin walked naked and unshod. The parts of his skin that were not usually exposed to sunlight were already an angry pink, and the sun still had a long arc to fall to finish the extended Winskill day.

Imbry descended to a height just above Mizzerin's reach and slowed to a

parallel course. The thagonist turned a puzzled expression on him as he took measured steps toward the bare horizon.

"You are trying to determine who has done this to you, and why," Imbry said.

"I am."

"I did."

Mizzerin stopped, his face clouded. He measured the distance between him and Imbry, then he drew in a deep breath and let it go. He resumed walking, but after a moment and without looking up, he said, "All right. Then why?"

"That is a good question. The simple answer requires you to consult your memory. Specifically you might recall your first roommate at Habrey's and how you parted."

Mizzerin looked at Imbry again for a moment, then nodded dourly and said, "Simple enough. But you imply that there is also a complex answer."

"Yes."

"I would like to hear it."

"I am still working on it," Imbry said. "It might take years before I have it complete in all its details."

Mizzerin walked on for several steps then said, "What happened to you after you left?"

Imbry gave him a summary of his life as a criminal. He saw no reason to dissemble.

"So," said Mizzerin, when he had heard it, "it seems I am responsible for the course your life has taken."

"It does."

"Yet you appear to be happy in that life. To a casual eye, you present an image of self-satisfaction."

"I am not unhappy," said Imbry.

"Do you pine for what might have been, a life of teaching and collegiality among the faculty at Habrey's?"

Imbry considered the question. "Pine' is not the word I would use," he said. "Wonder' is closer. Or perhaps 'idly dream.'"

The moved on for a while in silence until Imbry said, "Do you remember the integrator at Habrey's? The stories it used to tell?"

"It told me no stories," the marching man said.

"After we met and you blackened my eye, it told me a story about two animals in a forest. I didn't understand it at the time but when I was grown I looked up the tale."

"Is it relevant to our situation?"

Imbry declined a direct answer. "It was about how every beast must be true to its nature," he said, "no matter how ill the outcome."

"And are you true to yours?"

"I believe I am," said Imbry. "At least, I try to be."

"Ah," said Mizzerin, with another grim motion of his head, and began to ask another question. But Imbry did not stay to hear it. He lifted the car into the cooler upper air and sped away.

Mizzerin dwindled to a speck behind him. Imbry did not turn to look.



Four time Bram Stoker Award winner Brian A. Hopkins is the author of Something Haunts Us All (1995), Cold at Heart (1997), Flesh Wounds (1999), The Licking Valley Coon Hunters Club (2000), Wrinkles at Twilight (2000), These I Know By Heart (2001), Salt Water Tears (2001), El Dia de los Muertos (2002), and Lipstick, Lies, and Lady Luck (2004). Brian has been a finalist for both the Nebula Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for science fiction, as well as the International Horror Guild Award. Brian lives in Oklahoma City. You can learn more about him by visiting his webpage at <http://babwolf.com>.

Red Nails

Brian A. Hopkins

“Write the sunrise,” she said, her tone making it some easy task—as if she had asked him to take out the trash or stop for milk on the way home. Did she understand the complexity? Did she realize the price he would pay for putting this piece of his heart down on paper?

He studied the variegated shades of magenta and gold, the diverse ambers fading to mauve, the colors and emotions bleeding over the horizon to refract off the scarred surface of the airliner’s window pane. No easy task indeed.

She might not realize the sunrise was nothing more than a reflection of their emotional turmoil.

“What are you feeling right now?” he stalled.

“Cold.”

“I could get you a blanket.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

The red aura across the line of the

horizon, lowest band in this spectacular sunrise-spectrum, was a wound. Red. Angry. A vicious line drawn across his heart.

He took her hand: delicate fingers, fragile knuckles, nails so carefully painted . . . so red. The demarcation between her nails and flesh was as sharp as the band of red on the horizon. As sharp as the pain in his heart. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She withdrew against the window, hands clasped together in her lap, and studied the morning. “No clouds,” she observed. “The sky will be beautiful and blue.”

“There’s no blue in the sky.”

“Not now, but—”

“Not ever.”

She turned back to him. There were small diamonds glittering in the corners of her eyes. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s called Rayleigh Scattering. There’s actually very little blue pig-

ment in the world—none at all in the sky.” *None in your eyes*, he wanted to say. *Your eyes lie*. “The blue effect comes from tiny molecules of gas that scatter blue light through the atmosphere. Even a blue jay isn’t blue. It’s just the way tiny prisms in its feathers reflect the light.”

“Then there are no true colors?”

Perhaps, he wanted to tell her, *there is no truth*. But: “There is a true color,” he answered. *The color of pain. The color of sorrow. The color of torment and wasted years*. “All colors bleed to red.”

A tear spilled from her eye, briefly borrowing the blue of her iris as it cascaded over the rim of her lower lid. In that instant it was a warm, tiny sapphire. Then, a cold, hard diamond. Shaken, he watched as it trailed across her cheek.

“It can never be,” she sighed.

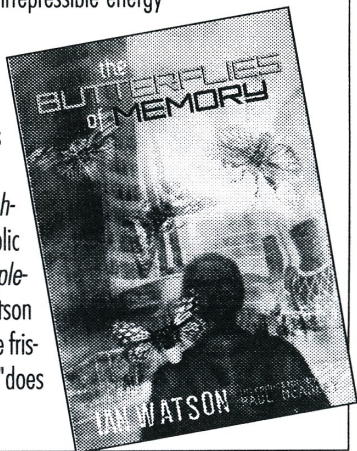
“I know.” He took out pad and pen and tried to put it down in words.

When the plane landed, he closed his journal and, without looking back, left her. There was another woman to greet him. As his hand closed over hers, he felt her nails, ragged and bitten and bare. In that moment he knew that Chekhov was right: that love is either the shrinking remnant of something that was once enormous or the quest for something that might one day become enormous. In the present, it does not satisfy.

And he knew that in every love there comes a point which the heart seeks in vain to surpass. That the heart can burst in the effort to recapture that pinnacle. And that nothing is more fatal to happiness than the remembrance of happiness, save . . . perhaps . . . the bitter taste of a passion forsaken. ☒

Ian Watson is one of the finest writers of SF and fantasy stories, and *Butterflies of Memory* is his 10th collection, with bonus prefaces to each of the 17 tales specially written by Ian. As Paul McAuley remarks in his Introduction to the whole ensemble, “Ian possesses an irrepressible energy and a restless, far-ranging imagination . . . His creative delight dances us through crossfires of plotlines, wild suppositions and general bizarreness, and irradiates his stories with a puckish sense of fun.” Stories that are by turns serious and playful, and always wildly imaginative . . .

Ian’s previous story collection, *The Great Escape*, was a *Washington Post* Book of the Year, and was praised on National Public Radio in America. Of an earlier collection, the *Times Literary Supplement* enthused, “a phenomenon, a national resource . . . Ian Watson resembles H.G. Wells.” Here, once again in McAuley’s words, is “the frisson of the unexpected, the shock of the new,” from an author who “does things differently. Every time.”



It won't come as any surprise to anyone who has ever met Darrell Schweitzer to learn that he's a fairly serious pulp collector. "As a consequence," he writes, "I've inevitably inhaled a lot of pulp dust, and maybe it has affected my mind."

It turns out that, about a year before this story was written, there was actually an anthology called All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories (how could anyone possibly resist!) and, having edited one anthology in the form of a pulp magazine facsimile, Darrell is now keen to do a book of Spicy Oriental Zeppelin Stories . . . and why not, we say!

Amongst several things upcoming from the prolific Mr. Schweitzer is Living With The Dead (from PS), the complete "Corpsenberg" story cycle begun some time back in Interzone. Meanwhile, Darrell still finds time to co-edit the inestimable Weird Tales. Talking of which, here's a doozy . . .

Fighting the Zeppelin Gang

Darrell Schweitzer

Daddy, Pops, *Paterfamilias*, Father, you managed to convince me you were nuts at a very early age. I was, how old?—ten—when you dragged the whole family, me, Mom, and baby sister Way Up North one summer for a vacation in a state park in New England where the mosquitoes were the size of small birds, and when the gutsy, he-man adventurer types (unshaven, in flannel shirts, just like on the covers of those magazines you used to read) saw you driving in with a suburban station wagon complete with small kids and baby sister's teddy bear in the window, *they* came to the same conclusion I did, probably with more reason.

You said it had to do with your work. You were never clear on exactly what you did for a living. I wasn't sure even Mom knew. This time you seemed to work for what a couple decades later

we'd call an environmental agency, and it had something to do with capturing a rare insect—a butterfly I think it was—which could only be found at that particular place in that particular season.

"We'll all have fun," you said to me, and to Mom you added, "Might as well combine business with pleasure."

She, saint of infinite patience that she was, could only agree.

What I most remember about that trip was the industrial-strength mosquitoes, not to mention the blood-sucking flies so massive they landed on you with a thump. We had to huddle within the smoke of our campfire to escape the bugs, and you had us all sing songs—and Mom, I could tell, was moving toward the consensus opinion about your sanity—and I remember watching with some fascination and a little dread as raccoons came into the

smoke to stand up on their hind legs and beg like dogs.

But none of that was the point. The point was the ascent up the Mountain, where you proposed to discover the Alleged Insect, and you volunteered me to come along “for the ride,” though there was no ride and we had to walk. Mom protested, but you got your way, and off we went, at dawn one morning while the mosquitoes, having sucked us dry the previous night, now lay around like crab-apples with little wings and legs sticking out, too bloated to get off the ground and do any more damage.

Do I exaggerate, Daddy, just a little bit? Have you always told 100% of the truth?

I enjoyed much of the walk, in the cool morning air, and as the trail rose up out of the forest there were great vistas like nothing we’d ever seen in Jersey City, and, for all that my ten-year-old self could never have articulated it and certainly would have been too stubborn to admit anything of the sort, yes, the landscape was breathtakingly beautiful, and images were to stay with me for the rest of my life. I felt as if a weight were dropping away from me—at my age, to think of such things!—and we were leaving civilization, our former lives, behind, like sinking into an ocean, deep, deep, the familiar sounds of traffic and TV fading behind us, *gone*.

But that wasn’t the point, either. A ten-year-old has only so much attention span. As we started to seriously

climb, it turned into *hard work*, and I became whiny and said, “Daddy, can’t we go back?”

Very firmly, in a tone that almost frightened me, you said, “We cannot go back.”

It was late afternoon by the time we reached the summit, then had to go over the summit onto a plateau. We were well above the timberline by then. The ground was covered with huge, round boulders, lichen, scrubby grass, and every once in a while a tiny tree, no more than a few inches high, a natural bonsai (as I would learn to call it much later) because the cold and the wind wouldn’t let it grow any taller. I was beginning to sympathize. I was exhausted by then. I too could crouch down between who rocks and become shrunken, twisted, and just *stay there*.

I think you caught the butterfly. I don’t even remember. Even that wasn’t the point.

The point was that it was getting late and we were not going to be able to get down before dark.

“Mom will be worried,” I said.

“She will *not* be worried.”

In fact she was frantic, and she packed baby sister into the station wagon and drove twenty miles to find a park ranger, by which point it was already dark and there wasn’t much he could do because this was, after all, 1970, and if you think park rangers in those days had whole fleets of helicopters and infra-red sights to go looking for crazy campers and their kids in the

middle of the night, you are sadly mistaken.

That was the point, Daddy, I understood even at the time. We might as well have been on Venus. We were *alone*.

So you made a campfire and we sat down behind a low ridge which would protect us from the worst of the wind, and we put on the extra wool sweaters you had been so careful to pack. We ate our supper and sat very close together, in the cold, while you told me to look out into the night sky—it was *dark* and moonless, and no one could ever believe there were that many stars—and you told me how, on certain nights, like this one, the “curtains in the sky” become very thin, or “open up” entirely and “powers” come through and walk the Earth. You told me that you, and a small number of others like you, some of whom were quite famous, though they all had secret identities, had learned to speak with these “powers” and gained from them powers of a different sort, meaning *abilities*, which is what made each of you special, and why each of you had to keep your identities secret. You told me that there were powers for good in the sky, but also powers of evil, which *also* came down on such nights as this and walked to and fro in the Earth and up and down in it—you used that odd phrase—and that our job, *ours*, which implied that I was supposed to be a part of this—was to learn to distinguish the good from the evil, and ally ourselves with the former in opposition to the latter.

“Get it wrong, and the world will end. *Pffft!* Blooey!”

You pointed to how the stars were rippling in the sky now, like reflections in water when somebody throws a stone in. The “gates” were opening. Yes, the wind was very cold, and I think I had a dream that there *were* faces in the sky, and you were talking with them, and later something was all around us in the dark, after the campfire had burned low, something which *touched* me right at the left cheek-bone and made that mark on my face which is still there—it was so cold it burned—and I dreamed that a voice was saying, “Yes, his training must begin.”

That was all a dream, Pappa, and you *were* nuts, and when we got back to the campsite the next afternoon, having somehow evaded the park rangers who were out looking for us, you merely pointed to my face and said, “He slipped and cut himself.”

That Mom, she of the halo and wings, did not sue for divorce on the spot was the most inexplicable thing of all. Maybe they didn’t do that in 1970.

R*ing, ring.*

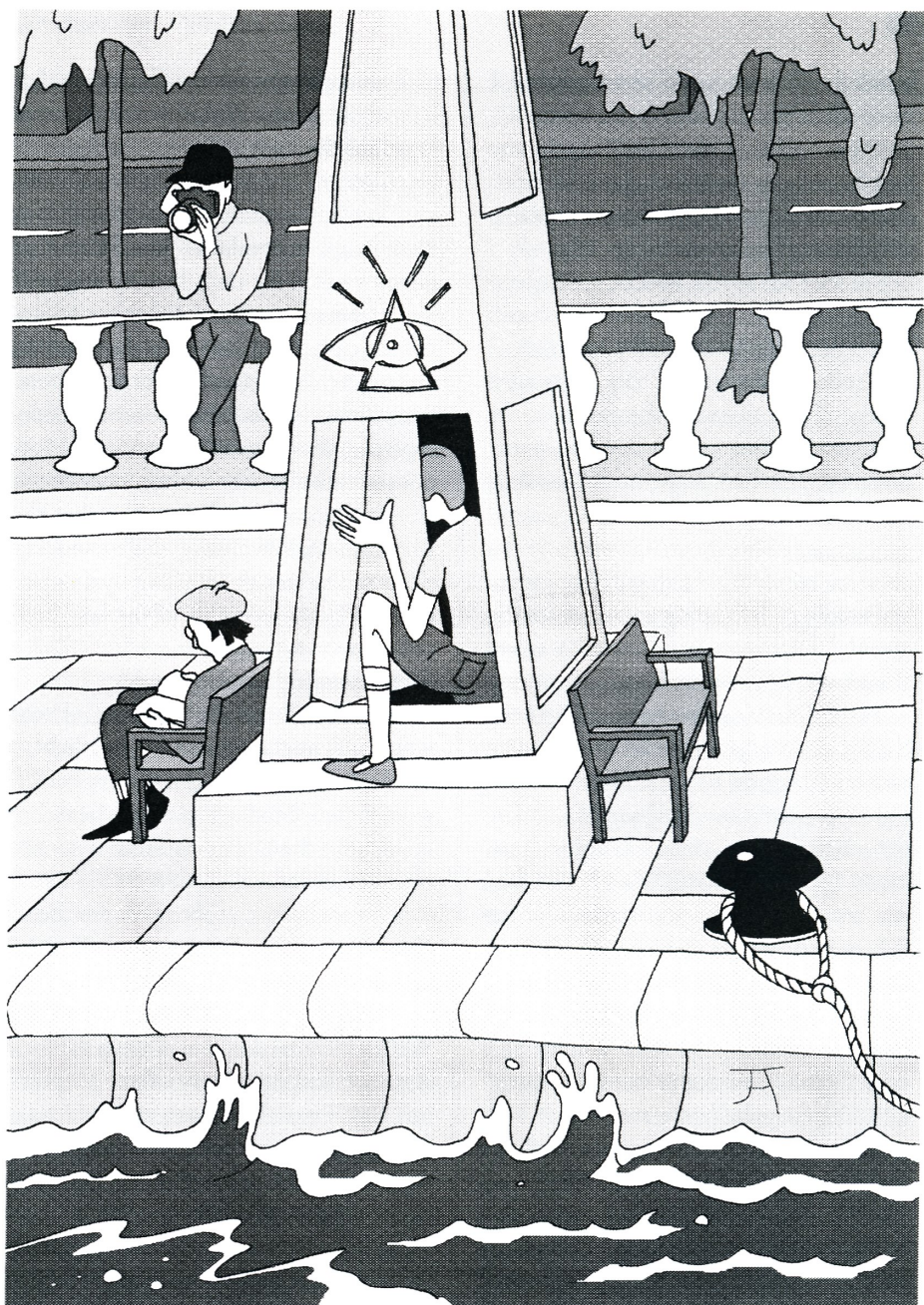
I pick up the phone.

“Matthew, it is time.”

“Dad, it is not time. I don’t have time.”

“Tonight.”

“Dad, I am twenty-six years old. I am married. I have an infant son. I have



a meeting I have to go to tomorrow. I have a life."

"None of that matters. What matters is that you meet me again, tonight, in the usual manner, in the usual place, in uniform."

By the time I was twelve you started telling me about the Zeppelin Gang, who spoke with the darkness the way we did, but with a *different* darkness, i.e. the bad guys, and how they would destroy the world in a cataclysm of nightmarish horror if given half the chance. You tended toward that sort of phraseology, betraying a melodramatic streak, quite consistent with a functional, though raving lunatic.

I still didn't know what you did for a living. I thought maybe you were a writer, of books, or even comic books, but I never saw anything you'd written, for all you were often locked in your study typing "reports." It occurred to me, too, that maybe you worked for the CIA, and when I blabbed that in school, said, "*My father is a secret agent!*" Bobby Parker smacked me on the side of the head with a ruler and said, "Then how come it isn't *a secret?*" and I suppose he had a point.

The Zeppelin Gang was led by somebody called the Black Scorpion, who wore a mask, whose face no one had ever seen. *He* was a figure of purest evil, who gathered evil men around him, all of whom travelled—or perhaps dwelt—in a fleet of pale gray zeppelins with an emblem on them, a black scor-

pion in a circular field of white; which I thought would make them about as formidable and scary as a fleet of Goodyear Blimps done up for Halloween, but in that, you insisted, I was very much mistaken. The fleet was never visible by day, but by night it would emerge out of a fissure in the sky, from behind one of those *curtains*, out of another reality or universe. Sometimes it was possible to see them crossing the face of the moon. Most people would just think they were clouds, but no, on nights like that the Black Scorpion would drift over the cities of the world, standing by an open window in the gondola of the lead zeppelin, pouring out of his hands, like a farmer sowing seeds, the very essence of evil, which brought plagues and wars and death and madness—hands which few had ever seen ungloved, and which were reputed to be almost skeletal, but black and hard and spiked, like the claws of an insect.

I admit I was caught up in the story. "But how can anyone stop him?" I asked.

"There are ways. Secret weapons. We have our resources. Our greatest is courage, and the clarity of our purpose, but there is still something to be said for gizmos, atomic disintegration machines, that sort of thing. In time, my son, you will learn much."

Another cold night. Always on a cold night, it seems, but there are no stars tonight. Overcast. Drizzle. It is late Oc-

tober. I can almost feel ice beginning to form on the sidewalk.

But I must go, like the vampire's victim who steals away to ecstasy and certain death, like an addict addicted to a dream which will inevitably devour him.

My wife and child are asleep. I slip out of the house, roll the car out of the driveway without starting the engine or turning on the lights, only turning the key when I am halfway down the sloping street.

I must go, as I have always gone.

As I can't stop myself from going.

When I was sixteen, you took me climbing again. Of course you were already dead by then, at least officially.

