

# Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION



Jack Dann  
John Grant  
Tim Lees  
Jeff VanderMeer  
and others

WINTER 2006  
NUMBER 9  
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Editor and Publisher

*Nick Gevers*  
Assistant Editor

*Alligator Tree Graphics*  
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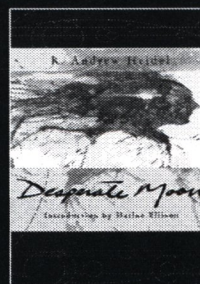
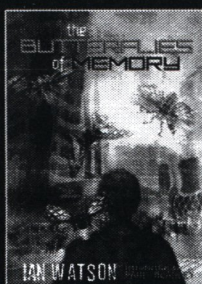
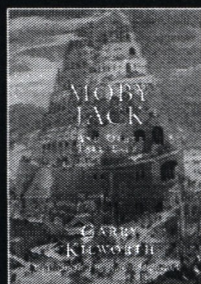
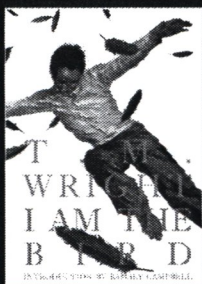
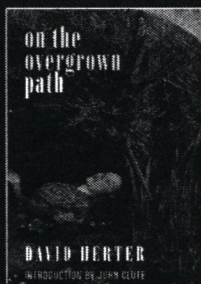
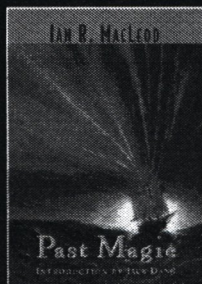
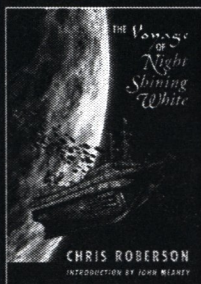
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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

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Jeff VanderMeer is the author of the acclaimed story cycle *City of Saints and Madmen: The Book of Ambergris*; his latest novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, is again set in *Ambergris*, legendary city of the subterranean graycaps and sinister freshwater squid. His upcoming projects include a pirate fiction anthology, a charity anthology called *Last Drink Bird Head*, and a new *Ambergris* novel titled *The Appoggiatura of John Finch*.

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# Editorial: American Fantasy?

## Jeff VanderMeer

Over the past few months, the question of whether there is a distinctly American brand of fantasy<sup>6</sup> has been much on my mind. There are a few reasons for this, perhaps the most relevant that I am co-editing a volume entitled *Best American Fantasy* and that I spent five weeks traveling through continental Europe this summer and asking everywhere, “How is fantasy in your country different? What are the unique qualities?” (And receiving wildly different answers.)

The more distant antecedents go back as far as the rather emotional “New Weird” discussion on the *Third Alternative* message boards a few years ago. One point of view expressed during the conversation argued that there was a distinctly British type of fantasy, and implied it was superior to the American version. I argued, within the context of the New Weird, against the existence of distinctly British fantasy. My theory was that in the email-internet world, globalization for fiction means a much greater acceleration of influences. To me, riffing among writers—the connectivity of individuals and ideas—had become something that now took not years but months and trumped environmental differences. In such a world, references to “regionalism” seemed not only limiting but perhaps naïve.

In the intervening years, several British writers and critics have continued to make a case for a distinctly British science fiction or fantasy, perhaps in line with a generally European point of view. This approach has resulted in a tendency by some to achieve (or make a case for) this UK uniqueness by reacting against a perceived weakness or, perhaps, irrelevance in American fantasy. I’ve resisted this line of thinking because I find generalizations dangerous—anything other than discus-

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<sup>6</sup>For the sake of focus in this brief article, I’m defining “fantasy” as anything other than “heroic fantasy”.



sion of individual texts strikes me as a way of being lazy, or, on some level, lying. But, at the same time, such comments have made me think about the possibilities of identifying a kind of “American fantasy.”

One reason such identification is so difficult is that there has never been a single type or mindset in American fantasy. The country is too vast and too various for that—in fact, one could argue that beyond the regionalism that can be found in, for example, the West Coast fiction of Kage Baker, James Blaylock, or Tim Powers, it is simply the fact of its wide-open spaces, and the political-social imperatives associated with that fact, that drives any distinctly American perspective, whether in the arts or in society in general.