Father, that is why I have always hated you, in my heart of hearts, for what you did to me, to Mother, to Baby Sister—who wasn't a baby anymore—to all our lives. You spent more and more time away from home. I know Mother wept at night when she was in her bedroom alone and thought I couldn't hear her. She loved you, Dad. She would have stuck with you through anything, but you "sacrificed" her for the cause, or the greater good or something, and there were times when I wasn't sure who was more evil, you or the Black Scorpion.

Then you didn't come back at all. I was told that "something had happened," but no one, not even Mother, would tell me what. She had to raise us.

I didn't know, then, that quite large checks came regularly in the mail, from a bank in Katmandu, and that helped, but it didn't help. Mother spent a lot of time staring out the window at the sky, I thought, as if she were waiting for something to drift across the face of the moon.

You and I had "issues," Father. Yes, indeed.

I leave the car and switch to another, very different one, which is always left for me on these occasions. The towers of Manhattan gleam before me, across the river, through the gathering fog.

I make a turn few people know about, down an alley, through what appears to be a solid wall, but is only a projection. I flip open the hidden control panel, and activate a field I can hardly explain, and then outside is only darkness, because the earth has swallowed me up.

I'll be there soon, Dad. I'm coming. But you knew that.

Then one day in junior biology class, I found a note, in my textbook, which I was certain had not been there the night before when I'd done my homework. It was from you, in your handwriting, containing a set of secret instructions, signs and symbols I knew from the Zeppelin Gang mythos, and directions, which involved Jersey Transit, a PATH train, the subway, Cleopa-

tra's Needle, Grant's Tomb, a long walk in the Upper West Side and a secret door beneath a Civil War monument near the River, which led to places under Manhattan that weren't in any of the guidebooks.

It was all I could do not to make an excuse and run out of class. I went of course. I skipped my last class, and a date with my then girlfriend, and went, without bothering to phone home first. We are alike, you and I, equally inconsiderate. Would Mother worry? Did I care?

I hung around, waiting till dark, as you had instructed. I waited until the Moon rose behind the Manhattan skyline. (Did something drift across its face?) I slid my fingers, *just so*, as you had described, into a niche in the monument, and found the key you told me would be there.

I opened the secret door, descended the long, winding staircase, into the cavern, groping my way among stalactites into the very Bowels of the Earth, as the phrase would have it, though it felt more like a mouth. I was something very small crawling between the teeth of something very large. Sometimes, the very stone seemed to ripple and I felt a cold wind blowing through a very thin curtain that separated our universe from something else.

In the darkness, you spoke to me, Father. You brought me to a dimly-lit grotto, where I saw you for the first time in years, only I didn't really see you, because you were wearing a mask, and some kind of costume that had

wings on it, which made you look like a huge, hunched-over bird.

There was a costume for me, too. You commanded me to put it on. It was featureless, all black, like a scuba-diver's wet suit, only it didn't feel like that against my skin. It became part of me. I felt amazing strength, and I had never been a big or muscular kid, but now I had become something else entirely. You told me to put on the mask and gloves and boots, and I put them on, and it had to have been a dream as we two climbed up through the earth, passing through solid stone as if through mist or through a curtain. Is that what we did? Up, we climbed, up, out into the glaring, but muted light of the night-time city in the fog. Up, and somehow the fibers of my fingertips and of my boots extended *into* stone and marble and steel, and I could feel the textures of these things as if they were my own flesh, and somehow the power flowing from them into my body gave me my very great strength, so that I could climb as I did, and hang onto a ledge fifty storeys above the street with one hand and not be afraid.

"Dad, this is amazing," I said.

"Yes," you replied. "It is."

It was only when the moon broke through the clouds at last—I had the image of a spiderweb being torn away from the face of a lantern—that I realized where we were.

We were on a ledge, halfway up the Empire State Building, sitting next to an Art Deco gargoye.

"Dad," I said. "This is so incredible. What does it mean?"

"You mean you haven't figured it out yet, son?"

"Not entirely."

You sighed, and I could sense the disappointment in your tone, as if to say to the gods, *I had hoped for a smarter kid, but never mind, I'll make do somehow.*

"I am the Night Hawk. The foe of the Black Scorpion. We two have been battling over the fate of the world and the future of mankind for a long, long time."

And you stood up on the ledge, and spread your wings.

I wanted to say to you, then and there, that this was all crazy, that you were a certified raving, gibbering, probably bug-eating lunatic, that you belonged not in a winged suit but in a straitjacket, but there I was with you, in a similar, albeit wingless suit, on a ledge on the Empire State Building something like a quarter of a mile above Manhattan, and so I couldn't quite bring myself to raise those objections.

You folded your wings and sat down beside me. You put your hand gently on my arm. I felt a tingling through the suit, as if power somehow passed from you to me, just then.

"There are others like us," you said, "who are better known. They keep their daily identities secret, of course, but their *personae* are known, even famous, even the subject of treatments in various media. But they are mere distractions, a kind of smokescreen.

We, who remain much less known, do all the serious work."

And I saw my whole life falling away as surely as if I'd suddenly taken a flying, albeit wingless leap.

"Let me guess," I said. "You want me to be your sidekick."

"More of a boy wonder, if you will excuse the phrase," you whispered into my ear, laughing.

When I got home the next morning, Mother looked pale, ill. She had been up all night. "You're not into drugs, are you?"

I assured her I was not.

She wept softly. I think she knew what was going on. I think she had always known. I think she began to die that night.

Onward and upward, into the cave, into the secret laboratory, some of which I understand, some of which I have been denied access to, despite my many "training missions" over the years. I suit up. All this has been my secret, my thrill, my delusion. I cannot remember all that we have done, even in my dreams. Most of it is just tales, things you have done on your own, and reported back to me, because I am not ready yet for the "real thing."

Up, climbing through the earth as if through smoke. Up the side of smooth stone and glass, like an insect. Into the street, moving swiftly in the shadows. Up again.

The Empire State Building. The ledge, where we have met so many

times before, next to the gargoyle we have nicknamed "Bruce."

There. You are waiting.

For once we climb even further, to the very top, onto the highest observation platform at the base of the radio antenna.

The city spreads before us, the world in light and fog, the faint sounds of traffic and ship horns from the river like a whispering of a tide.

"This is the last time, Matthew," you say. "From now on you must go it alone. No more sidekick."

"What are you saying, Father?"

Again I can sense that faint exasperation in your voice. You explain what you'd hoped would be obvious.

"It is time for you to take over. You must become the Night Hawk."

"No," I say softly. "I can't."

"I didn't raise you to be a coward, son. I raised you to be a hero. Maybe you're not the most heroic hero to ever come down the pike, but dammit, you're going to have to do. You're all I got."

"There was Baby Sister," I say bitterly, "and Mom."

"Your mother is dead. I regret that very much. As for your sister, Gwendolyn—"

"I'll tell you what happened to my sister, Gwendolyn. I don't think you know about this, because it just happened, just two days ago, and besides, you were away all the time and never gave a bug's ass about her, did you—?"

"Son, you know I have other preoccupations—"

"Well Gwen grew up—is growing up, she is only nineteen—rather confused, and, lacking any guidance, even from me because I too was preoccupied, she fell in with some very bad company indeed, Father, and I must confess to you that with some of the tricks you've taught me I found out all about it, every last sordid detail, like the party where she got herself so shot up with junk that she didn't know what was going on even when she got gangbanged by an entire fraternity. You know what I did? After hours, when the party had thinned out a bit, I went in and cleaned things up, not wearing any magic suit, not using any super-powers, with my face covered with a knit ski-mask and armed with a baseball bat. I smashed a couple guys up pretty badly, Father. I could have *killed* them. Easily. And, you know, I *wanted* to. I felt entirely justified in doing so. I might even have *enjoyed* it.

"But somehow I didn't, not quite. I carried Gwen back to her dorm and told her it was all a bad dream, and I felt so *dirty* telling such lies, having done such things and thought such thoughts, that I *know*, Father, I am not the stuff that Night Hawks are made of."

For the last time, you put your hand on my shoulder gently, and I feel a tingling, of some mystical energy passing from father to son, and you say, "On the contrary, you've finished your training. You are ready. You have learned to act decisively, to draw on the darkness within yourself, to harness even that for the greater cause—"

“No, Father. I came here tonight to tell you that I quit. I’ve concluded you *are* a fucking lunatic after all, that none of this is real, that both of us are fucking lunatics, that we should both turn ourselves in to the police and hope they put us away in a rubber room where we won’t hurt anybody—”

You shake your head sadly. “I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but it has. I had wanted to grow old as your curmudgeonly mentor, maybe playing the outward role as a faithful butler or something, all part of the secret identity stuff, but the reason I called you here tonight, son, on this night, for the last time, is to tell you that there are shortcomings to this line of work, and sometimes bad things happen, and it so happens that I am dying, son, of an incurable disease, which I must have acquired dodging too many death rays, or from the Black Scorpion’s poisons. It couldn’t have come at a worse time. I know the Enemy is planning a new assault, and must be stopped at all costs. Therefore you must take over the family concern, *now*, tonight.”

“Why you crazy—”

But before I can say anymore, you press something into my hand, and climb back over the metal fence that is supposed to prevent the observer, so

high up, from yielding to perverse and terrible impulses. But you scale it with ease, as might an insect—no, that’s not right—as might a huge, black bird.

You stand up and spread your wings.

“Matthew, become the Night Hawk now. Fulfill your destiny.”

“Father, no!”

It is only then, in a moment of sheer, helpless terror, that I truly understand that those wings, whatever enhanced powers your suit might have given you, are for decoration, or psychological effect only, as in *not functional*.

You fall away into the darkness.

It is only much later, as I cling to the iron fence, sobbing, and I hear sirens in the street below, that I realize that what you pressed into my hand is an envelope. Final instructions, of course. And a key, which will not only give me access to every part of the laboratory, but also open a certain locker in which hangs another suit, like yours, with wings.

I am ready to put that suit on now. I am not ready to try to fly with it. Not yet.

The Moon comes out. Something, not clouds, drifts across its face.

I hear engines thundering in the night. ☒

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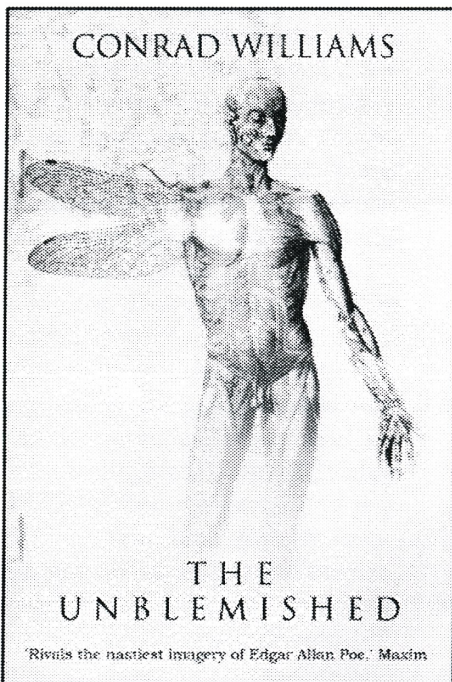
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THE UNBLEMISHED is an original novel by British Fantasy Award-winner Conrad Williams and the latest book in Earthling's popular Halloween Series, published mid-October 2006 as a hardcover limited edition.

Introduction by
JEFF VANDERMEER

Afterword by CONRAD WILLIAMS.

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Tony Richards is the author of four novels—one of them nominated for the Bram Stoker Award—and more than sixty stories, and has appeared in F&SF, Weird Tales, Asimov's, Cemetery Dance, the Pan Books of Horror, and Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. Widely-travelled, he often uses the places he has visited as settings for his work. The projects he is working on at present include a series of short films based on his stories—one, Beautiful Stranger, has already been completed. He lives in North London with his wife, who is his constant travelling companion.

Alsiso

Tony Richards

In the morning, Beth would paint. She liked the light at that time of the day, the way it was reflected in from the Caribbean. Harriet? She would sleep late, or sunbathe, or swim, or read—often a combination of all four activities. Did sleeping late count as an activity? She wasn't sure.

At lunchtime they would go to La Cocina, a restaurant owned by a local who had lived in San Diego for ten years and spoke good English.

And the afternoon? Originally, they had spent it on Alsiso's little crescent-shaped beach of white sand. That had been before they had discovered the rocks and the caves at the far southern end. No one else ever went there, and after the first couple of months they decided it belonged to them.

Harriet had never known her skin this dark. It didn't look at all like skin to her these days. It looked like oil.

In the early evening they would go back to the simply-furnished apartment they were renting and make love, and this was, without a doubt, the best

part of Harriet's day. It seemed incredible to her, now, that she had spent an entire nine years married to Mike and she had never once, in all that time, attained a climax. Sex back then had amounted to lying back and being jig-gled for a while. Sex now? She had always imagined—pre-Beth—that it was all to do with mouths. And there was some of that, but it soon turned out fingers were more important.

And it was not even that, she finally discovered. Beth could make her come by simply playing with her nipples for a good long while. At first, that hadn't been the case. In the first couple of months, doing anything short of clitoral, the slowly-shuddering ceiling of the bedroom back in London would come floating back into her vision, and she would go rather numb. But after a while, she had forgotten all that, relaxed, released herself.

Later in the evening? They would hang about the promenade for a while, trying to sell whatever Beth had painted. Alsiso didn't get anything like

the number of tourists who visited Cancun, further along the coast. But it got its share, mostly older North Americans.

And then, with money in their pockets, they would head back to La Cocina for their evening meal. They liked the place. It had a courtyard with two lemon trees. The air was fragranced by them. They could look up at the bright, sharp stars. Rodrigo, who owned the restaurant, understood that they didn't eat meat and—unlike most Mexicans—respected that.

This whole business had struck Harriet as odd initially. She had laughed at countless jokes about vegetarian lesbians during suburban London dinner parties . . . and now? She *was* one. How had that come to be the case? She had originally thought there was a historical symbolism to the whole “no meat” thing. Men had traditionally brought home meat—eschewing it proclaimed an independence from them. Now she understood that it was, rather, an attempt to live your life without everyday—and thus unremarked upon—cruelty.

Later, they would prop themselves up at La Cocina's well-stocked bar, start on the tequila and get—usually—rather drunk.

This was how every day had gone for months now. It was good to stop in one place for a while. After fleeing London—they had met at an arts class sponsored by the local council, Beth had been in England as a nanny for six months—they had flown to Seattle,

and then made their way down the Pacific coast until Harriet's visa had run out. Now? Mexico. And after Mexico? She had no idea. No plans.

Apart from the early evenings, it was the rocks she loved the best. There was just one flat smooth area on which they could lie naked. Beside that there was a pool perhaps twelve feet deep, half-filled with weed amongst which there lived starfish, hermit crabs, and various tiny blennies. The rest was sharp crags and projections, and was honeycombed with—not caves really—pumice-like tubes, almost all of them leading downwards. Water rushed through most of them, occasionally surging up so hard that it erupted from an opening, drenching them in cool, fine spray. The sounds it made. It was like listening to the ocean breathing.

It would be nice to dive into the water from the rocks, but the sea was rough around here, and occasionally the tip of a black fin would appear for a couple of seconds, something you never saw from the beach. Their apartment complex had a swimming pool, and they confined themselves to that.

Harriet would stare at Beth for hours sometimes, while the woman slept. Beth was so much more beautiful than her. Naturally slim, naturally athletic, small and very blond. She had the laziest, easiest of smiles, even in repose. She refused point blank to divulge her true age—even going to the extent of hiding her passport—but was obviously in her mid-to-late twenties.

Harriet was thirty-two. Had never

had children—couldn't, something Mike had never forgiven her or let her forget. She had been rather flabby when she had met Beth, but that had now melted away. Why? Simply because she was happier? She had red hair, and was quite tall. She didn't *mind* not having kids, could recall hours spent in the company of recent mothers thinking "don't you have anything else to talk about, a life of your own, you silly cow?"

Except that, before Beth, she'd had no real life of her own either.

She wished she could paint well enough to make a living. Wished she could do something. Perhaps she should get a job? But lying out here on the rocks, she was entirely happy.

The young man started working at La Cocina in early May. When they first saw him, over lunch, he was sweeping out a corner of the courtyard.

He was perhaps six foot two. Well-muscled, not an ounce of spare fat on him. Wore a white singlet and faded Levis. Had his hair woven into beaded dreadlocks. There were several gold rings on his fingers, and a thick chain of the same around his neck.

When he saw them, he grinned—his face was extremely smooth and handsome. He put down his broom and then came sauntering across and leaned on their table.

"Can I get you ladies anything?" He was North American, they realised now. "Freshen up your water, perhaps?"

There was a twinkle in his eye as his

gaze flickered between them, and Harriet realised she was warming to that. She was about to answer, when she heard Rodrigo shouting from the kitchen doorway.

The young man glanced over his shoulder, looked back at them and shrugged, then wandered across to see what the Mexican wanted. There was a hurried, muffled conversation between them, which Harriet could guess the sense of. "Stop bothering them, dummy—they're a pair of dykes".

And then Rodrigo sent the young man off into the kitchen on some errand.

"I am sorry about that," he explained when he came over to greet them. "He is new here."

"He being?"

"His name's Cody. Just some kind of drifter. I offered him the spare room at the back and minimal pay to do some odd jobs 'round the place."

Beth looked slowly round the courtyard. "You're not exactly busy here."

Rodrigo grinned, slightly embarrassed. "I know. I've just got a soft spot for strays, I guess." He glanced at their table next. "Can I fetch you more salad?"

Down on the rocks that afternoon, Harriet found herself thinking about Cody. The casual way he had leant on their table. The casual effortlessness of his every move. She liked that. In all the time that she had been with Beth—almost a year now—she had never found herself attracted to another man. Most of them reminded her of Mike,

all stiffness and tough outer shell. But there were earlier memories than Mike. For two whole months at university, she had been with a young man not unlike Cody at all—she'd never even told her parents about that. And their lovemaking had been . . . *more* than just a ceiling jiggling.

More than even with Beth? She was not quite sure, it was so long ago.

She found herself staring for ages at the blue-white sky though, imagining things.

After a long while, she realised Beth had come awake. She turned her head to see those green eyes staring at her oddly. As though Beth could read her thoughts.

“What’s up?”

“It’s okay,” Beth told her, rather coolly. “I’m not Mike, you know. I’m not about to go berserk because some hunk catches your interest.”

“That’s—”

“Really? I could see the way you were at lunch. Don’t worry about it. I’m cool.”

That evening when they made love, Harriet mostly did for Beth, working diligently, deeply, as though in an effort to make up for what she had been thinking.

Cody wasn’t there when they returned to La Cocina.

“He only works here days,” Rodrigo told them. “I think he went off with some Danish chick who was here earlier.”

The next morning was like any other. Sleeping late, sunbathing, swim-

ming, reading while Beth painted. Beth could not afford to work on canvas, used hardboard which she had to prime herself. Her paintings still sold anyway—all of them, eventually.

Cody was up a ladder when they walked into the restaurant’s courtyard, replacing some of the red tiles on the roof. He had his shirt off and was sweaty. When he realised they were there, he looked down at them and grinned. “Afternoon, ladies.”

Harriet answered him back. Beth didn’t.

Down on the rocks all that afternoon, Harriet had precisely the feeling of enduring a long, sleepless night, despite the fact that it was daylight. She felt simultaneously restless and unable to move. Kept closing her eyes and thinking about Cody. Why was the man affecting her so? It wasn’t just the memory of the lover at college, it was . . .

No, damn it! She tried to force that out of her mind.

Cody himself just wouldn’t leave her imagination, though. She kept picturing him looming over her, touching her, his bare skin damp and salty. After an age she fell into a half doze, and it was a while before she realised that her left hand had actually moved down between her legs, her fingers were—

“Oh, fuck you!”

Beth’s voice brought her awake with a start. She snatched her hand back now, uncertain where to put it.

Beth was up on her elbows and staring at her fiercely.

"I'm right here! Right beside you! Oh, *fuck* you!"

And in the next moment she had stood upright. In the next after that, she took three steps towards the edge of the rocks, and then dived into the churning sea below.

Harriet sat up with a yelp. "Beth, no!"

There was nothing she could do though. The blond head was already moving outwards, appearing and then disappearing behind the tall waves. Harriet drew her knees up to her chest and shivered, frightenedly scanning the surface for any signs of a black fin.

It was five minutes before Beth re-emerged. She was dripping and looked rather cold, but didn't seem any less angry.

"Right next to you," she muttered, snatching up a towel. "And you're getting off thinking about some guy you barely know."

"I'm sorry." Harriet could hear how her own voice had taken on a childish quaver. "I was asleep. I didn't realise—"

They didn't make love that evening, and had their meal at some other establishment than La Cocina. Beth went straight to bed when they got home, and immediately fell asleep, the way she always did when something was upsetting her. Harriet lay awake for hours. She was staring at the darkened ceiling now—had she spent her whole life gazing upwards? And those bad, those stupid thoughts of this afternoon kept flowing through her head.

It was ridiculous. No, worse than that, it was self-destructive and absurd. The time she'd spent with Beth had been the happiest, the most relaxed, most joyous in her entire life. She dearly loved the woman.

And yet . . . *crazy!*

And yet . . .

There had always been—she was forced to admit it now—a small voice nagging from a darkened section of her mind. "Things shouldn't be like this". She had been brought up from the earliest age to believe women should be with, marry, men and anything else was wrong. And that was utter, ignorant, out-dated rubbish—her forebrain more than understood that. Yet it didn't stop the little voice. She just ignored it, mostly.

Now, though? Now, for the first time in practically a year, the question had posed itself. Did it have to be this way forever? Mike could just have been a sour aberration. Could she actually find what she needed with a man?

She looked across at Beth, so beautiful asleep. Felt guilty even entertaining thoughts like these. But she simply couldn't help it. It was part of what she was.

Beth was in no better mood by the next morning. Started on a new painting, then knocked it off its easel.

"Shit, I need a break from this. I'm going for a walk. Alone."

She hadn't returned by midday. Harriet thought of going to look for her, then realised how pointless that would

all stiffness and tough outer shell. But there were earlier memories than Mike. For two whole months at university, she had been with a young man not unlike Cody at all—she'd never even told her parents about that. And their lovemaking had been . . . *more* than just a ceiling jiggling.

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enjoy it, when she had the most awful suspicion.

Somebody was watching them. She felt entirely certain of that fact.

Her eyelids sprang open, went straight to the front door, which was closed. Went next to the window. It was open. She could make out a palm tree and some thin white clouds high up beyond it. Nothing more than that, though. Nobody there. No face.

The feeling wouldn't go away, though, however hard she tried to ignore it. It made her stiff, and drained all passion from her. In the end, she was forced to pretend that something had happened, the same way she used to with Mike.

Cody got himself up higher on the bed and pushed his jeans down. She felt that once-familiar thrill from college days as Mr. C. bounced into view, alive-seeming and eager. And she wanted to touch it, play with it a while. But Cody was too excited by this time, too driven, impatient.

She bit her lip as he entered her. Then, after a few strokes, started to respond, thrusting back.

The feeling of being watched returned stronger than ever, making her go still again and sapping every last ounce of her pleasure.

In the end . . . in the end . . .

She wound up watching the ceiling jiggle for a while.

Cody rolled off her as soon as he was done and disappeared into the wash-room to dispose of his rubber. She could hear water running. When he

came back in, he flopped down on the bed, ran a hand across her breasts and gave a huge smile.

"You're so cute. And your girlfriend's even cuter. Reckon she'd be interested in joining in some time?"

When she started to get angry, he just looked bemused.

"What problem? We're all freaks when it comes down to it. You should know that better than anyone."

She was almost crying tears of rage, mostly directed at herself, as she headed back to the apartment. There, she'd done it! Gone and done it, really, truly! Proved herself "normal". And just how had she managed that?

Not only by betraying Beth, but by betraying her cheaply, pointlessly, and joylessly with somebody who couldn't hold a candle to the woman. There! Well done! Congratulations! Did she get a merit badge?

There *were* tears dribbling down her face by now. Not least because she realised she now faced one last decision. Whether she was going to confess all this or not. She couldn't think straight, so she didn't know.

Beth was still out when she let herself back into the apartment. That was very odd. Where could she have disappeared to for so long?

Harriet went to take a shower, and stayed in there for a considerable while, remaining under the jets long after the hot water from the solar-heated tank

had run out. She felt no cleaner by the time that she emerged, however. She towelled herself off.

Beth was *still* not home. And it was by now well past three o'clock. The woman had been gone for hours.

At nine, a wan, sad shadow of herself, she wandered down to a café on the beachfront, ordered a plate of *refritos* and rice, and barely touched it. Watched the sunset bleakly.

It was dark by the time that she got back. Beth still had not returned. When she let herself in this time, she did not switch on any of the lights. Just sat down in an armchair in the living room and pulled her legs up to her chest. And, resting her head on her knees, accepted the inevitable. Beth knew. Beth had seen or found out. And had gone away.

How could she have done this? How could she have been so incredibly stupid?

She was on the verge of tears again when a car pulled up outside the window, its headlights sweeping briefly across her. Half a minute later, a key turned in the lock.

Beth stepped in.

Harriet noticed something odd about her right away. She was smiling, but it was not the usual lazy, easy smile that she had become accustomed to. It was a tight thing, compacted. Why was that? What was happening?

"Did someone drive you here?" she asked.

Beth shook her head. "I've hired a car."

Stepping to the window, Harriet could see an aged-looking, pale-beige Wrangler now parked on the drive. It had only two seats and a carrying area in the rear, into which was neatly folded the Jeep's canvas roof. She turned back towards Beth, thankful that the darkness was masking her own expression.

"Why?"

"We've been hanging around here too long. I thought we'd just move on down the coast."

And Harriet was about to blurt out "but we love Aliso!"—when she realised that the two words "but" and "love" sat very heavily with her by now. She loved Beth. But what had she still gone and got up to?

The apartment complex was well lit, and she could see Beth's face quite clearly. And the look on it spoke volumes. It asked, "Want to know where I've been all day? Should I enquire the same of you?"

Then it suddenly relaxed. The lazy, easy smile returned.

They went to bed and, as was usually the case, Beth attended first to Harriet. All of the familiar moves. All of the so-needed touches and caresses.

And yet . . . this time, Harriet could not stop thinking about what she'd done this afternoon. It left her stiff, uncomfortable again. Drained of all sensation once more.

In the end, as with Cody, she was forced to pretend something. The first

time she had ever had to pretend that with Beth.

And once Beth was asleep? She curled into a tight, hard ball, and then gave herself over to quiet tears again. What had she *done*?

Come morning, Beth announced that she was going to scout ahead for them. Alone. She gave Harriet just the briefest of pecks on the cheek before she left, and looked pleased with herself as she sailed off in her new vehicle down the driveway.

She knew what had happened, Harriet now realised instinctually. She had either seen or guessed or found out somehow. It all seemed to be behind them now, though, never to be mentioned. The only thing she had to be quite sure of was that Cody understood.

He wasn't anywhere in sight when she walked into the courtyard of La Cocina. But Rodrigo was there, laying out fresh napkins, so she enquired after him.

Rodrigo just frowned unhappily. "He's gone. Lit out in the night without a word."

"Are you sure?"

"All his stuff's gone. And I paid him up till Friday too. Damned drifters."

The words kept turning over in Harriet's mind without settling properly. Gone? But he'd been talking, just yesterday, about doing certain "things" in the future. And he didn't seem the type to turn tail and run

just because she'd got annoyed with him.

She started to remember other things as well. The powerful sensation of being watched while she had been with him. The way that Beth had been gone the whole day. And the sudden, unannounced appearance of a vehicle with a load-carrying area and folded canvas in the rear.

For carrying what? Carrying it where?

An answer occurred to her that made her turn around and walk back out without another word.

It took her just under a quarter of an hour to reach the rocks. There was a heavy set of tyre tracks leading to and from them which had not been there a couple of days back.

Breathlessly, she made her way over the jagged grey surfaces, hunting for any tiny signs of something being dragged. There were none. She peered into some of the large, rough-edged tubes that led downwards. The ocean was churning at the bottom of them as usual, but she could make out nothing else down there.

She gazed out across the surface of the dark, unsettled water. A black triangular fin came into view for a few seconds, then just slipped away.

This was totally ridiculous. She was being even more insane than she had been yesterday. God, she thought of how big Cody was, and how small Beth, and her mind began to settle, her

limbs started to relax. What she'd been imagining wasn't possible.

She was standing by now, on the flat section of rock they always lay on. Right beside the deep pool. So she looked down there.

Hermit crabs were scuttling across the stones, as always. Tiny fish flitted between the thick, undulating strands of weed.

One strand moved off to the side for a moment. Just long enough for Harriet to catch a glimpse of something shining. Something gold.

It was gone again almost as soon as she had seen it.

She dropped to her knees, her heart thumping, waiting for the weed to move aside again. But now it didn't.

The rumble of an engine, then a crunch of tyres, announced the re-appearance of the Jeep. It stopped above her and Beth got out, still looking extremely pleased with herself. Shouted, "I thought I might find you here. What? Lost something? Looking for something?"

Harriet climbed back to her feet, trying to keep her expression blank. She could feel her sinews quivering gently as Beth came quickly down the slope towards her.

"What's that?"

"You looked like you were searching for something, that's all. Forget it." Reaching her, Beth planted a deep kiss on her mouth. "I've found the ideal

place. A little fishing village about eight miles south. I've already put money down on a room by the harbour. It's just perfect."

Well *that* was a relief at least. To be getting away from here.

"When are we going?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Not today?"

Beth shook her head. "No way. Because today, my love, I want to lie here with you. Can't we do that? In this special place? Just lie here? One last time?"

Except that none of it was really a question. Because, the whole time she was asking it, Beth had rested her hands on Harriet's shoulders and was applying a gentle but firm pressure, not forcing her so much as gradually, inexorably easing her downwards.

And Harriet had never understood, until that moment, exactly how strong, physically, Beth was.

Usually, when they lay together in this place, it was side by side and on their backs, their shoulders almost, not quite, touching. But this time, for the first time, Beth wrapped her arms around Harriet tightly, and didn't even release her grip when she fell into a light, comfortable sleep.

Harriet lay there with her eyes wide open the whole while, but she remained entirely still, wondering what might happen if she dared to move.



This is Scott William Carter's first appearance in Postscripts. In the last three years, he has sold over twenty-five short stories to such places as Analog, Asimov's, Ellery Queen, and Realms of Fantasy, and recently he has also been working on novels. He lives in Northwest Oregon with his wife and daughter. You can find out more about his work at www.scottwilliamcarter.com.

Happy Time

Scott William Carter

When Dale thought back on their encounter, he often wondered what would have happened if he had been more alert. Would he have seen the girl coming? Would he have been able to avoid bumping into her? If he hadn't been tired from squinting at a monitor all day, if Portland's pollen-thick air hadn't given him a splitting headache, if he hadn't been lightheaded from the evening's bourbon, then maybe, just maybe, he would have noticed her before stepping out of his doorway.

Then everything would have been different.

But he *didn't* see her, and he *did* step, ice bucket in hand, out into the Phoenix Inn's blue-carpeted hall. He always refilled his ice before he went to bed. It was one of his rituals. If he woke up thirsty, he liked having ice in his water. Behind him, he heard the rain pelting the parking lot outside his open window. It had been raining since his plane touched down three days earlier, except for twenty minutes that first morning when it hailed. The hall was

warmer and more humid than his room. Dale always kept his room cool. Sixty-two degrees. That's how he liked it.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he turned to head to the ice machine, and that's when he saw the little black girl cartwheeling into him.

Routine will save you. Whenever a new guy tagged along on a job—which, thankfully, wasn't all that often—that's what Dale told him. No matter what city you land in, no matter how much the clients fucked up their network, you can find solace and comfort in the daily rhythms of your own routine. When you land in Denver, get your shoes shined before you take a taxi to the Hilton. Before bed, have a half a glass of bourbon with half a glass of Coke, one ice cube, while catching a full cycle of CNN. In Chicago, eat breakfast at the Iron Skillet and order the mandarin crepes, light on the whipping cream. Have your cup of coffee with two sugars. Read the local paper,

front page first, then sports, then financial. Scan the obituaries. If you're feeling down, you can compare your life to some poor bastard who died younger than you and say to yourself, "Shit, it can't be too bad. I could have been *him*."

After five years as a travelling network engineer for Benco Industries, Dale had found that these carefully constructed habits acted as a shield against the occasional melancholy. If the new guy asked, and he often did, whether Dale liked his job, whether it made him happy, he said sure. You make sixty grand a year and you get to see the country. Do you get lonely? Sure, you do. It's normal. It's part of the job. That's why you need routine. It keeps you from thinking about things that don't matter. And if you have needs, as all men have needs, there are places to go to take care of that.

Sure beats having a wife and a couple of brats to anchor you down, he'd say. A lot of guys, they get lonely, and they go out and do something stupid like get married. But if you just wait until the feeling passes, if you use routine to insulate yourself from the depression, then the next thing you know you're having a steak, medium rare, in the Space Needle in Seattle at sunset, a new Grisham hardback open on the table next to a glass of white wine, and a feeling of total contentment swells up inside of you. That's when you know it, man. That's when you know life just can't get any better.

Right before he collided with the girl, Dale heard a shout from the other end of the hall—a man with a high, sharp voice: "*Eunice!*" But it was too late. The girl's feet ploughed into Dale's chest, the two of them going down, the ice bucket flying out of his hand and bouncing off the Van Gogh print on the wall. She landed on top of him, crushing the air out of him, her brown eyes inches in front of his own, wide and terrified. Her black braided pony-tail fell against his neck.

At first, other than a sharp pain in his tailbone, he felt only mild irritation—mostly at himself, for failing to look before stepping out into the hall. It was only when the girl touched him, inadvertently on the arm as she scrambled back to her feet, that he felt the most powerful surge of loneliness he had ever felt in his life.

It was like drowning in cold water.

Then, for just a few seconds, he remembered a life he had never lived.

The chance encounter with Susan happened in an Atlanta grocery store three years earlier. Jingle Bells played faintly in the background and red and green streamers decorated the aisles, which just didn't seem right when his collar was soaked with sweat from walking five blocks from the hotel in the balmy heat. He was stooping to pick up a package of shaving cream when he saw her pass his aisle, pushing a squeaky cart. Since they had attended high school three thousand miles away

in Los Angeles, he told himself it couldn't have been her—not the same blond Susan who sat next to him in American History, the Susan with a locker three down from his, the Susan who smiled and said hello to him when most people looked through him as if he was made of glass.

His heart beating harder, he followed the direction of her cart to the produce section, peering cautiously through a wine rack. And there she was, her hair cut shorter than he remembered, a little heavier around the middle maybe, but still gorgeous in cut off jeans and a white T-shirt with the words *Bean Counting Babe* across the front in bold black letters. She was picking out organic apples.

Dale, pretending to look at a bottle of merlot, wondered if he should say hello. What would he say? You know, I always had a crush on you. And she would say, what, gee, you look kinda familiar . . . She dropped a couple of apples in a plastic bag, sealed them with a twisty tie, and then rolled her cart away. Going, going . . .

Realizing she was about to disappear from his life, Dale stepped from behind the wine rack.

(No, Dale thought. That's not what happened. I never approached her. I walked away, never saw her again . . .)

"Susan?" he called.

She turned, and when she saw him, her face lit up with a smile.

She knew his name, she remembered him, god, how wonderful that she remembered him. She said she

always wished she knew him better. They got to talking and it came out that she was recently divorced, finishing her accounting degree so she could make something of her life. He told her he was there on a job and she said, hey, no sense in eating alone.

They ate at a smoky Italian place around the corner. The lump in his throat wouldn't go away, and all the words that came out of his mouth didn't seem to form into sentences, but she still laughed and smiled at the right times. You remember Mister Trindle? The Biology teacher who couldn't go through a class without breaking a test tube? You remember that prank our senior year, when we came to school and found the principal's car on the front lawn with all the tires missing? When they finished, she gave him her phone number. Hey, if you're ever in Atlanta . . .

And two weeks later, he *was* in Atlanta and they did dinner again. They made love that night, and everything went wrong because he'd never done it with anyone but hookers, but she didn't care. After that, he called her from the road, and whenever he got time off he spent it with her. A year later they married. A year after that, they had their first child—a little blond girl named Francine.

(None of this happened. I never saw her. I heard from a friend a couple years later who saw her at the reunion. She was with her husband, a doctor, and she had a little boy . . .)

Francine took her first tottering

steps at eleven months and said Daddy for the first time at thirteen months when he was reading her a bedtime story. She had said it before, but this time she looked right at him and he knew she meant it. Then Susan was pregnant again, and he quit his job and took one for half the money with the State of Georgia explaining to frustrated people why their mouse wouldn't work or just how exactly to attach a file to an email. It wasn't great work, but it didn't matter.

He was happy, happier than he had ever thought possible.

Once, at the urging of a roommate back in college, Dale had dropped some acid, and he remembered the head-spinning craziness that followed. For a moment he thought that's what had happened—the girl must have stuck him with a needle. But in seconds the wooziness passed, leaving him just as sober as he was before, and all that remained was the aching loneliness.

And all those memories . . .

The black girl, wringing her hands together, peered down at him. She wore a yellow tank top and blue shorts, a Band-Aid on one of her bony knees. Her face—there was something familiar about her. A tall, sandy-haired white man in a brown suede jacket appeared next to her. He looked down at Dale gravely, his eyes partially hidden behind hazel-tinted glasses. The beginnings of a patchy beard decorated the man's face. He was young, an air of

intelligence about him. He looked like somebody who spent his free nights reciting poetry in coffee shops. A gray duffel bag was slung over his shoulder.

"What—what—" Dale stammered.

"Sorry about that," the man said, reaching down and taking hold of Dale's hand. He had small, delicate fingers, cold. Dale froze, wondering if what happened before would happen again. But as the man pulled Dale to his feet, nothing happened. The blood rushed to his head, and he felt dizzy, but that was normal. That happened to him all the time. He was a man with a slow heart.

Susan . . .

"I'm sorry," Dale said, looking for his ice bucket, and, finding it, hurriedly picking it off the floor. "I should have looked—"

"You have nothing to be sorry about," the man said, giving the black girl a scolding look. "She gets a little hyper sometimes. Are you all right?"

The man looked at him with concern. Dale, who was trembling, stumbled to his door. "Fine," he said. "I just . . . need to sit down."

The man was opening his mouth to say something else when Dale shut the door. He leaned his back against the cool wood and let out a long trembling breath. He was still trying to make sense of what he had seen. A vision? A dream? It was so real, so vivid. Looking at his empty room, the perfectly made queen bed, the spotless carpet, the absolute lack of anything personal except for his single brown suitcase sit-

ting on the dresser, the top open, everything inside neatly packed, his loneliness deepened.

He had a baby girl. Her name was Francine. When they played music for her, she waved her arms in time to the beat.

No, he reminded himself, he didn't. It was a fantasy. Susan had married someone else. Dale had never married, never planned to marry, never thought there was anything in it for him.

The air conditioner kicked on, its droning hum filling the room, and Dale shivered. So cold. He had never felt this cold before. He moved to the air conditioner, and as he reached to turn the dial, the black girl's face popped into his mind again. There was definitely something familiar about her. He had seen her somewhere. Then it came to him—the paper. He retrieved the day's *Oregonian* from the bathroom, rifled through the news section until he found it: a small blurb inside, the girl's picture right there in black and white. It was definitely the same girl. "Foster Child Kidnapped From Los Angeles Home" was the headline. Dale read the piece.

A man had kidnapped the girl, ten-year old Eunice Harkins, during dinner. He was wearing a ski mask, but they knew he was white because they could see his neck. He had a gun.

Dale felt a cold feeling of dread settle over him. A gun.

Swallowing, he stepped over to the phone. Intending to call 9-1-1, he picked up the receiver.

That's when his door swung open.

Dale froze. The sandy-haired man stepped inside, and as he shut the door behind him, he pulled his hand out of his pocket. He had a revolver, and he pointed it at Dale. The man's face was pinched, his cheeks pale. He looked like he might throw up.