Paul Di Filippo embraces the natural extension of this aspect of American fantasy and expresses it best when he says: “Even if the characters or subject matter or tropes I’m working with have a timeless provenance, my whole attitude toward the material can be nothing but American, since I’m steeped in the whole can-do, sky’s-the-limit, why-not triumphalism of USA pop culture and history.”

Sometimes this openness and the idealism of a kind of “can-do” attitude is mistaken for naïvete or fuzzy thinking or a lack of seriousness when it is just a different way of looking at the world. A generosity of spirit and optimism follow from these ideas, whether expressed explicitly or implicitly. These qualities can devolve into sentimentality, but no more readily than seriousness and earnestness can devolve into cynicism.

In some ways—to indulge in dangerous generalization for a second—I see in American fantasy more playfulness than in British fantasy, and a willingness to give the reader more of a way into the story. This should not be mistaken for being unnecessarily frivolous or untruthful.

The most perfect example of these qualities occurs in the work of Jeffrey Ford, which achieves its effects through populist characters and situations wedded to an innovating surrealism and strangeness. It is these qualities the reader finds at the core of works like “Creation” and “The Weight of Words.”

Kelly Link also makes a real effort to use American idioms in an American context, while doing so in a way that strives for the universal and the odd. She does not work with any kind of safety net and the postmodern seems wedded to the American experience in her stories.

But at the same time, even as I make the argument, I still wonder if it is really meaningful to talk about “American fantasy” when in that classification you can find writers as different in outlook and approach as, for example, Caitlin Kiernan and Jay Lake. Kiernan, a vastly underrated writer, creates distinctly untraditional traditional tales using a kind of mutated Decadent quality to guide her style. Jay Lake, a consistently interesting writer, reconfigures reality in a humanistic way that seems to pull from that same can-do aw-shucks American attitude mentioned by

Paul Di Filippo, even if it's with a healthy dose of knowledge, empathy, and depth behind it.

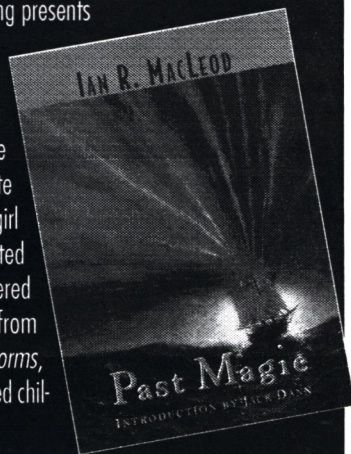
The point, regardless of whether there is any value in discussing unique attributes of American fantasy—and I'm still ambivalent about the subject—is that you can make a very good case for there being a vibrant and growing American fantasy movement right now (just think of our elders, too, like Michael Swanwick, Gene Wolfe, John Crowley, Ursula K. Le Guin, Carol Emshwiller, etc.)

If anything does bother me about the qualities of so-called American fantasy that I've discussed so far, it's that these qualities may apply to an American Experience that soon will not exist—radically re-imagined by a corrupt and ever-more totalitarian society masked by rampant consumerism and pop culture. To some extent, current events indicate that the fate of American fantasy will be decided by whether or not American writers confront and internalize the issues of the day—because these issues will be with us for decades at the very least. In short, whether the newer writers drift and fade into the communal fantasy that is the American political and social reality right now or fight against it with the considerable weapons at their disposal: imagination, unique ways of seeing the world, and, yes, good old American hopefulness.



One of the finest SF and fantasy short fiction writers in Britain today, Ian R. MacLeod has won or been shortlisted for Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, Sturgeon, British SF, Tiptree, John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and Sidewise Awards for his deeply felt, marvelously atmospheric, and highly ingenious stories. Like an inspired fusion of Ray Bradbury and Brian Aldiss, he captures brilliantly the intersection of future possibility and the extremes of human emotion. Now, PS Publishing presents *Past Magic*, MacLeod's third collection, and his strongest yet.

The tales gathered here include slyly rendered time travel, Lovecraftian horror, alternate histories of theocratic ascendancy, and a vision of an astronaut lost between universes. In the title story, the Isle of Man is a last opulent refuge from the onslaught of climate change, and its miracle-working scientists have resurrected a little girl lost at sea; in "Two Sleepers", a housewife finds herself transplanted from a drab suburban existence into a slightly but crucially altered domestic idyll . . . and in "The Bonny Boy"—a lost chapter from MacLeod's remarkable neo-Victorian fantasy novel *The House of Storms*, appearing here for the first time—the staff of a home for abandoned children confront their own prejudices in unforgettable ways.