"Please don't," the man said.

Dale put down the receiver. His mind raced through what he might do. He could scream. Maybe the man, frightened of being caught, would bolt.

"Don't even think of making a sound," the man said, stepping closer. Dale saw that the man's gun hand was shaking. "I can't let you call the police."

"I wasn't going to," Dale lied. He wondered how the man knew.

"Just shut up," the man said. "Sit on the bed."

Dale obeyed, feeling the cushion sink beneath him. The man, shaking his head, stepped up to him.

"I thought we could sneak in," he said. "Damn. Damn." He went on pointing the gun at Dale for a few seconds, then closed his eyes and dropped his gun arm to his side. "I can't do this. I can't. I'm not a killer." He opened his eyes and glared at Dale. "Why did you have to be coming out right then, huh? Now we've got this mess. They can't know we're here—they can't."

"If you let me go, I promise I won't call them," Dale said.

The man leaned against the opposite wall. "You can't lie to me," he said quietly.

"I'm not lying."

The man laughed. "What I mean is, you *can't*. How do you think I knew you were going to call the police, huh? I heard your thoughts. I can hear them if I'm close. Walls don't matter."

"You what?"

The man was about to say something when the door opened again and the black girl stepped into the room.

"You're not going to hurt him none are you, Tom?" she said.

"Go back to the room, Eunice," the man said sharply.

"No! Not till you promise you won't hurt him none. You said we wouldn't hurt nobody."

"I'm not going to hurt him," Tom said, looking at Dale.

Dale was confused. Eunice seemed to be with the man willingly. He had gotten the impression from the article that the girl had been taken from her family against her will.

"No, she came of her own free will," Tom said. When Dale jumped, he added, "I told you—I can hear thoughts."

Dale was beginning to believe it. "What number am I thinking of?" he asked, imagining the number fifty-eight.

"Fifty-eight," Tom replied immediately. "It's how old your father was when he died, which is what you thought just now. You're also thinking that your father was alone when he died. He divorced your Mom when you were still in high school, and he never married again. He—"

"Stop!" Dale said, terrified. It was true, all of it. He felt naked before this man. "Who are you people? What—what did she do to me?"

Sighing, Tom stuck the gun back in his pocket. He motioned for Eunice to shut the door, and after she did, he pulled the chair out from under the little table and sat in it across from Dale. Eunice, her hands clasped behind her, stood next to Tom.

"Look," the man said, "I'm not supposed to tell you. It could get me in a lot of trouble, understand? But I'm going to. Maybe if you know, you'll understand why you shouldn't call the police. Eunice . . . she's one of the gifted. There's lots of us out there, and when we find one, we watch them. If they're in trouble, we make contact. We give them the choice of living with us."

"Where?" Dale asked.

"I'll just say we were on our way north to get there."

Dale looked at the girl. "And what happened to me, what I saw, she did it?"

"Yes," Tom said.

"What was it?"

"Your happy time," Eunice said quickly. She briefly locked eyes with Dale, then looked at the floor.

"Eunice has a unique gift," Tom said. "She hasn't learned to control it yet, and that's why you felt what you did. If she touches you, you get a glimpse of your best possible life."

"Your happy time," Eunice said again.

"That's right," Tom said. "Every choice you make over the course of your life has consequences. One thing leads to another. A thousand paths diverge, another thousand from those, and on and on. Eunice shows you the path of choices that would have led to your happiest life. It is her gift. Her foster parents didn't see it that way, though. They had no idea what was going on, and they couldn't stand touching her. The memories were too painful. She spent most of her time locked in a closet."

It sounded crazy, but because of what Dale had seen, what he had felt, he believed it. He also understood how the memories could drive the foster parents to act so cruel.

"I'm glad you believe us," Tom said.

Dale nodded. How could he ever go back to his solitary life after what he had seen? He had thought he was happy, but now he knew it was only the shadow of happiness. He had never known real happiness.

"Can she take it away?" Dale asked, looking at Eunice. "Can she put me back the way I was?"

"Yes," Tom said. "With my help, she can. But—"

"Do it," Dale said.

Tom shook his head. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. Please. It's all I ask. If you do that for me, I won't call the police. I promise. Just take it away. Take away what I've seen."

"It doesn't have to be a curse," Tom said.

Dale looked over at the open window, watched the rain flashing in and out of the light. "No?" he said, feeling his throat constrict. "Susan married someone else. You want me to be a home wrecker? I can't have that life. I missed it. I don't want to be reminded of it every day. At least, before, I was fine. I didn't know. That's what I want. I want to go back to not knowing."

"But you can have other happy times," Eunice said, and Dale saw that she was fighting back tears. When she went on, she was nearly shouting. "Everybody always has the chance of having other happy times. That's why it's not so bad, no matter what I see. If I touch you now, it might be different. If I touch you tomorrow, even more different. Another happy time. Always more chances. Always . . ."

The girl was talking in a rush, words spilling out one on top of the other, and Tom took her hand. She quieted and looked at the floor.

"I just don't want him to be sad," Eunice said.

Tom nodded and looked at Dale. "You've got to understand, what you saw was only the happiest you would have been *up to this point*. Who knows what the future could bring?"

"It hurts so much," Dale said.

"I know," Tom said. "Believe me, man, I know. I'm a loner, too." He smiled weakly. "You're not the only one who saw something he can't have. But like I said, it doesn't have to be a curse. For guys like us, it can be a reminder—a reminder to open your

eyes. To take a chance. To not let life pass you by.”

Dale wasn't sure he could live with that memory haunting him. “What if that's the best it can ever be?”

“What if it isn't?” Tom said.

It was after midnight when Dale left the hotel, and the only restaurant open was a Denny's four blocks over. When he stepped inside, his rain slicker dripping on the gray slate tiles, there was a sign that said, *Seat Yourself*. The place was empty except for a couple of kids in tie-dye talking heatedly and a burly trucker-type in the corner reading a magazine. Dale took a booth in the back.

The waitress who approached his table, a lanky brunette, smiled at him. She didn't look a thing like Susan, but he liked her smile. There was no ring on her finger.

“Need a menu?” she asked.

“Just some coffee,” he said, smiling back. It felt strange to smile. He rarely smiled.

“Sugar or cream?”

“Yes, p—” he began, and then shook his head. How easy it was to fall back into his old routine. “No,” he said. “No, I'll just have it black this time.”

“Gotcha,” she said, and started to turn away.

“Say,” Dale said, and when the waitress turned back, eyebrows raised, his heart started racing. A lump formed in his throat. “Do you, ah . . . do you get a break?”

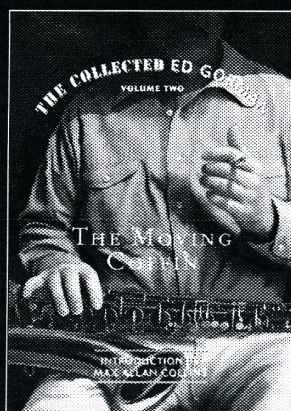
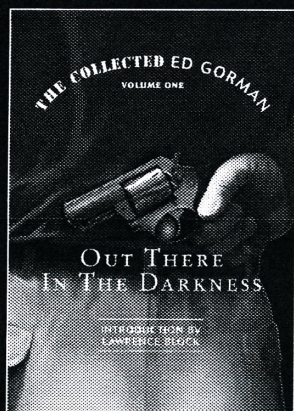
“Yes,” she said, eyes narrowing slightly, though the smile was still there. “Why?”

He swallowed. He didn't realize it would be so hard. “How would you like to have coffee with me?”

For a moment, she didn't answer, and Dale looked at her expectantly. He was a man without the comfort of his routine and he was scared. But excited too. Every choice had consequences. A thousand paths diverged, another thousand from those. Would she say yes? Would she say no? And then he realized that it didn't really matter.

All that mattered was that he had asked.





With this projected multi-volume set of the complete collected short stories of Ed Gorman, PS Publishing has provided a wonderful opportunity for discerning readers to sample the man whose work has been translated into eleven languages and won praise from sources as divergent as *The New York Times* and *Penthouse*. These first two volumes plus volume three will concentrate on Gorman's crime and mystery stories.

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K. W. Jeter was born in Los Angeles in 1950 and that's about all he likes to say about himself. But then his work does tend to speak volubly on its own behalf. Take this tale, which represents K.W.'s return to prose fiction after an absence of a few years while he pursued other projects. "It's part of a work in progress, a novel with the working title Evil Empire," K.W. tells us. "The two motorhead characters also appear in a story titled 'Riding Bitch', which will appear in Ellen Datlow's Inferno anthology, slated for publication next year. But that story isn't part of Evil Empire." So now you know.

Ninja Two-Fifty

K.W. Jeter

The worst of it had been over for some time. The noises had died away—the screaming and shouting, the clang of metal against metal, the racking back and forth of the steel-barred doors. Eventually, like the slow digging out from under a dream, there had been silence again, through all the long cement block corridors.

But different noises outside. They had been able to watch what was going on, by dragging a table from the wing's day-room area into one of the cells and climbing on top of it. They had taken turns peering out the narrow slot of a window. Out in the yard, long lines of men, stripped to the skin, hands clasped on top of their heads, had shuffled through the sparkling bits of broken glass. Other men, in uniforms with badges, rifles slung easily at their sides, had prodded them along.

"Just stay here," one of the others had told him. "We don't have to go anywhere. They'll be coming inside

soon and doing a sweep, and they'll find us. So it's cool."

He had climbed down from the table and had gone over to the transport wing's main door. Through the worst of the storm, the angry shouting and crazy laughter and the screaming that had gone on and on, all of them had huddled there in the darkness, listening and wondering when the door would pop open. They had been able to listen, holding their breath in darkness, and hear whole cellblocks of doors racking open, as the rioters had swarmed over one control module after another. If the guards had still been there, so much the worse for them; if they were lucky, they became hostages, and if not—if there were some long-simmering grudges to be worked out—then something else went down. More shouting and screaming, with silence at the end. In the transport wing, they had listened and had known just what was happening.

Scores had been settled all through

the long grey corridors. "They won't bother us," one of the other guys in the transport wing had whispered. "Why should they? They don't know us." Which had been crap, of course, and even the guy who had said it had known that it was. When the storm begins, it doesn't stop at anyone's doorstep. There had been six of them in the transport wing, five of them waiting for the van with the barred windows that would have taken them upstate to the minimum security facility in the morning, if all this other stuff hadn't happened instead. The sixth guy had been scheduled to go to the pre-release unit downtown; that was how close that one had been to putting all of this behind him, the steel doors clanging at his back for good. Just one day away; nobody found that particularly funny.

So when the door had popped, even though the long night's noises had died away, even though they could climb up to the day-room's narrow slot of a window and look out at the general population stripped and lined up in the yard, under the watch of the guns and police and state troopers, back in control at last—nobody had thought that was a good thing. They had all snapped alert, spines rigid, eyes widened, at the sound of metal sliding against metal, the lock mechanism retracting into the main door's steel frame. Then silence again, broken only by the drawn-out squeak of the door turning on its

hinges, pushed by nothing but its own weight . . .

"Don't go out there."

He had known it wouldn't be a good idea.

"The guards will come and find us." One of the others' hands had clutched at his sleeve. "We're okay here. Just be cool."

There could still be others out there, that hadn't been tear-gassed out of the cellblocks and out into the yard. Others, lifers and hardcore badasses, who had hunkered down where they were, damp t-shirts and jackets pulled over their heads so they could breathe, who would just love to have a little more fun before the police swept through, rounded them up and dragged them off to the super-max wing. Those guys were never going anywhere—this was their home, their world, for which they had been born, day one to eternity. So taking it out on some fool from the transport unit and getting another life sentence stacked on their two-inch-thick files—that wouldn't have meant squat to any of them. Just the end of the party, that would have been all.

"Don't—"

But he had pulled the heavy steel door the rest of the way open, and had stepped outside. He hadn't even known why he was doing it. But he had known he would find out.

He had found a lot of things as he had walked farther down the corridors, pushing open one unit door after

another. The storm had passed, leaving its wreckage behind. There had been whole cellblocks where everything had been set on fire, the thin mattresses now smoldering heaps, the steel bedframes shoved back against the walls. The cement floors had been ankle-deep in water from the overhead sprinklers, the wet seeping into the cuffs of the faded orange jumpsuit he had been issued when he'd arrived on the county lock-up's transport van. Broken glass had crackled beneath each slow step he had taken.

He had known—had been able to imagine—what he would find in the protective custody unit. Heavy payback. As bad as it had been way over in the transport unit, listening and waiting, it must have been a thousand times worse for the snitches and molesters and the femmy queers, all the ones who wouldn't have lasted two minutes if they had been thrown out in the general population. In the p.c. unit—Punk City, as the badasses called it—they would have known that the eye of the storm had been headed straight for them.

He had walked past one cell after another, touching the cold steel bars of each one. Like walking through some Museum of Natural History's diorama displays—he had seen things that might have been alive once, but were no more. Some of the punks and snitches had piled everything—mattress, bedframe, tattered books, radio, hotplate, cache of soup packets and candy bars, anything—up against

the cell doors, barricades that might have slowed down the ones outside for a few seconds. All that crap had been yanked out into the corridor—he had stepped over the sodden tangles of clothing and wet cardboard as he had passed by. In some of the cells there had been nothing but a single body, face down in the pink water, brighter red smeared across the naked buttocks and ravaged thighs, a blood mask over the concave pulp of what had been faces and mouths. The ones whose screams had been cut short were huddled against the cells' farthest walls, sharpened steel in their guts or the filed and pointed handle of a toothbrush sunk crosswise in their throats.

Those had been the good ones. The bad dioramas had been the ones where infinite loving patience had guided the hands of those who had come and pulled open the cell doors, tossed aside the rags and books and cereal boxes, and stepped inside. All the electricity had been shut off by then, but there had still been enough light seeping through the window bars, from the moon and the police searchlights outside the walls, for the work to be done. A litter of blackened wires and razor blades, burnt-out disposable lighters and knotted cords, floated on top of the shallow water. Things that were still human in shape—torso, legs, arms, bound at wrist and ankle—crouched unmoving in the corners of the cells. But the faces, what had been left of them—their screams had choked on the rags of their own flesh. Too much

fun; too much long dreaming of what would go down, when the chance finally came. And it had.

He had seen enough. More than enough. But he had still walked farther through the corridors, his shoes mired in the clotted tide.

He had stopped, listening. Somebody—something—had been whispering to him. He had been able to hear it, but he hadn't been able to make out what was being said. Close enough to his ear, almost a kiss, that he had turned about, to catch whoever had crept up beside him. But there had been no-one. He had stood in the middle of the corridor, looking down the way he had come, past the open cell doors. The indistinct voice, whoever it had been, had gone on whispering to him. He had closed his eyes and listened harder, trying to tell if it had been one voice or many, and what they had been trying to say to him, all secretive and sly.

The noises outside had faded even farther away. His gut had tightened, squeezing the sour taste of vomit to the back of his mouth. He hadn't wanted to go any farther down the corridor; he had wanted to go back to the transport wing, run back to where the other ones, the smarter ones, had hunkered down, waiting patiently for their rescuers. But the way back there led past the open steel-barred doors and the things inside the cells. The certainty had come over him, the sourness in his throat curdling on his tongue, that if he went back that way, those things wouldn't have been huddled in the

cells' corners, motionless and silent, but would have crept out to the edge of the corridor. Where they would have been able to snare his ankle as he passed by, pull themselves up with their ragged, blackened hands, and gaze into his face with their knowing eyes. They wouldn't have whispered then; they would have spoken aloud, of all they had learned at the square point of a razor blade turned in the teardrop flame of a Bic lighter.

Every thing in this world had wanted to tell him something. The grey cinder-block walls had trembled with urgency, drawing nearer with each breath he had taken. At his ear, the whisper had grown louder, its smile entangled with each syllable, but he had still been unable to tell what it said.

The words had touched the walls of little rooms inside his head. As he had turned and listened, to silence and the whispering, their doors had opened all by themselves, one after another. Just as the grey steel doors all around him had opened, one after another, the buttons pushed on a control panel far from here, unseen.

He had looked down and had seen that the shallow water had changed. Other things had floated in it, nudging against his damp shoes. Unspooled elastic bandages had trailed like white seaweed; little orange bottles and their plastic caps had bobbed and sunk as he had taken one slow step after another. The paler, emptier hands of doctors' latex gloves had touched him, then had drifted on by.

The medical unit, or the hospital or the infirmary—he hadn't know what they called it in this facility. It hadn't mattered; he had peered in through a narrow opening, its door ripped off its hinges, and had looked across the ransacked cupboards and drawers. It had probably been one of the first places targeted when the storm had broken. All those goodies inside—and they had been found quickly enough. One of the badasses, three hundred pounds of muscle and anger, had laid face-down in the muck, his tattooed bicep tied off with the rubber cord from a nurse's blood-pressure kit. Two hypodermics, wine-red with the badass's blood, sprouted from a pulseless vein like glass hummingbirds.

He had stepped over the badass; the whisper had grown louder, from somewhere farther into the dark. *You've come this far*, he had told himself. *Why stop now?*

Then—at last—he had found where the soft, smiling words had come from. The janitor's closet, way at the back, past the examination tables and the toppled-over x-ray machine. It had held a mop and a bucket, shelves stacked with paper towels and ammonia, folded wheelchairs . . . and one corpse.

The poor bastard must have dragged himself back into this last little hiding place. He had knelt down and touched the body, turning it onto its back. Just enough light had seeped in from the corridor outside, that he had been able to see that the fun had continued, even

back here in this narrow hole. White had glinted through the raw face, what was left of it. Stuff that might have been red, knotted string—but he had known it wasn't that—had thickened the shallow water around his knees.

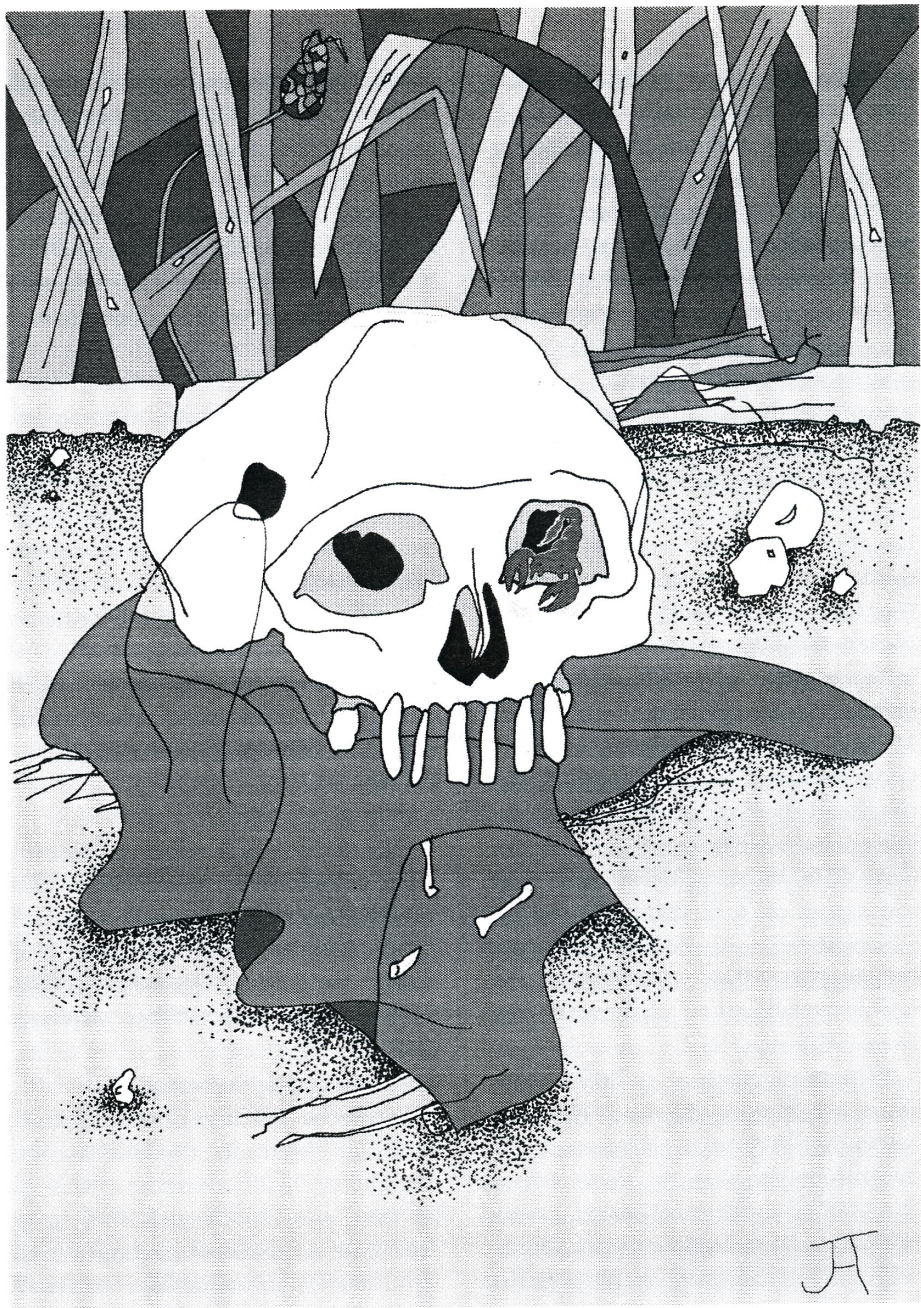
Nothing had looked back at him in the closet's dark. Nothing looked into him. There had been nothing inside the places where the eyes had been before. Hollow and dark, rimmed with clotted red. He had been able to see all the way to the back of the skull.