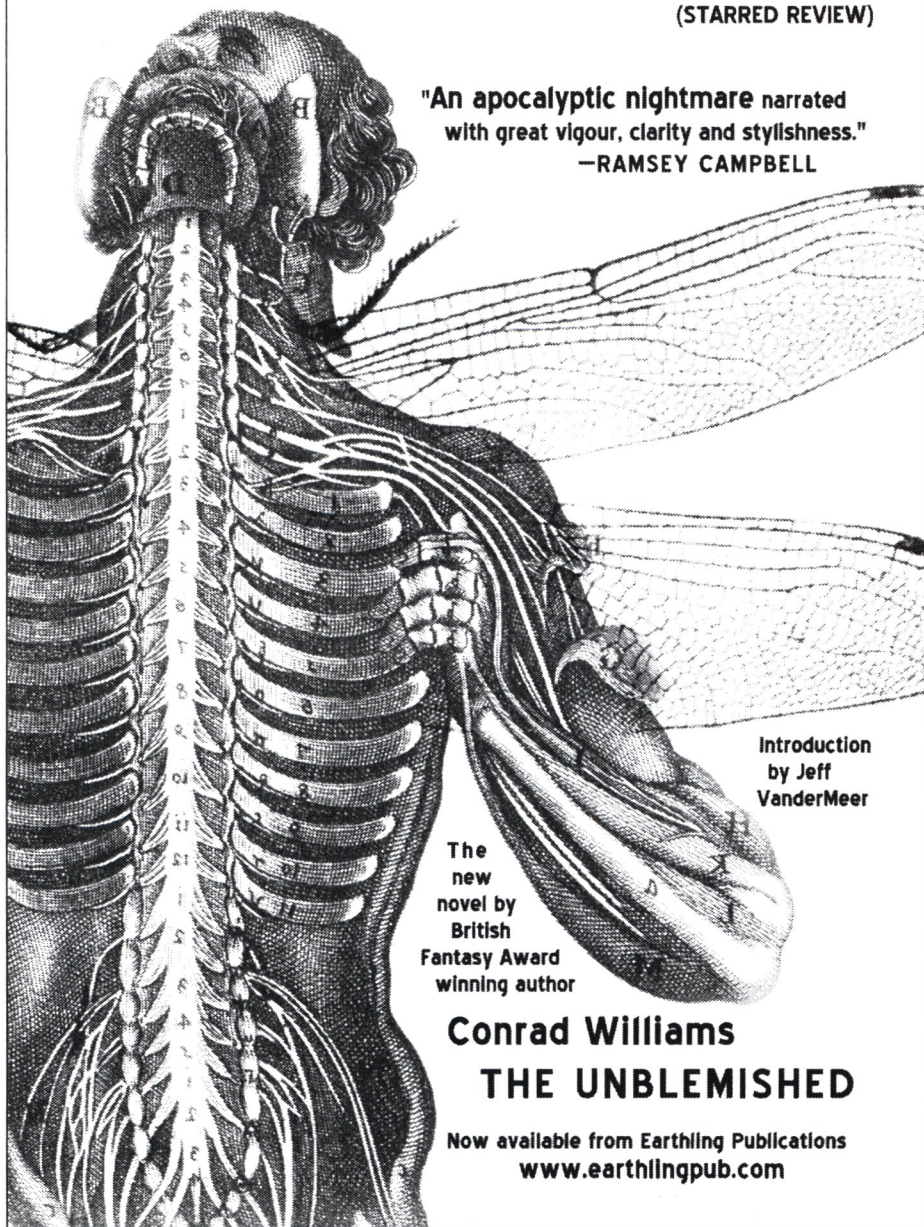
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**(STARRED REVIEW)**

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*"I don't exactly have a love-hate relationship with apocalyptic stories," says David Barnett, "more of an I-hate-them-but-I-just-can't-stop-myself-having-a-look relationship. I decided to write 'The End of the World Show' to exorcise a few demons. In order to ensure I never have to write an apocalyptic story ever again, I threw every nightmare I could think of into this tale: impending cosmic destruction, nuclear devastation, the dead rising from the cold earth, rampaging giant lizards, martial law, civil breakdown and rat stew." He adds: "I also wanted to write an apocalypse backdrop that was more relevant to me than punk cannibals in desert wastelands. The result is, I like to think, Panic in Year Zero meets Coronation Street." Close the curtains and pass the popcorn—we could be here for a while!*