It had smiled at him, and had whispered, soft but close enough that he had been able to hear what it said. The closet walls had pressed against his shoulders and there had been no door, no way to go back the route he had taken to that narrow place. There had been no other place but this one.

It smiled, and whispered, and told him all that he had needed to hear, all that he had never wanted to hear, all that he had come so far to find out.

What's there to get into a sweat about, pal? You already know what's going to happen." The click of the yellowed teeth, the whisper of sand through the empty eye sockets. "As I am, you will be. You can take that to the bank."

He ignored the smiling words. That nobody else could hear, anyway. That, he knew, only sounded inside his own head. He leaned over the motorcycle's handlebars, chest down closer to the tank, racer-style, getting himself into



the little zone of calmer air behind the dark-tinted windscreen.

The bones were up ahead, waiting for him. Enough to just roll the throttle on. To twist the black, ridged rubber his leather glove surrounded—right hand—while the left gathered the clutch in one quick smooth grab, the toe of his boot goosing the bike's gear up from fourth to fifth. Then fifth to sixth, edging it to the top on a nice long straight stretch that he knew well enough to chance without screwing up. Still dark enough to see the headlight beam brushing across the construction gravel scattered across the asphalt, the skid traps that he flicked the bike around with an easy push on either grip. The hidden sun etched the mountains red, out beyond Henderson and the glittering foothills. Clouds covered just enough of the sky overhead, to catch the lights of the casinos at the south end of the Strip, MGM's green velvet smear, like some toxic yet eerily beautiful gas. He rolled the throttle on a little more, ducking his helmet low beneath the unfolding wheels of a jet coming in from California.

"Come on, come on . . ." The bones spoke inside his head again. They were just visible, in their gear of tattered rags and oil-stained dirt, up ahead where the 215 beltway crossed over the road. The cement embankment, throbbing with the early morning traffic, was the headboard of their bed. "You got plenty of time, sure, but that's no reason to take all day about it."

He would have said something back to them, but against the whine of the bike's engine, redlined at 14K, he wouldn't have been able to hear even his own voice inside his helmet. Another half a tab of what he'd left back home in the kitchen cupboard, and the bones would have been silent as well.

He hit the brakes, first checking the left mirror to make sure some overloaded dump truck wasn't hard upon him. He smoked the rear Pirelli, letting up on the stamp-sized pedal just enough to keep the bike in a straight line. Momentum lifted his tailbone off the seat, all his body weight moving up into his fists as he squeezed the clutch and front brake levers. Any less pressure and he would have shot by the spot where the bones half-lay, half-sat waiting for him.

"Good to see you."

Said the bones drily—that was his own joke, edited in his head. How else would bones speak?

"Last night you didn't come by." The empty sockets regarded him with fleshless equanimity. "That made us sad."

"Last night I was running late." He didn't bother putting down the kickstand, but just leaned the bike's weight onto his right leg. A scrap of frayed leather, once black and now grey, flicked near the toe of his boot. "Last night I didn't have time for your crap."

"The way you talk—" The bones smiled. They always smiled. Everything, he knew, was funny to them.

"Anybody who heard us, they'd think we weren't friends."

"We're not."

Nobody would hear them. It wasn't that kind of a conversation. A pickup truck loaded with Mexicans and lawnmowers roared past on the road, scattering pebbles like unnumbered dice across the dusty patch of ground. He toed the bike's gear-shift up into neutral, so he could take his hand off the clutch, undo the buckle of his helmet and lift it off his head. Even a couple of minutes without the wind of his forward motion and he was sweating.

The overpass screamed above, the voices of the traffic mingling with the bike's insistent idle, right beneath him. If there were quiet places left in the desert, this wasn't one of them.

Still the bones spoke soft and clear to him.

"But I'm *your* friend," said the bones. "You know that, don't you?"

The yellowed teeth might have clicked a fraction of an inch away from his ear, biting the whispered words into little pieces. He turned his head away and closed his eyes, the hard leather collar of his gear rubbing a dull knife-blade against the underside of his chin.

It didn't help. He could still see them, hear them. Once the bones, before he had come to know them as well as he did now, had coyly invited him to sit down beside them. The machinery of his racer boots had creaked as he had squatted down halfway between the bones and his

bike. He had reached back and laid his glove on the front wheel, not to balance himself but to keep his means of escape close by. Halfway between the bike and the bones, he had leaned forward, close to them, to the listen.

But the bones hadn't wanted to talk then; they'd wanted to show him something. Joking with him. He'd never be able to say that they didn't have a sense of humor, such as it was. Sand had gritted in the joints under the leather rags as the yellowed smile had risen up toward his own face. A white fingertip had touched one of the eye sockets, directing his attention. Inside the empty circle, a baby scorpion had nested. They weren't so easy to find anymore, even here in the desert; the new houses and condos and apartment buildings had chased them up into the foothills. A vision had come unbidden to him, of the bones on their hands and rag-clad knees, dry white bits scraping about in a widening circle, searching under moonlight and the edges of occasional high-beams zipping past on the road. Searching for some tiny carapaced insect, sickle tail erect, its stinger leaving a futile spot of venom on the white fingers that were already so far beyond pain, picking up the scorpion and depositing it in one of the eye sockets. Keeping it there with a little tap of a skinned fingertip, just the way the living might adjust a contact lens that kept slipping out of place. Just so the bones would have their little joke to show him, laughter held silent in what was left of their seg-

mented throat. If it had been designed to get a reaction from him, it didn't work; he had seen worse. The scorpion had regarded him for a moment with its own dark beads of eyes, then had apparently decided he was neither threat or prey, and had scuttled back into the skull's dark shelter.

"Your only friend," said the bones. Smiling. "That's why you come to see me, isn't it?"

He didn't answer. He let his gloved hand rest on the throttle grip. One little turn and he could've drowned out the sneering words with the engine's high-pitched shout. Two hundred and fifty cc's, goosed up, was more than enough to do that job. And more than enough, if he kicked the bike into gear, to take him away from this familiar spot, like a full-fairing bullet. Just a matter of power-to-weight ratio—that was what the motorheads had told him, when they'd sold him the bike. Strip off everything that didn't matter, make yourself as close to weightless as possible, and then nothing could hold you back from whatever waited for you at the end of the road. A little acceleration, zero to whatever, and he could put the road blurring under the slender wheels again, his chest suspended nearly horizontal above the tank, his heart straining toward its own rev limit . . .

But he didn't do that. He let the bones talk to him, and made no reply. Because he had no answer to what they said. Or he did, but it wasn't one he wanted to speak aloud.

"Go on," said the bones. "Get out of here." They knew they had him. Every night, without even trying, they won. "You're just wasting time. Ours and yours."

"No . . ." He looked away, off toward the east, where a red fragment of sun leaked through a crack in the hills. "It'll still happen. Just takes time, that's all." A semi rolled by, tires bellying, eclipsing the light for a moment. "To do it right."

"Oh, it'll happen. We know that." The bones always spoke in the plural, as if the rattling white pieces—the ribs like spider legs under the torn jacket, the pelvis with its edge shoveled into the sand—were a committee that had elected the skull their spokesman. "We made a deal, didn't we? You just need to keep up your end of it."

"You don't need to worry."

"Of course we don't." The bones shifted about in their rags, as though about to push themselves up from the ground. He didn't know if they could or not, if they had that kind of strength. "But maybe *you* should worry. Because we've been pretty light on you up until now. That could change."

He could barely hear what the bones said. Not because the traffic's noise had grown louder overhead, or he had rolled on the motorcycle's throttle. The bones' voice had faded to less than a whisper. That was the risperidone kicking in, he knew. He had taken his usual half a tab this morning, while he had been getting ready to hit the road, but he hadn't washed it down with the

glass of milk that he'd poured out. The glass would be waiting there on the kitchen counter when he got home this evening, its contents warmed and sour and fit only for pouring down the sink. So the medication, unbuffered, had come on a little stronger and sooner this morning. He could tell for sure by glancing at his hand: a tremor shook inside the thin black leather.

The bones leaned forward, as though the empty eye sockets were having a hard time discerning him. "All right," they said. "We'll talk some more. Next time."

If he looked from the corner of his eye, he knew he wouldn't see them at all. But just rags, empty, nothing yellowed and whitened inside, that spoke and smiled. If the black tatters moved, it was because of the wind that slid along the desert floor, or the trucks that barreled past on the road. That wasn't a good sign, if that was all he saw. It meant the medicine was still kicking in, some remnant metabolizing into his bloodstream. The tremor in his hand would grow worse, and quickly, bad enough that he would have a hard time keeping the bike on the road and in a straight line.

But he wasn't that far away from where he was headed. *Relax*. He could make it if he didn't screw around here any longer. The bones had nothing new to tell him, anyway. They never did; it wasn't in their nature.

"Fine." He straightened the bike and kicked the stand back up with the heel of his boot. "Next time."

There was always a next time. That was how things worked. How they had come to work. He left the bones in their nest of rags, against the beltway overpass. Where they would be waiting for him again. Always waiting.

Looping back into town, then a straight shot over to the motorheads' place—easy westside suburban streets, no tricky curves or intersections near the off-Strip casinos, with their moron, half-drunk cager clientele, who had all watched *The Fast and the Furious* way too many times, boiling out of the parking lots even this early in the morning. He'd already bungee'd onto the back of the bike the parcel that the UPS guy had dropped off yesterday.

"Hey, you mook." The motorheads were walking and riding museums of things that nobody but them said anymore. They were too young to have picked it up from anywhere but their grandfathers. The redheaded one wiped his hands on a greasy-black shop rag. "Where you been all this time?"

"What're you talking about?" He switched off the bike, just outside the house's open garage. "I was just here last weekend."

"You were? Huh." The motorheads had a loose hold on abstract concepts such as time. If it didn't have an engine attached to it, or could have a welding torch applied to it, it pretty much didn't exist for them. "Now I remem-

ber. We were fixing the mounting on the Muzzy. How's it holding up?"

"You tell me." He kept his helmet under his arm as he stepped back from the motorcycle, so the other motorhead could squat down on his heels and poke at the muffler. "You put it on."

Hard to tell what the one with the buzz cut was hunting for as he peered at the scorched-looking weld marks. Both of them went into deep meditative trances, silent as skinny, t-shirted Buddhas in jeans frayed out at the knees, as they clicked into the mechanical world. Then they would emerge later—could be minutes, could be hours—with no announcement of what had been revealed to them there.

That didn't matter to him. The motorheads' front yard was one of the places he most liked to be. He set his helmet down on the driveway's edge, close to the bare dirt—if there had ever been a grass lawn, like the surrounding houses in the tract, it had died out long ago, from lack of watering and too many midnight oil changes. He was sure the neighbors all cordially hated the motorheads, the rotten spot in their suburban apple. He had caught a couple of them glaring at him from behind the vertical blinds of their living room windows, as he had come downshifting and easing off the throttle, coasting to a stop at their enemies' trashed-out headquarters.

They think you're one of us, Buzzcut had explained. *Another goddamn motorhead*. They called themselves that; he had picked it up from them.

Of course that pisses 'em off. It's only natural.

He had wanted to know if he was one. A motorhead.

Shit. Buzz-cut had smiled sadly and shaken his head, as though the depths of human folly had been once more revealed to him. *If you were a real motorhead, you'd be doing all this work yourself, instead of paying us to do it for you.*

He didn't mind being at the perimeter of their world, in a tight slow orbit about it rather than right on its grease-stained surface. He looked around the yard as the motorhead squinted at the racing exhaust. In the red-tinged morning light, the carcasses of every possible variation on the theme of engines and wheels glistened beneath strata of grease and rust. A bent-framed dirtbike with decaying knobblies leaned against an antique golf cart with a canvas top tattered into pennants; one of the neighborhood's stray cats had littered in the cart's popped-open batteries compartment, and had kept the space for her solo nest after her weaned kittens had scattered and staked out their own lairs under the jacked-up beaters with the police auction numbers still spray-painted on their cracked windshields. No exact count was possible of the Japanese cruisers and sportbikes that had died in the yard and along the alley side of the motorhead house. They had all been stripped and salvaged, parts swapped, disassembled, reassembled and abandoned so often that what was left, especially at night,

looked like the ooze from which the dinosaurs' grandparents might have evolved, if their DNA had been pieced together from tiny metric nuts and bolts.

Something that he liked about the motorheads' yard was that it was one of the few places—maybe the only one—where the bones never came. He never saw them here, never had to listen to the sly words from behind the yellowed teeth, never had to look at some scuttling surprise in the empty sockets. That all happened somewhere else—or everywhere else. Maybe the bones never came here because it was a different sort of graveyard, different from the rest of the world's graves. When machines crapped out and went unburied, they didn't make such a fuss about it.

"Looks okay to me." Red had gone into the house and come back out, letting the screen door slam behind him. Digging the last fries from the bottom of a Burger King sack, he watched the other motorhead inspecting the muffler welds. "What's the problem?"

"Let me do it next time," said Buzz-cut, "and you won't have to get all defensive about it."

"Your ass." Red laid his hand right on the muffler, despite its residual heat, and gave it a tug. "I've seen you put on Muzzy's before. Tuna cans're put together better." Another tug. The muffler stayed where it was mounted on the side of the motorcycle. Satisfied, the motorhead stood up. "Should hold you, though." A smile. "Not like you're

going to be putting a lot of miles on it, anyway. Is it?"

That was the big reason he liked hanging out with the motorheads. They were in on the plan.

They had been from the beginning. He had spotted the house and its yard collection of decaying machinery long before he had figured out exactly what he wanted to do. So when he did know, they were the first people he wanted to talk to about it.

Yeah, we can probably fix you up. Buzz-cut had stood in the doorway of the garage, wiping his hands on the same rag, and had nodded. *I mean, if it's a sportbike you want.*

Red had cut in: *Because we don't do those dorky freak bikes like you see on those TV chopper shows. That shit's for orthodontists and movie stars.*

All that Jesse Jerk-off crap. Buzz-cut had sounded sullen for a moment, as though from some deep personal resentment. *And those father and son morons, that Doodle family or whatever they're called. What a buncha drama queens.*

Yeah—A smirk from the other. Who says there's no gay programming on TV?

So if that's what you're looking for, don't bother around here. Buzz-cut had glared at him. *Performance is what we're talking about, mac. Light and fast—it's all about the power to weight ratio.*

So no pigged-out Harley b.s., Red had elaborated. *Those lardbutts are for guys who need to keep telling themselves, This is my penis and this is my bike; they are not the same . . . not the same . . .*

That was how his first conversation with the motorheads had gone. Which indicated that he had fallen among true believers. A faith in speed and nothing but. That had suited him—and the plan—just fine.

“This came.” He unhooked the bungees and lifted the UPS box off the rack. He handed it to Buzz-cut. “Yesterday.”

“Cool. Pods.” He held up one of the K&N cartons from the box, so it caught more light from the garage. “You even managed to get the right size. Congrats.”

“Now those,” said the redheaded one, “are a definite good idea.” Buzz-cut nodded in agreement. “You’ll notice the difference, right off. We should’ve done these right at the start.”

“Yeah, instead of that stupid Muzzy.”

“Bite me.” The motorheads bickered with each other the way old married couples did, just to keep basic respiratory functions going. “We had the Muzzy in the parts bin already, remember? Dickhead.”

“Dickhead yourself, man. Airflow’s always more important than exhaust . . .”

Half the time, he had no idea what they were talking about. Except that it would make the bike go faster.

So you got a yen for speed? That was what Buzz-cut had asked him, that first time he had talked with them. *That’s why you want a bike?*

When he had told the motorheads—told them about the plan—they had

both nodded. *Yeah, that’s cool*, Buzz-cut had said. *That’s worth doing*. His intent hadn’t seemed like a strange idea to them. *Let me show you something . . .*

They had taken him to the back of the garage. Buzz-cut had pulled a tarp off a motorcycle painted an eye-aching green, with *Kawasaki* lettered slantwise on the sides.

He had asked what the hell it was.

It’s a Ninja. Red had straddled the seat, then had reached down to point out the word on the lower fairing. *Cut ya a deal on it—only has a couple hundred miles on the odometer. Guy bought it for his wife, she hated it, he sold it to us for cheap*. He had patted the tank with obvious affection. *Two hundred and fifty cc’s. Great bike*.

That had seemed a little small to him, engine-wise.

You want a pig, get a pig. But this’ll take care of what you’re talking about.

Power to weight, Buzz-cut had said. *That’s what it’s all about. This little sucker’ll get you to a hair under a hundred, no problem . . .*

He had brought cash with him, a wad of it stuffed into his jacket pocket. As though he had known he was going to find just what he had needed.

That had been then, the start of the plan. But even now, the motorheads bickered on.

“So why’re you getting on my case? Now he’ll have both airflow *and* exhaust. Same thing, really.”

“True.” Buzz-cut glanced over at him. “Then you’ll be way over a hundred on this puppy.”

“Good thing we got the handling sorted out for ya, right off.”

Actually, the tires had come before that. Those had really been the beginning, the first items the motorheads had started on. Working from a list scrawled on the back of the handwritten receipt for the bike. *Tires*, Buzz-cut had said, licking the point of a stub pencil. *Either the Pirellis or the Bridgestones . . .*

Pirellis. Red had leaned over the paper from the other side of the bench. *Go with the Sport Demons. Those are killer. Nice sticky rubber, traction like flypaper.*

Mileage is crap on those. Get a lot more with the BT45's.

So? He's not going to need 'em that long.

True. Buzz-cut had kept writing on the scrap of paper. *Plus it's not going to do him any good to take a spill. Those trucks have really got the roads ripped up, out there past Durango. He hits some frickin' pothole and winds up in the hospital, that'll just delay the whole process.*

So we're gonna trick out the suspension for him also?

Yeah, he's gotta be able to get around stuff. More scribbling. Better get some cartridge emulators on those front forks. What's a set of Race Tech Gold Valves going for these days?

He had asked how much all this was going to cost.

Don't worry. It'll be worth it. You'll see.

We can probably get a EX500 rear shock off eBay. Somebody's always selling one . . .

By the time the motorheads had finished writing stuff down, there had been about a dozen different items on the scrap of paper, things he hadn't had a clue about. Right from the beginning, the plan had started to get more elaborate than he had figured.

“What's going on?”

He looked over to the house's front porch. A girl came out of the house, barefoot and a ratty blanket thrown around her shoulders. There was always a rotating cast of them at the motorhead house, lookers with the resilient breasts that indicated professional employment, either in one of the off-Strip shows or the gentlemen's clubs along Industrial. Their connection with the motor-heads was hazy; he was pretty sure that neither buzz-cut nor redhead was sleeping with any of them. Maybe the girls crashed there because it was one of the few places in town where they weren't automatically the center of lustful attention. The motorheads' preoccupation with internal combustion engines was probably a welcome change of pace for them.

“Now what?” She laid a hand on the back of his neck. Together, they watched the motorheads futzing around. “What are they doing for ya this time?”

“Pods,” said Buzz-cut. “We're going to get the air intake all fixed up on this bad boy.”

“Whatever.” One of the showgirl's artificial fingernails drew a smooth, meaningless figure at the top of his spine. “How long's it gonna take?”

"Couple of hours. To do it right."

"Great." She leaned her head a little forward, so she could smile at him. "That means you got enough time to take me for breakfast."

He had figured before that one of the advantages of living in a city without time, where clocks had been banished from the casinos, was that it was always time for breakfast. So you could delude yourself that the whole day still lay ahead of you, filled with bright promise. For a little while, at least.

Though being stuck in a formicatable booth with a beautiful woman wasn't too bad. Though they all had appetites like Army privates after a 50-mile pack drill—he poked a fork at a Denver omelet and watched her demolish a couple of stacked plates.

"I used to be a vegan." She mopped up maple syrup with a strip of bacon. "When I was at UNLV. But then I noticed all that soy was making my boobs hurt. So I figured, screw it."

"Yeah, that would probably change my mind, too."

"Now something's gotta die for me at every meal." She licked the syrup from her iridescent nails. "So why do you hang out with those guys, anyway? I see you over there all the time."

"The motorheads?"

"That's what you call 'em?" She still had her stage lashes on, long and stiff enough that a bird could have perched on them. The tips of the sweeping dark curves quivered with her laugh. "That's cool. Motorheads. Yeah, them."

He shrugged. "They're helping me with a plan."

"Plan? What kind of a plan?" She speared a small sausage and bit it in half on the end of her fork. "You going to race? So that's why you've got 'em hopping up your bike. That's where I met them, out at the speedway. I was an umbrella girl. Just a one-off gig." She swallowed the rest of the sausage and started in on the pancakes again. "You know, with the winners up on the podium, you got the trophies, all that good stuff. But you always got champagne all over you. Seems a waste." The showgirl regarded him with a critical if not unkind eye. "You seem a little old for racing, though. Is there like a senior division?"

His smile was a lot smaller than hers, as he shook his head. "I'm not going racing."

"Then why the hot bike? Just a style thing? That's cool. I like the boots."

"These?" He was wearing his Ox-tars. He stuck them out from under the booth's table, so they could both admire the silver-and-black Power Ranger-ness of them. "They're just to protect my ankles. I had a low-speed get-off a few months ago, over on Industrial and Twain—you know, just behind Caesar's. Didn't break anything, but I twisted my left ankle pretty bad. Kept me off the bike for about six weeks." He reached down and tapped the intricate, machine-like sides of the boots. "See, these've got a torsion control system built into them; they can only twist so far before

they lock up. That's why real racers wear them. See, you want to make sure that—"

"Whatever." It was obviously more than she'd wanted to know. "I still don't get why you have those guys working on your bike all the time. Hopping it up and stuff. I mean, it's a nice bike and all, but still."

He shrugged. "Like I said, I've got a plan going."

"So if it's not racing, what is it?"

He had talked with the motorheads about it before—and of course the bones—but the showgirl would be the first civilian, as it were. So he told her.

"That's what you're going to do?" It didn't seem to faze her. "With the bike?"

He nodded. "Pretty much the idea."

"Cool."

Another advantage, he supposed, of living in this town. You could talk to a beautiful girl about something like this—not joking around, but serious—and she wouldn't freak on you. "Are you going to eat that?" She pointed to his untouched waffle, then forked it over to her own plate before he could reply. She'd probably had enough guys already talk about the same thing, and do it, that it no longer seemed like a big deal to her.

"Why use a motorcycle?" She drizzled syrup across the waffle. "Seems messy."

"I've got my reasons." He wasn't going to tell her about those; he figured that part was kind of a downer. "And it's not like it's a totally originally

idea. Other people have done it that way."

"Like who? You mean, on purpose? I had a boyfriend who crashed his Road King, out near Mesquite, and he was in the ICU for six days before they pulled the plug on him." She could've been talking about flicking off a light switch. "But he'd been doing crystal and Jack's before he hit the road, so it's not as if he'd planned on winding it up that way."

"No, this is more an intentional thing." He pulled his research up from his personal memory bank. "Back in the eighties, there was a fad in Germany—short-lived, so to speak—of these young guys doing the same thing. With motorcycles. Racer bikes. They're big in Europe, you know."

"Um." The waffle was half gone. "What would they do, go over a cliff or something? Or maybe off the top of Montblanc—that'd be cool."

"No, they'd slam into something. You hit a brick wall or the side of a bridge, straight on at a hundred miles per hour plus, and you don't have to worry about spending time in intensive care."

"Ohhh . . . I get it. That's why you getting the bike all hopped up." The showgirl nodded approvingly. "You want to make sure you're going fast enough when it happens."

"It's kinda like insurance." He took another bite of what was left of the omelet.

"If you're going to do something like this, you want to make sure you do

it right. All the way. You don't want to just wind up all crippled and brain-damaged."

"Yeah . . ." She mulled it over. "That would definitely suck."

"So that's why I've got the guys fixing up the bike." He took the folded sheet of paper, with its black thumbprints all over it, from his shirt pocket and showed it to her. "They figured out a whole list of things I should have on it, to get it going fast as possible." He tucked the paper away. "I mean, if going 105 miles per hour rather than 95 is the difference between getting the job done and just messing myself up real bad—I'd be stupid not to do it."

She nodded. "I guess it's the kind of thing you want to get right the first time."

"Exactly."

"Well, you came to the right place," said the showgirl. "Those are pretty helpful guys. For that sort of thing."

Also true. He wouldn't have been able to pull the plan together without the motorheads. They had even taught him to ride the bike, since he had never even been on one, before coming up with the plan.

Which hadn't gone well at the beginning. Both Buzz-cut and Red had wound up gazing down at him, as he had lain on his back in the middle of the street, breath knocked out of him. He had just toppled over on the Ninja, which had then sputtered dead, its sideways weight trapping his foot.

This isn't going to work. Buzz-cut had pointed to his trembling hand. That was why he had dropped the bike; the tremor had been so pronounced that he hadn't been able to manage the clutch lever. *Are you on something?*

The technical term, he had known for a long time, was iatrogenic choreo-athetosis. He had done his research. A lot of anti-psychotics besides risperidone caused the spasms and trembling hands. He had been through most of them, starting out with amitriptyline hydrochloride and then perphenazine; this stuff was better than most. The quetiapine had been the worst; he hadn't even been able to use a knife and fork when he had been on that.

He hadn't told the motorheads about the medications. Just that he would be back the next night, to give it another shot. When he had gotten home, he had sat for a long time looking at the little orange plastic container on the table in front of him. He had known what the choice was. The shakes, with no voices whispering at his ear, no crazy things crawling right at the corner of his vision, where he could just barely see them. Or his hands nice and steady, tremors gone, and all those bad things coming back to him, out from behind the little doors in his head that the medications were so good at keeping locked up tight.

Then he had decided, and had rolled one of the tabs out of the bottle, and with a paring knife from the kitchen drawer, he had carefully cut it in half . . .

When he had gone back to the motorheads' place, the tremor had been light enough that nobody else would have noticed it. And he had been able to handle the bike, or at least start getting the hang of it. *Just takes practice.* Buzz-cut had watched him doing slow figure-eights in the middle of the empty street. *That's all.*

"You're right," he told the showgirl. "They're pretty helpful."

There had been more stuff they had shown him.

You gotta look where you want to go—

That was something else Buzz-cut had told him, back when they had been teaching him to ride the bike. Out in an empty supermarket parking lot, about three in the morning, so there had been more room for him to get up to speed. He had just come close to ramming the Ninja straight into a cinder-block retaining wall, and had barely managed to keep from dropping it again.

It's what they call target fix. Buzz-cut had tapped a finger on the side of the helmet. *Happens up here. Whatever you're looking at, that's where you're gonna go. You're looking at the ground, you're gonna go down. Some cager pulls in front of you, out on the street, you lock on 'em, you're gonna hit 'em.* He mimed holding onto a motorcycle's handlebars. *You're on the highway, some eighteen-wheeler comes up beside you, you look over at those great big wheels spinning at your elbow—they'll suck you right in.*

So where was he supposed to look, he had asked the motorhead.

Where the truck isn't, Buzz-cut had answered patiently. Just fix on the target you want, your escape route, and you'll be fine. Trust me on this one, pal. It works.

"You got a place picked out?"

He looked up at the showgirl. "For what?"

"You moron." She said it with a smile. "For where you're going to do it."

He shook his head. Actually, he had one—but it was something else he wanted to keep private. It was right out at the overpass, where he met and conversed with the bones. For now, he wanted to keep it to himself.

"I'll miss you," said the showgirl. She had taken his arm as they walked across the parking lot, toward her tricked-out Escalade. "I mean it."

He knew she did, in some small but genuine way. The way someone would when they sat down in front of the television and hit the Guide button on the Tivo remote, and couldn't find a favorite program, and went scanning through all the cable channels and still couldn't find it. Not the end of the world—hers, at least—but still a real loss.

"At least you got a reason for all that motorcycle crap. Not like all those other guys who are always hanging around over there. That's important."

He knew what was going to happen next. It had happened before. He stopped and looked around at her. She smiled as he looked into her eyes.

"It's important to have a plan," she said. But it wasn't her who said it. The

baby scorpion scuttled inside the hollow eye socket, back to the darkness it held.

He nodded and looked away, as the showgirl pressed the button on the Escalade's remote, to unlock the doors. There had been no surprise to what he had seen. Just a trick of the bones, to let him know who he was really talking to. Always the bones; always with him.

He climbed in on the passenger's side, and didn't say anything all the way back to the motorheads' place.

When they got there, she disappeared inside—there was an audition she had to get to, somebody big from Los Angeles was in town, something like that. She left him out in the garage.

"There you go," said Buzz-cut. "Pods are in, plus we re-jetted the carbs." He stood beside the Ninja, twisting the throttle.

The small-displacement engine screamed louder, the sound ripping through the suburban streets, until it was rolled off again. "You'll notice the difference. Mostly at the top end." Buzz-cut wiped a spot of grease off the lower left fairing with a shop rag. "But that's what you want, right?"

"What do I owe you guys?"

"*Nada*. You overpaid when we put the new shock in—so this one's on the house." Buzz-cut started picking up his tools from the black-stained towel he'd spread on the garage's bare cement floor. "Besides, we should probably throw one in for you, by this point."

"Since we're kinda done." The red-headed one stood by the open garage door, working on another beer. "That was the last thing left on the checklist."

He nodded. "I guess so." He fetched his helmet from the workbench where he'd left it and climbed on the bike.

"It's been fun." Buzz-cut reached out and shook his hand. "Hope everything works out the way you want."

He didn't say anything. Just slipped on the helmet, rolled the bike down the driveway to the street, started it up and headed away.

A little movie played out in his head. While he was riding. He didn't need to close his eyes to watch it.

Out on Hacienda, to the west, where the Luxor pyramid was a small black triangle in the distance, its beam of light just a faded, starward chalk scratch. Somebody had dumped an old sofa at the side of the road, in the dirt-and-gravel strip between the edge of the asphalt and the big storm channel, the concrete ditch for the monsoon run-offs from the housing tracts farther on. People did that in this town, just abandoned their old crap right out in the open, instead of dragging it from one cheap apartment to another. Usually the old furniture just decayed away, under the hammer of the sun, until it was the same color and indistinguishable from the dust and rocks around it. But this time, somebody had set fire to the derelict furniture—kids, probably,

or maybe some homeless guy, who had fallen asleep on it while smoking through the pack of cigarettes that an hour or so of panhandling had earned him. At any rate, there really wasn't an old sofa at the side of the road any longer, but a charred rectangular patch on the ground, with blackened springs and scraps of the ashen framework poking up. The negative image of a sofa, something that had been there but wasn't now.

The movie ran inside his head as he rode by the spot. The movie, the memory, was from back when he was first married, long before all the bad stuff had happened, the tide of troubles—mostly of his own devising—that had washed away his marriage and so much else besides. It was a movie of him and his wife, the wife he had then, making love in the bedroom of the first apartment they'd had together. His apartment, that she had moved into with all her woman's things, the clothes that took up most of the closet and all the little bottles and jars that suddenly appeared around the bathroom sink, and which he didn't mind at all, and later missed with a terrible, heart-empty longing when they disappeared. But that wasn't in this movie; it was just the two of them in bed, in twined motion and release, in every direction that heart and lust suggested, the urgent whispers of lips and tongues brushing against each other's ears . . .

The camera of memory pulled back, rose above, to encompass the whole

room and the ones beyond. The apartment building had had thin walls that were more like microphones into their neighbors' lives, rather than barriers keeping them out. He and his new wife had been able to hear people sneezing in the bedroom on the other side of the wall closest to their pillows. And as they had made love, every time, they had known that the others could hear them as well, the slide of skin against skin, the quickened breaths, the cries and commands. Which was confirmed in that movie's night by the sounds coming back to them through the bedroom wall, of the couple on the other side, awakened and inspired in the middle of the cozy night, starting up on their own bout. He and his wife had clung to each other, his arms tight around her naked shoulders, the sweat that made her breasts glow in the moonlight mingling with his. They had held each other and listened, sharing a smile, blessed and able to bless. Their neighbors' love-making had grown louder and faster, becoming in turn the soundtrack to that night's movie, as he and his wife had gone silently prideful that their own had tapped through others' dreaming. And another little movie had played inside his head, of the couple in the apartment on the other side of their neighbors', awakened by the sounds coming through their thin bedroom wall. And then they would start in as well—*Why not?*—and they would waken the couple in the apartment beyond them, and on and on,

upstairs and downstairs, throughout the entire apartment building, all awakened and inspired in the moonlit night. All making love at the same time, the sounds of breath and friction coming back around to him and his wife, resting up from their own exertions, letting their own breath slow and still again, getting ready for another go at it—they had both been so much younger then. And as he had held his young wife, the movie had continued to play in his head, of the whole apartment building, all the windows dark and everyone inside engaged in the same activity, the beds creaking and swaying like small boats docked at the edge of a swelling ocean. And the sounds, though whispers, loud enough together that the next apartment building over awoke, bedroom by bedroom, and one by one, couple by couple, started in. And then the next building down the street, and the next, until the whole block, everyone who had been asleep and had been awoken by their neighbors and their own dreams, was making love. And then the next block after that, and the next, one by one, bedroom by bedroom, couple by couple . . .

The invisible camera's angle rose upward, through the bedroom's ceiling, into the sky, God-like as the clouds rolling beneath the moon. And he could look down at himself, his arms wrapped tight around his wife, and also—higher, beyond the clouds and moon—at what they had started, not a wave-driven ocean now but a fire

sweeping through the streets and the dark apartment buildings, ignited by the spark from the one bedroom in the center of it all. Block by block, the couples oblivious to the flames, until the entire city was ablaze. And then, as the camera rose farther, high enough to glimpse the curvature of the earth, the cities on either side caught fire as well, first at their edges and then through all their awakened and still dreaming streets. Then even higher, the round earth hiding the stars, all its cities and fields burning now, and bright points of fiery islands in the blackness of the seas. The entire world burning in desire and motion, casting flickering shadows across the other planets in their lonely orbits . . .

That was as far as that movie went; it ended there, faded to black before the stars themselves ignited hotter. Leaving him, older and wife-less, riding around in the night, going nowhere, past the charred remains of the burnt-out sofa on the side of the road. The sight of which had triggered all the unreeling memory of that night so long ago, when the whole world had caught fire from a single spark.

The wind and the occasional desert rain would smear the burned sofa's ashes into the gravel, the sun bleaching it to gray, until nothing would be left but a shadow on the ground, a ghost in his remembering. To spool back onto its reel from the projector in that private theatre, seal in its round flat film can and stack with the other reels, the archive of all he'd lost.

“So how’s the machine?” The bones seemed genuinely interested. But then, the plan was as much theirs as his. “How’s it running now?”

“Fine.” It had seemed a shame to throttle off the bike, after he’d gotten it up to speed on the long straightaway leading to the overpass, just so he could work back down through the gears and ease to a stop. “Real fast.”

“Good. That’s good.” The eye sockets held the same dark, minus the pinpoint stars, as the night sky. “Glad to hear that. So what’s left on the to-do list?”

He didn’t answer. At least not yet. There wasn’t much he could tell the bones. He sat on the motorcycle, both legs swung over to the left side, the scuffed black heels of his Oxtars dug into the gravel. The night was hot enough that he just had on a t-shirt beneath the Gericke jacket, unzipped to the level of his heart. Slowly, the sensory impressions of getting the motorcycle close to a hundred—the optimistic Ninja speedometer had read one-ten—settled in his head, like birds catching up with his passage through them. He stripped off his sweaty gloves and stuffed them into his helmet. There wasn’t much he could tell the bones, because there wasn’t anything left on the list.

The pods and the carb re-jetting had done everything the motorheads had promised him. With the air intake opened up, the engine had no problem revving to the max, screaming like a torched cat. Sixth gear and the tach

red-lined, there was just enough road, from where the streetlights ended to here, for him to approach top speed. Which would mean—if he hadn’t pushed down on the postage stamp-sized pedal with his right boot and squeezed his right hand into a fist with the lever inside—then he would have been into the triple digits when the side of the overpass popped into view. Just as he and the motorheads, with their scrap of paper and pencil stub had calculated months ago, in their garage. He still had the paper, with their motor oil thumbprints all over it, in his jacket pocket. That and the list of performance mod’s for the bike were the hard copies for the plan. Everything else had been kept inside his head and the rounded, empty white dome shared by clickety smiles and nesting scorpions.

“Come on,” said the bones. “You know the answer as well as I do. Don’t you?”

“I guess so.” He leaned forward, holding the helmet by its rim. “I’d have to check.”

“Don’t try to b.s. me, pal. We don’t have that kind of a relationship.” There was no smile in the bones’ voice. “Screw your list. You were telling me a week ago there was only one thing left on it. The pods, right? And some jack-ass thing to do with the carburetor. Right?”

“Pretty much.”

An eighteen-wheeler rumbled overhead. The bones waited until the noise from the overpass faded, so their insistent whisper could be heard.

"And you were just over at the motorheads' place, weren't you? Which is why you're out here so late. That's the usual drill, isn't it? You get some work done over there by those wrench guys, then you come try it out. Vroom vroom. In your boy racer get-up." In their rags, the bones sneered. "And of course, you stop to chat with us. Nice of you to drop in."

Get off my back, he thought. "You know," he said, "I don't have to."

"Wrong, wrong, wrong. You *do* have to. There are no options in your life. You got rid of those a long time ago. The only options you've got are the ones we let you have." The beads of the scorpion's hard gaze glinted at one socket's rim, the baby sting hovering a threat at the darkness' center. "Your little plan—that was amusing. We liked it."

"I'm glad."

"Don't be," said the bones. "You know what we liked about it? You go through all the motions, all the little choices you think you have—gotta have these exact tires on your motorcycle, gotta have the suspension tricked out just this way, gotta do this to the engine, your moronic pods or whatever they are, get the air intake just perfect—you do all that, and guess what? Every step brings you closer to right now. This moment. When you're ours." The rags parted slightly, revealing the white cage of ribs and the knotted spine, the bones stirring from their throne in the dust, as though they were about to rise up

and fold him in their dry embrace. "When it's all done—and it will be—you're just as dead at the side of the road, in your vainglorious wreckage, the flames and blood, the whole nine yards of it, as you would have been in that dark little hole you're so scared of. So you might as well quit wasting your time and ours. Fun as it's been. Stop screwing around, pal, and get it over with. Because you really don't have a choice. You never did." The bones leaned forward, the empty gaze peering up into his eyes. "You know that now, don't you?"

"Whatever you say." It didn't matter to him. He had heard as much before, a lot of times, over and over. From the beginning, when he had first figured out the plan and what he was going to do. From when he had cut back on the med's, so his hands wouldn't tremble so badly that he couldn't ride the bike. That was when the little doors had creaked open again, and he had heard the whispers again.

All he would have had to do was take the med's, the full dose of the risperidone. Or any of the others they gave him. They were all good. They all worked just fine. The little doors would have closed again, and he wouldn't have heard the whispers. And the bones, in their rags and darkness, wouldn't have crept out and waited for him, either.

But that was the deal. If he wanted the bike—and the plan; that was what it was all about—then the bones came with it. He knew that.

"I guess it's the way things are," he said aloud. "In this world."

"There isn't any other. So let's go." The bones spoke almost kindly to him. Almost. "Tonight's the night. You don't have to wait 'til morning to unwrap your presents." A white hand, its fleshless segments rattling like dice, pointed from the end of one tattered sleeve. "Just throw your leg over your machine and head back down the road. You know the spot; it's all part of the plan, right? Then turn the machine back around, this way, and punch it."

"You don't punch a bike's throttle," he said. "You roll it on."

"Have it your way." The bones spoke with the vast patience of kings. "You know what to do. We've talked this all over before, haven't we? And even when we don't tell you—when you don't come out here to see us—then you tell yourself. Because we're always with you."

That much was true. He looked away from the bones, down the way he had come. In the distance the last of the streetlights shone, pale blue, the frayed edge of the city. The night had grown silent, the rumble of traffic on the overpass thinned to nothing. All that was left out here now was the desert and the road. All he had to do—just as the bones told him—was to head down to the starting point he had already picked out, turn around and take the straight shot back to where the bones would be waiting for him. Except this time he wouldn't roll off the throttle a couple seconds after

he hit sixth gear, smoke the brakes and snick the left pedal back down to first, coming to a stop a yard away from the bundle of rags and the yellowed smile. Instead—another movie played inside his head, a shorter one, that was all speed and night until the last hard second—he would roll the throttle to the limit, the acceleration mounting beneath and around him, his unhelmeted gaze fixed on the target in the center of the windscreen. A little to the left of the rags and bones, to the right of the asphalt's course. The blank concrete wall of the overpass, racing toward him and he to it. Crouching down low, his heart against the motorcycle's tank, pulling himself forward with the grips in his fists, to bring himself that last inch closer, the last second cut even shorter, nothing but the wall filling the headlight beam . . .

There wasn't any movie after that. The end of them—looking across the night road, he was grateful he couldn't see anything more. He had already figured that the small wreckage would be spotted and radioed in by some trucker crossing on the overpass above, or maybe by one of the crews heading for an early-morning start at one of the construction sites close by. Or if there were flames—if the bike's split-open gas tank sparked just right—maybe a police helicopter cruising over the Strip would bank over to investigate the smoke and glow.

Or maybe—and sometimes he wondered if this might not be the most

likely, after all—nobody would notice what had happened. Why should they? Abandoned things and forgotten—this was the landscape for them. People had been hauling their old junk out to the desert and leaving it there for generations, to rot and weather away, or burn to ashes. A crumpled-up motorcycle, complete with the corpse of its rider—who'd notice? Or if they did, why would they bother about it? He could see himself, or what would be left of him, lying where the bones lay now, in the same tattered rags. The coyotes and feral dogs would strip the bruised and bloodied flesh from his arms. The sun would dry his face to leather, then strip it away in the dust and wind. Leaving the cracked bone behind, his own smile yellowing to greet whoever might stop, the next one . . .

"That's exactly how it'll be." The bones had read his thoughts. Or their own. "You've come this far. Ready to wrap it up. All that screwing around with the machine—that's been fun, and it got you here. To this point. That's great, but now you're just wasting time. Let's get it over with."

"Sure." He nodded as he loosened the buckle on the helmet's strap. "That's what I want, all right. But I've got something else to take care of first."

"What are you talking about?" The bones' whisper rasped harsher. "You don't have anything else to do. That's what this is all about. That's why you're here."

"Maybe." He swiveled the helmet

around in his hands, right side up. "No, you're right. I know you are." Everything in his life had brought him to this place, a bare roadside in the middle of the night. "So I'll be back in just a bit."

"And just where do you think you're going?" The bones' fleshless hands knuckled the dust; the emptied shape inside the rags leaned forward, the hollow gaze intense on him, as though strength other than its voice had been found, enough to grab him by the legs and drag him back against the overpass wall. "You can't go anywhere. You're ours now. You've always been."

He had already pulled on the helmet, but the bones' words came shrill at his ear, regardless. "I'll see you." He started up the motorcycle.

"Oh, you will." The tiny scorpion crouched at the rim of a smaller darkness. "You will," promised the bones.

Nothing but powder left in his jacket pockets now. With the throttle rolled on, the highway curving away before him, he'd taken his left hand off the grip and dug inside his jacket, close to his waist. His gloved fingers had found the little orange container, rattling with the tabs inside it. He had grasped it and took it out, threw it away. In one of his mirrors he had seen a little sparking explosion behind him, the plastic cylinder splintering on impact, the white lid spinning across the asphalt, the tablets dancing for a

moment before they were ground under the wheels of a semi heading east.

He should have been able to spot the approaching lights of Barstow by now. A straight shot, coming from the east on the I-15. Even without checking his watch or the motorcycle's odometer, he knew how long he had been riding. That the highway and the bare landscape on either side still lay under the night's dark—not a good sign.

And that he was all alone on the road—not good, either. There should have been plenty of other traffic, in either direction. But for hours, there had been just his bike's headlight, carving out a little section of asphalt and concrete ahead of him.

What it meant, he knew, was that whatever traces of the med's had been left in his system when he had started, they were all processed out by now. The last leak he had taken, the bike pulled over to the side of the road, had left whatever remained of the risperidone in a wet mark on the sand. As he had zipped the riding trousers back up, he had looked up at the stars, trembling in their slow paths. Any moment, they would arrange themselves into words unreadable until now. He had seen them before, a long time back, spelled out in the debris swirling on a flooded concrete floor. The message would have to wait, though. He had gotten back on the bike and had started it up, knowing that there would be things he would need to deal with.

Taillights showed up ahead. He straightened his back, bringing his gaze higher over the windscreen, and studied them. At first he figured they were a truck, some eighteen-wheeler; the lights were way up in the air. Then the moon edged out from a patch of clouds, and he could see that the taillights were on the butt of some RV lumbering along, an old-model Winnebago or Coachmen. Big panel view windows were centered under the taillights and down along the RV's high sides. Through the Ninja's top-gear whine, the sound of the way bigger vehicle's engine could be heard straining against the weight it carried.

Over in the left lane, the RV wasn't anywhere near the speed limit. Coming up closer, he could see that there was all kinds of junk strapped to it, a couple of dirt bikes on the bumper rack, camping gear and plastic storage bins roped down on top. He wouldn't have to drop down into fifth gear to slide past the RV's right rear corner.

Soon as the Ninja sped alongside, the RV moved over into his lane, like a horizontal avalanche.

Straight highway—if he had been banked into a curve, he would have been screwed. He grabbed the front brakes and trod hard on the rear brake pedal. That yanked him back quickly enough that the RV's bumper missed his front wheel by a couple of feet. He rode the brakes a little more, letting the bike drop another few yards behind the RV.

He didn't need to glimpse the driver's face, looking back at him from the RV's mirrors. This was an old movie, that he had seen before. In the bike's headlight beam, he could see the lumbering box shape more clearly now: the dirt bikes strapped to its rear were rusted and decaying, the rubber shredding off the broken-spoked wheels, the frames bent and useless, ready to snap apart with a finger's touch. Scraps of tattered canvas fluttered from the camping gear above. The plastic bins had split open, the rotted contents leaking in dark stains smeared by the wind along the side panels of the RV.

A child's hand or something like it, but whiter and thinner, twitched aside the ragged curtain in the rear window. He could just see an angle of a child's face—but it wasn't—peering out at him with hollowed eyes. And smiling all yellowed before letting the curtain drop back into place.

The RV slowed down as it drifted back and forth across both lanes, blocking him. A different movie, he knew. He leaned his weight onto the bike's handlebars, watching. The game wouldn't be to run him off the road, or crush him and the bike under the weight of all that rusting steel. But instead, to just creep slower and slower, with him and the crawling bike stuck behind, trapped, until time and this world—their world—came to a stop. The road wouldn't end, the night wouldn't end; nothing would.

Maybe I should've stuck to the plan. That would have been a better deal. With the plan, at least, there would have been an end to all things.

But now it was too late. *You might as well,* he told himself. *Do it.*

He drifted the bike over to the far left edge of the highway, as though he were going to try to sail across the boulder-lined ravine at the asphalt's limit. The RV moved the wall of its tail end in front of him, as he knew it would. He goosed the throttle, coming up within a couple feet of the bumper. Then he grabbed the clutch lever and kicked the bike down into fifth, then off the clutch, rolling the throttle all the way on while pushing down hard on the right grip. The Ninja bolted itself into a forty-five degree turn, nearly clipping the RV's bumper as it shot over to the right lane. He kept the throttle rolled to its limit, shoving down on the left grip, bringing the bike straight and upright before it could fly off into the sharp-edged rocks at the other edge of the highway.

Alongside the RV now, he flattened his chest against the Ninja's tank, the scream of the red-lined engine accelerating his heart. Looking straight through the windscreen rather than over it, he could see the open highway up ahead in the broad swath of the RV's headlights. *Target fix,* he told himself. *That's all you gotta do.*

Towering above, the side of the RV walked past him, one slow measure after another. He could see it in his

peripheral vision, blocking half the world. Its engine, twenty times bigger than the Ninja's, coughed and growled, then roared as the unseen driver slammed down the accelerator pedal. Black oily smoke bellowed out from the rust-perforated exhaust beneath the RV, its sharp acrid fumes whipped up in the bike's wheels and hitting him in the face, gagging and blinding him. He let go of the left grip and backhanded the helmet visor, knocking it upward so the wind could scrub his sight clear again. The RV lurched beside him, matching his speed—

Or close to. The bike still had an edge, crawling alongside the RV now. The speedometer's needle trembled past ninety. He was halfway past the RV's bulk, inching toward the open highway beyond their headlights. He curled into a full tuck behind the wind-screen, bootsoles jammed against the pegs. The asphalt below him blurred, the moonlit desert to his right, and the silhouetted mountains in the distance, speeding by.

The RV crossed the center line, rumbling closer to his left elbow. Another couple of feet over and it would bat him flying off the highway, the bike catching on the rock-strewn gravel and tumbling end over end. A push against the right grip edged him a few inches away from the RV and closer to the roadside. The RV teasingly moved over with him, the divider line underneath its smoking under-

belly, funneling the lane they shared now into a space barely wider than the bike's handlebars.

They want me to look. He realized that it wouldn't be enough to just shove him off the road at speed; that would be over too fast. If he gave in to the pull of the roaring shape looming inches at his left elbow and glanced up and over at the RV's passenger-side window—he would see past it to what was behind the wheel, see their hollowed eyes and yellowed smile. He would even hear the whispered greeting inside his helmet. That would be all it would take. Enough to draw the bike a degree off its straight-ahead course, enough to suck him right up against the RV's battered, rust-stained wall, one of the bike's handlebars snagging against the corrugated steel and fiberglass. That would be enough contact to whip the bike out of his control and hammer it down on its left side, the rear wheel breaking grip with the asphalt and sailing above him, as he scraped and tumbled himself into blood and rags of leather on the road surface.

Look where you want to go. He could hear the motorhead telling him that. *That's where you'll go.* And his own voice, silent through clenched teeth: *Don't look where you don't want to go.*

The needle centered between the 100 mark's zeroes. He was close enough to the front of the RV that the notion came to him, that he could let go of the left handgrip, reach ahead

past the windscreen, grab the rusted chrome rim of the RV's headlight and pull himself and the bike up ahead of it. Ahead, and out into the road beyond, the lane opening up full width, where he could just stay tucked behind the windscreen, kick the bike up into sixth, roll the throttle to its limit and leave the RV behind, his silhouette racing to the far reach of its headlight beams . . .

The asphalt and concrete narrowed another foot, as the RV edged over again. Toying with him; if whatever was behind the wheel had wanted to end it right now, a sharp tug on the steering wheel would have knocked the bike tumbling into the rocks and gravel.

But he knew the bones didn't want that. Because then it would be over. They wanted him to ease off the throttle, maybe a little step on the brake pedal. Just enough to let the bike drift back, the side of the RV rolling past him. Until he was all the way behind it, breathing its heavy exhaust, the gravel kicked up by its tires splattering against the windscreen and his helmet's faceshield. The high taillights would glint down at him, pulling far enough way from him to shine like smoky red stars in the darkness. Which would only end when he gave up and turned around, to go back and keep his end of the bargain he had made a long time ago.

The RV cut away another slice of the road. The strip of asphalt he had

left in front of him was barely wider than the bike's handlebars.

Roll it off now, he told himself. *Or don't.*

He didn't get to decide. Already too late for that—the road suddenly turned underneath him. It wasn't supposed to; in another world, the real one—or at least the one that people who weren't so screwed up lived in—the road was a straight shot, a strip of asphalt and concrete laid out across the desert like a knifeblade. But here in this world, the bones' world, he found himself looking into nothing but the darkness beyond the windscreen, as the Ninja's headlight beam swept off the right-hand curve that snapped in front of him. He shoved down on the right grip and the bike heeled over, cutting into the road's sudden arc.

At his left side, inches away, the RV groaned onto its rust-choked suspension. In his mirror, he glimpsed the RV's heavy back end breaking free and fishtailing, the wide bald tires scrubbing S-shaped rubber tracks across the road behind. The RV piled into the curve, its engine still gunned to the max, its high bulk tilting over the bike.

The curve tightened. He couldn't roll off the throttle now, even if he had wanted to. The bike's velocity was all that kept it pinned to the road. He tucked in flat enough on the tank to grind the helmet's chinbar against the gauges. The night sky tilted on its hidden axis, the silhouetted mountains climbing up alongside the stars.

Tighter, higher, vertical—speed erased gravity. Stars wheeled in the headlight's beam. On the bike's tach, the needle had redlined seconds, ages ago. The engine's scream vibrated up through the grips, along his arms and down his hunched, contracted spine. The asphalt wasn't a road anymore, but a curving wall that the bike's centrifugal force hammered him into. Farther above him, the RV's bulk blotted out the stars, the max'd-out engine roaring loud enough to banish all perception other than his heart pounding against the tank.

Look where. The words caught in his clenched teeth. *You want to go.* His tongue bled a salt trickle down his throat. *That's where you'll go.*

Flames mingled with the smoke pouring from beneath the RV. The orange glare flicked across the Ninja's gauges and windscreen. From the corner of his eye, he could just see the side panel of the RV break loose from the frame, the wind peeling it back like a broken wing.

The RV's side window twisted and shattered, sending bright fragments of razor-sharp hail across his faceshield and the backs of his gloved hands, tight on the bike's grips. The little storm passed over him before he could even duck his head beneath it.

Don't look. The flames and smoke tugged at the edge of his sight. *You look, you'll crash.* He knew that; he knew that all he had to do was turn his head a couple of degrees and his eyes

would lock, beyond will or choice, on to the churning vision that sped parallel to his course. It had always been that way. *That's how you got to this place.* Lock, and be sucked under the shoulder-high wheels roaring right next to him. *Don't look where you don't want to go—*

The road curved tighter. He shoved the right grip all the way down, twisting his body to keep his shoulder from catching the asphalt. Sparks shot from the skidplate on one of the Oxtars as it ground against the road.

Above him, the RV's side panel ripped all the way free and scythed spiraling inches above his head. Everything inside exposed now—he kept his eyes locked ahead into the dark, but still could see the flames and smoke at the edge of his vision. And worse. He didn't need to turn his head, lock on to what was inside the flames. A red flood, hissing and steaming, mired with little orange plastic cylinders, spilling out bright capsules and tab's, syringes and empty latex gloves like ghosts' hands, fingering torn-up release forms and divorce papers, scraps of some other life, the debris of fraud and vengeance, everything he had been so stupid about, that had caught him at last, wrapping their thin wet snares about his neck, choking him . . .

And something darker, whipping the shallow tide across the RV's floorboard. A storm that never passed. A storm of screaming and shouting, men's cries of furious rage and glee,

trapped inside a small dark place that you crawled bleeding into. The hole where you died. Under the screaming that was your own, under the screaming and shouting, the flames and smoke of the storm that never passed. That roared and tumbled, beside and above you, so close that you sucked it in with each breath. All the way, every second, every mile that the road and the bike screamed beneath you, the storm that never passed, that could never end—

Look where you want to go. He opened his eyes wide to the dark, seeing nothing ahead. *Look where you want to go.*

Somewhere else. Somewhere that wasn't this place. Even if he couldn't see it. *Where you want—*

An explosion beside him, strong enough to knock the bike wavering before he could balance out its angled trajectory again. The RV's right front tire shredded apart, whips of worn-through black rubber pinwheeling around the bolted hub. One frayed tip struck him across the faceshield, knocking his head back for a moment. He squeezed the grips tighter as the disintegrating tire lashed the spine of his jacket and the bike's rear fender.

The RV lifted away from the asphalt, its velocity and the road's curve launching it into the night sky. Now he couldn't help but look, as the flame-filled mass rotated on its axis, centrifugal all that kept its smoking wreckage from spilling down upon him. If his hand hadn't been locked on the left

grip, he would have instinctively, futilely tried to shield himself from the weight and fire crashing down on him in frozen time.

Now he closed his eyes. He huddled against the bike's tank, elbow and knees welded to the small machine, curling himself into a sightless ball, sparks grinding out unseen against the road as he tilted the bike farther into the tightening curve.

Something hit the road behind him, hard enough to send a shockwave buckling through the road beneath, the front wheel lifting clear for a fraction of a second. The wheel hit hard enough to bottom out the forks. He wrestled the grips, eyes sprung open again, to keep the bike from spinning out from under him. A gust of heat, hard and scorching as a steel furnace, rolled across him from behind, wrapping him in churning smoke.

The road straightened, like a rope snapped taut. He heeled the Ninja back up to vertical and squeezed on the brakes, as the bike shot out into air scrubbed clean by the desert wind.

The speedometer's needle crawled down to sixty, then fifty and forty. He kept it there, downshifting and rolling on the throttle. In the mirrors, past his own shoulders, he could see the flames growing smaller, the wreckage diminishing with each mile. Until it was gone and there was just darkness around him, picked apart by stars, split by the headlight beam racing ahead.

Buddy, you look like hell.”

He glanced up from the coffee cup. “What?”

“You’re in bad shape.” The guy behind the counter, in a t-shirt and grease-stained apron, pointed. “Right there, you’re bleeding.”

His fingertips came away red when he touched the side of his face. He had set his helmet down on the counter; he could see now where the transparent shield had been cracked. When the shredded tire had hit him—he hadn’t even felt it.

“Lucky you didn’t lose an eye.” The guy topped up the cup, then replaced the pot on the burner behind him. “Stuff like that happens all the time.”

“Yeah—” He poked the sore edge, running from his temple down to his cheekbone. It seemed to be closing up. “I guess.”

“Where you heading?”

“L.A.” He had left the Ninja parked out by the gas pumps. The station and little convenience store had been the first lights he had come across. If he let his hand rest around the cup for too long, the dark surface trembled. Not from the med’s—those were long gone—but from the strain tightening his shoulder muscles.

“You got a long way to go.” The guy rested his bare elbows on the counter, bringing his grey-stubbled face close. “A real long way.”

He looked up, knowing already what he would see.

“You might,” said the guy, “not make it.”

“I don’t know about that. I got a pretty good start.”

The yellowed smile widened. “You can get into all sorts of bad stuff out on the road.” A thin hand reached over and idly spun a rack of frayed, dog-eared postcards beside the cash register. Vistas of Death Valley and Zion rolled past. “Shit happens.”

“Tell me about it.” He looked right back, without blinking, into the dark spaces gazing at him. With a fingertip, he drew a red mark across the mottled counter. “It already has.”

“Oh?” Still smiling, the way they always did. “Was there . . . an accident?” A nod toward the police scanner sitting on a shelf. “Funny we didn’t hear about it.”

“Then I guess there wasn’t.”

A tiny shape, with black bead eyes and a hooked stinger curving over its back, peered at him as it clung to a ridge of white bone.

“You better go back home, buddy.” The bones reached for the pot and topped up the cup again. “Back where you belong. You’re not going to make it.”

He didn’t touch the coffee. Laying a couple of dollars on the counter, he slid off the padded stool. “We’ll see about that.”

“Look at you.” The yellowed smile clicked in place. “You’re already shot.”

“Yeah, well . . .” He zipped up the jacket. The front of it was covered with

road dust, and he saw now that the corner of one pocket was ripped loose. "We do what we can."

"That was nothing." The thin hand pointed out the window, past the neon Budweiser sign and down the unlit road. "There's worse things out there."

"Better hurry, then." He picked up his helmet from the counter, pulled his gloves from inside and pulled them on. "I don't want to keep them waiting."

The bells over the door caught and jingled as he walked out to the bike.

Noon when he pulled into Los Angeles; the heat was nothing compared to where he had come from. He could keep his riding jacket on, without being pounded into the sidewalk by the sun. And even though the Pacific was still another half-hour away, he could smell it from here, ocean salt on his tongue.

He left the Ninja at the curb. It didn't feel right to park it in the house's driveway; it wasn't his house anymore, and hadn't been for a long time. When he slid the ignition key into his pocket, his hand grazed the shape, an egg with edges, of the bike's left front turn signal, that he had retrieved from the end of a six-foot-long skid mark and tucked inside his jacket. He looked the bike over more closely, surveying the damage: besides losing the signal, the fairing had a nasty crack on that side, running all the way up to the

headlight. Bending down, he ran his hand over the rashed front fender. Nothing too bad; nothing that the motorheads couldn't either fix or replace.

There was a scrape on his jacket's left elbow as well, and his arm ached from the fall. That would fade; he could tell that nothing was broken, just by clenching his fist. A knee of his trousers was torn, exposing the curved armor underneath, plus one Oxtar was a little beat up. Overall, he had gotten off light. He had gone down right at the end of the freeway off-ramp, taking the curve too hot, from over-confidence and relief at having made it all this way. But even as he had been rolling onto his back, the bike skidding in a half-spiral away from him, he had almost been laughing inside his helmet, knowing that this was no big thing. No traffic on the road that he had spilled onto—he had picked himself up, walked over to the bike and righted it, rolled it out of the way. Waiting for the gas to ebb out of the flooded carburetors, he had spotted the turn signal lying in the road, wire dangling from the stalk, and had strolled back to fetch it before it got flattened. Then the Ninja had started right up. *Nice and easy*, he had told himself, shifting into second. He had gotten this far; the rest would be a piece of cake.

Carrying the helmet by its strap, he walked to the front door, past the split-leaf philodendrons that he had planted so long ago. They had grown large and

sprawling enough to brush against anybody who came up the narrow concrete path. Maybe there would be another time he could come out here and trim them back.

Nobody answered the doorbell. He squinted in through the pebbled glass panels and saw nothing. Funny if he had come all this way and she wasn't home.

The trash cans were still behind the side gate, right where they had kept them when he had lived there. He squeezed past and stepped onto the wide concrete slab of the back patio. On a little plastic table—that much was new—a nearly full cup of coffee trailed a wisp of steam into the still air.

He poked his head in the open screen door. "Julie?"

She didn't seem surprised that he was standing there. Maybe a little puzzled. She stepped back from the hallway closet and looked across the kitchen at him. "Hey —" And smiled. "Wow. Been a while."

"Yeah. I know." They had never been completely out of touch. There had always been some phone calls, especially when he had first got out. But those had tapered off the last couple of years. "Can I come in?"

"Are you kidding?" She set her stationery box back on the closet's top shelf. "You don't have to ask that."

"Well . . ." He set his helmet down on the counter by the sink. "It's not my house."

"Yeah, right. Technically."

Sitting at the table, he watched as she poured coffee for him, adding the half-and-half from the fridge without asking him. "You remembered."

"What?"

"How I take it."

"Hold that thought." She went out to the patio to fetch her own cup.

For a moment, waiting, he let himself slip back. To that other time, long before. He could close his eyes and not see the things that had changed, not even how she had changed. She had cut her hair shorter, but it didn't matter. When she sat down across from him, real time started up again.

"You came all the way out here on that motorcycle of yours?" The helmet on the counter had finally caught her eye. "God, you must be tired."

More numb than tired; the circulation was just beginning to return to his butt. He shrugged. "It's how I get around."

"So I heard."

He looked away from her, across the kitchen cupboards. Even with them closed, he knew just how the dishes were stacked inside, how the cups hung from the little hooks he had put in. Long ago.

He was glad she had kept the place. That had been the main reason for the divorce. Doing what the lawyers had advised. So she wouldn't get hurt too bad when all the hearings and pleas had finally been over, and he had gone in.

"Did you take the day off or some-

thing?" He saw that she had her jeans on.

She shook her head. "I have to go over to Accounting in a couple of hours. And cover for Kathy. Remember Kathy?"

"Sure." He had no idea who she was talking about.

"She just had another baby."

"Oh."

"Otherwise . . . maybe we could've gone and had lunch or something. Since you're here. You should've called me."

"It's okay," he said. "I have to get back, anyway. And it's a long ride."

Silence, and a bit of the time before, as they sat and sipped their coffee. He held the cup in both hands, though he didn't need to.

"So what's the reason? For the visit?"

He didn't know. He had come all this way, and he still didn't know. He hadn't known when he had left. If the bones had asked him, he wouldn't have been able to say why.

"Just to see me?" Her voice was soft, a little sad. Maybe she had felt that other time circle around her as well. She set her cup down and smiled. "You could've done that before now."

"No . . . that's not it."

"Then what is?" She waited for him to answer.

Then he knew. "Look at me," he said.

"You dope. I am looking at you. Right now."

"No—" He shook his head. "I mean really look at me. Real close."

"All right." She made a game out of setting her cup down, folding her arms on the table and leaning forward. "What do you want me to see?"

He leaned forward as well, close enough to have kissed her. But he didn't. And there was nothing that he wanted her to see in his face; he knew he looked older to her. Probably a lot older. Not that it mattered—he really just wanted to look at her, into her eyes.

He didn't see anything. Or just the dark, at their centers; that was all. That was enough.

"Well . . . you need to start getting ready. To go to work." He leaned back in the chair, turned the coffee cup around with one finger. "I should take off."

"You're heading back? Already?" She looked even more puzzled. "You just got here."

"Yeah, I know. But . . ." He shrugged. "I should get going."

"That's really stupid. Look, why don't you just hang out here until I get back? Then—I don't know—maybe we could go have dinner or something." She reached her hand out and laid it on top of his. "Like the old days."

He smiled. "Old days are gone, baby." *Just as well*, he thought. "Maybe next time."

She watched as he got up and took his helmet from the counter. "Next time," she said quietly.

Outside, a patrol car had pulled up alongside the bike. The cop behind the wheel looked over at him as he came down the house's driveway. "That's an equipment violation, pal." The cop nodded toward the bike. "You need working turn signals in this state."

He took the broken-off signal from his jacket and held it up. "Just need to get it wired up, officer."

"What happened?"

"No big deal." He swung his leg over the bike. "Took a spill a little while ago. Coming off the freeway. That's all."

The cop's gaze took in the bike's cracked fairing. "How long you been riding?"

"Long enough."

The cop leaned farther out the driver's-side window, looking straight at him. "Think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

He knew who he was talking to, even before the cop pulled off the LAPD-issue sunglasses. He had expected as much, sooner or later. The tiny dry claws, the segmented tail and venomous hook arching over the scaly back, the tinier pinpoint eyes watching from the emptiness inside a rim of white. "Smart enough," he said.

"No, you're not." The yellowed smile showed. "We had a plan. That was the deal."

"I changed it." With his bootheel, he kicked up the bike's side-stand. "That was one of the things I learned

when I was inside. You have to be able to change your plans as you go along. So I did."

"Nice," snarled the bones. "Real nice. When did this happen?"

"I don't know." He had thought about it before. "Maybe when they put the new tires on." A slow nod. "Yeah, that was probably it. Made a lot more difference, performance-wise, than the engine mod's." He tilted his hands in front of himself. "I could really feel the bike then. First curve I took, it was like *tight* on the road, you know? And then, with the new rear shock added on, I started to—"

"Oh, shut up. Just shut up." It wasn't a smile anymore, but yellowed teeth gritted with loathing. The bones put the sunglasses back over the cop's eyes, hiding the baby scorpion. "You didn't change anything. Your ass is still mine. You want to know why?"

"Tell me."

"You want too much," said the bones. "You got your stupid motorcycle; you should've stopped with that. Something real. *One* thing. That should've been enough. That's way more than most people ever get. But you want more than that, don't you?"

"I guess so." He shrugged. "Maybe I do."

"You want what by nature you cannot have." The cop drew himself back inside the patrol car. "What you lost a long time ago. That's what will break you."

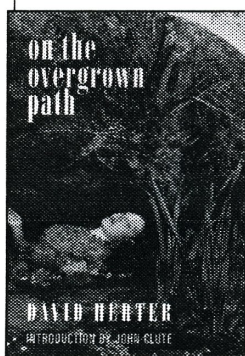
"Okay. We'll see."

“Oh, I promise you. Don’t worry about that.”

“Well . . .” He couldn’t think of anything else. “Like I said. We’ll see.”

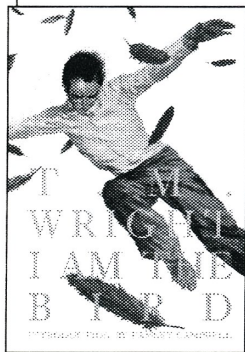
“And then . . .” The bones gazed at him in fury for a moment longer, before the patrol car pulled away from him.

He watched it disappear down the street. A glance back at the house, its door with panels of pebbled glass, the overgrown greenery, the plates stacked in the kitchen cupboards. Then he started up the bike, swung it around and headed east, back the way the roads had brought him. ☒



En route from Bratislava to Prague in the deceptive spring of the 1920s, Leoš Janáček, famed opera composer, ethnographer, and amateur psychologist, is stranded in an obscure and enigmatic mountain village, lured from his train by a song of blood. Here, Janáček must become a detective far from home. Attempting to solve a bizarre murder in which he himself is suspect—and whose perpetrator might be a wild animal, a jealous lover, or Nature unhinged—he brings to bear his singular skills of observation and poetic insight, and most importantly, his belief in the truthfulness of the “little melodies” heard in everyday life: the cry of a bird, the plash of snow from the eaves, the horrendous lie voiced with a smile. What he uncovers is a many-stranded aria of ravenous Nature and mischievous Time, threatening to consume his world.

David Herter, author of the acclaimed, stylish novels *Ceres Storm* and *Evening’s Empire*, has written a rich and dark fantasy growing from the very roots of Janáček’s idiosyncratic soul.



Max Gorshen lives in a dark, hot apartment in a medium-size, though unnamed, north American city with someone he refers to only as “the other [man],” who, Max tell us, lives in the apartment’s “long, dim hallway.” Max and “the other [man]” never seem to encounter each other in the apartment (although Max sees “the other [man]” mingling with and bedeviling “the interlopers and trespassers” on the city streets below the window Max sits at while he writes the novella), though they talk to one another through letters and brief notes: neither man is certain the other man really exists. Both of these characters live with “Langley,” a very talkative and apparently highly intelligent African gray parrot. Something else exists in the big apartment, too, and all three first-person narrators (Max, the other [man], and Langley) lead us to believe that it is something vile.

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EDWARD MILLER.

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And here we hand back to Terry Bisson, who tops and tails this issue. Terry observes of his ongoing cycle of "Billy" vignettes, "I wanted to write stories that would transcend the artificial (and often, alas, self-imposed) limitations of genre; stories in which the wonders of science and magic are invoked not just to entertain but to investigate and illuminate the human condition; stories of real people confronting the often dazzling and always troubling uncertainties of modern life. But the magazines are already full of them, so I wrote these Billy stories instead."

Billy and the Talking Plant

Terry Bisson

One day Billy got sent to the office. The principal said, "Run home, Billy. Your grandfather has fallen down dead."

Billy ran home. It wasn't very far.

His grandfather was on the couch in the living room, but he wasn't dead yet.

"He wants to watch TV while he passes away," said Billy's mother.

"They should call it the dying room," said Billy's grandfather. He was always making jokes.

He had a big Harley. He wore a black leather jacket that said *Bikers for Christ* on the back, and he gave Billy a Savings Bond every year for his birthday.

Billy didn't like Savings Bonds but he liked his grandfather. "Don't die yet," he said.

"Not till this show is over," said Billy's grandfather. Jerry Springer was on. It was like school. They wouldn't stay in their seats.

"My time is almost up, Billy," said Billy's grandfather. It was during a commercial. "I am leaving you my colors."

He handed Billy his jacket. "It's too big for me," said Billy.

"You'll get bigger," said his grandfather. "And I have something else for you."

"What?" asked Billy. He hoped it wasn't a Savings Bond. Maybe it would be the big Harley!

"My plant," said Billy's grandfather. Billy was disappointed. The plant was in a little pot on the coffee table.

"I want you to take care of it for me while I am dead," said Billy's grandfather.

That seemed like a long time. "Won't that be forever?" asked Billy.

"Not if Jesus has anything to say about it," said Billy's grandfather. "We will all be raised from the dead very soon, and I will want my plant. You can keep the jacket."

As soon as the show was over, he died.

Billy's mother closed his eyes with the remote because she didn't like to touch dead people. Billy just watched.

She used it like a little stick.

Billy put the plant in his room. It had big green leaves.

After a few days the leaves started to droop. Billy was afraid it would die.

He stole a dollar from his mother's purse and went to the magazine store. Billy liked magazines.

"Do you have any magazines about plants?" he asked the store owner. He showed him the dollar.

"You're in luck," said the store owner. He took the dollar and gave Billy a copy of *Plants Magazine*.

Billy took the magazine home. He looked at all the pictures. None of them looked like his grandfather's plant. The leaves were the right color but the wrong shape.

He took the magazine to the store and tried to get his money back.

"All sales final," said the store owner. "Try the little ads in the back. It may be that you might find just what you are looking for there."

When Billy got home, the plant looked even worse. Its leaves were turning yellow.

Billy looked in the back of the magazine. There was a little ad that said *Teach your plant to talk. One dollar.*

There was a box number.

Billy stole a dollar from his mother's purse and sent it to the box number. He stole a stamp too.

The next day a little stick came in the mail. It looked like a popsicle stick.

The instructions said, *Stick in dirt next to plant. Wait one hour.*

Billy stuck the stick in the dirt and went out to play.

After an hour he went back inside. He closed the door of his room and the plant said, "Water."

"What?" said Billy.

"Water," said the plant.

Billy gave it some water. He waited for the plant to say something else.

It didn't, so he went back out to play.

The next morning the plant looked better. Its leaves were drooping less but they were still yellow. It said, "Water."

Billy gave it some water and went to school. When he got home, the plant said "Water" again.

"Is that all you can say?" asked Billy.

"I'm a plant," said the plant. "I don't have to say anything at all."

Billy thought about that. He gave it some water and went out to play.

The next morning, the plant was green again. And it didn't droop at all. Billy was glad.

"Take me to school," the plant said.

Billy took the plant to school.

"You can't bring a plant to school," said the teacher.

"It's a talking plant," said Billy.

"Prove it," said the teacher.

"Say water," said Billy. He was talking to the plant.

The plant said, "Water."

"That's clever," said the teacher.

"You can bring it to the Science Fair tomorrow."

That night at supper, Billy said, "There's a Science Fair at school tomorrow."

"Eat your turkey," said Billy's mother. They had turkey every night.

"I'm going to win the Science Prize," said Billy. "I have a talking plant."

"When your father gets out of jail, he will be proud," said Billy's mother.

That night Billy made a sign for the Science Fair. It said *Talking Plant*.

He used a Magic Marker from his mother's purse. It was filled with them.

Billy took the plant to the Science Fair at school. He wore his grandfather's jacket.

"You can't wear that at school," said the teacher.

"It was my grandfather's," said Billy. "He had a big Harley."

"You can't wear that at school," said the teacher. "It says *Christ* on it."

Billy hung it up in the closet. It was too big anyway.

The Science Fair was in the gym.

Billy put the plant on the long table. He put the *Talking Plant* sign in front of it.

The teachers were the judges. They walked by and read the sign. "Let's hear it talk," they said.

"Say water," said Billy.

The plant said, "Water."

The teachers all gathered around. They were all dressed alike. "Make it say water again," they said.

"Water," said the plant. Billy didn't have to ask.

The teachers picked up the pot and looked for a speaker. They couldn't find one.

They frowned and shook their

heads. "Ventriloquism is not science," they said.

"What's ventriloquism?" asked Billy.

"It means you are making it talk."

"I am not," said Billy. "It's the stick."

"Prove it," said the teachers.

Billy pulled the stick out. The plant didn't say anything.

"See?" said Billy.

"A plant that doesn't talk doesn't prove anything," said the teachers. "You are disqualified."

"What's disqualified?" asked Billy.

"It means you don't get the Science Prize."

Billy thought about that. It made him mad. He stuck the stick back in the dirt.

"Fuck you," said the plant.

"What?" said the teachers.

"Fuck a bunch of teachers," said the plant.

The teachers sent Billy home. They made him take his plant and his jacket with him.

"What happened?" asked Billy's mother.

"Nothing," said Billy. "We got out early."

He took the plant to his room and put it on his desk.

"You can't say fuck in school," he said. "Even a plant should know that."

"I can say anything I want to," said the plant. "I'm a plant."

Billy thought about that.

"Water," said the plant.

Billy gave it some water and went out to play. He was glad to be home from school.

That night Billy's father was reading the paper. He was home from jail.

"Get a load of this," he said. "Plant Says Fuck at School."

"Don't say fuck at the table," said Billy's mother.

"You shut up," said Billy's father.

"That was my plant," said Billy. "I'm taking care of it for grandfather."

"That's my boy," said Billy's father. "I'm taking care of his big Harley. I am proud of you. Be sure and give it plenty of water."

"I already did," said Billy.

Postscripts

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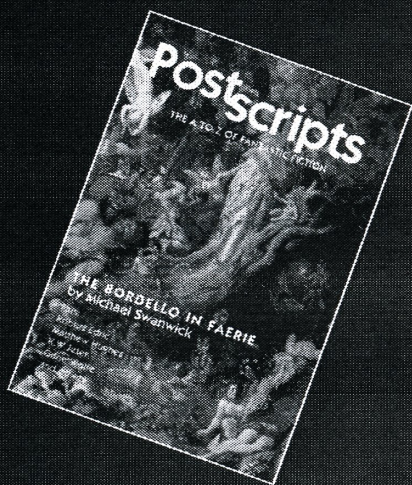
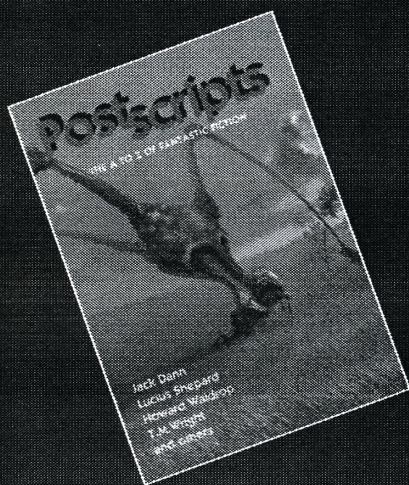
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