*David is the author of Hinterland, which was published by Immanion Press in 2005—Immanion will also be publishing The Janus House and Other Stories in 2007, and David has written three further novels, which are currently with his agent.*

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# The End of the World Show

## David Barnett

**O**n the seventh day before the end, the aliens said goodbye.

"It's all true," said a tired-looking man from the Government, being interviewed on the tea-time news. "Non-Earth Originated Intelligences have been among us since 1947. They have contributed a great deal to our development over the past sixty years. It's highly doubtful we would have been able to make the strides in space exploration that we have without their help. And the work they have done with us on researching treatments for cancer and other conditions has been phenomenal. It's just a shame that they have to leave now, with so much yet to do."

"Why exactly are they leaving?" asked the reporter.

The man from the Government

tugged at his collar and looked off-camera. "Uh, no more questions at this time, please," he said.

The general consensus was that it was all a big hoax. There were special news reports on all the channels devoted to the announcement. They even cancelled *EastEnders*. Katy would not have approved.

It was with Katy that I really wanted to talk about all this, but she'd gone a long time ago. I sat in my cramped terraced house, cruising through the digital channels, every one with some expert or other talking animatedly about the aliens. They came from a planet circling a star that we didn't even have a name for, just a string of numbers. There was a lot of talk about the impossibility of interstellar travel, and someone asked a scientist if travel

between stars was possible, why had the aliens only shown us how to get as far as the Moon?

Katy would be talking about it with Steve, about what it all meant for the future, for their future, their cosy little, middle-class, Volkswagen Touran-driving, holidays-in-Tuscany future. I went to the pub.

"It's a hoax," said Bob with authority. "Has to be, hasn't it? Can't possibly be true."

"Where are they, then, if they're here? Where's their space rocket?" said Alan.

There was a boom of voices as the barmaid turned up the volume on the television in the corner. The studio discussions on the BBC special news programme had cut to some shaky camerawork in a field somewhere in Cornwall, according to the caption. A reporter in a raincoat ducked into shot. "And here we are at the scene of the extra-terrestrials actually leaving the earth . . ."

The camera angle changed abruptly and focused on a cigar-shaped silver rocket standing in the dark, rain-soaked field. God knows where they'd been hiding it and how they'd suddenly got it there.

"I bet it's been there all the time, invisible," said Alan.

"It's a hoax," said Bob, lighting a cigarette, apparently satisfied. "I mean, look at it. It's like something out of Flash Gordon."

Alan's mobile phone buzzed on the table. While he fumbled with the but-

tons, the camera panned to three of the aliens standing on a platform near the rocket. They looked a bit like Meat Loaf, only with a slightly greenish tinge and less hair. They were wearing three-button black suits with Nehru collars. **FIRST PICTURES OF THE ALIENS** flashed across the bottom of the screen.

"Why are you leaving?" shouted someone from the huddle of press reporters.

One of the aliens looked at the other two. He coughed, and then said in perfect English: "We are very sorry. We have to go now. It's beyond our control."

"That was Margery," said Alan, putting the phone back into his jacket pocket. "The lads have taken the Focus and set off for Cornwall. They want to go with the aliens."

Bob stubbed out his cigarette and laughed. "Your lads? Wayne and Stu? What makes them think the aliens'll want to take them back to Pluto? Unless they're short of workshy layabouts up there."

"I'd tell them not to bother," I said, pointing at the telly. "They're off."

They were indeed. The aliens had got inside their rocket and the army were herding the press pack and the rubber-neckers away. A green glow erupted from the base of the silver spaceship and the camera shook and wobbled. Then it was gone, soaring up into the night sky. The camera tracked it until it was swallowed by the black clouds.







There was a hush over the pub, and the field in Cornwall, until the reporter said in reverent tones: "And there we have it. A historic, epoch-making event. I have been proud and honoured to witness the first open contact between humanity and extra-terrestrial intelligences . . ."

"Proud and honoured to witness them bugging off," said Bob, lighting up again.

"I wonder why they've gone, really?" said Alan.

"I wonder whose round it is, really?" said Bob.

Later, pissed, I phoned Katy, against my better judgement.

"Did you see the aliens?" I bumbled.

"Of course I did," she said flatly. "I'd imagine everyone on earth saw them. Why are you calling me?"

"I still love you," I whispered.

The phone went dead.

I lay in bed for a bit but couldn't sleep. I tried to have a wank but could only summon up images of flabby green aliens in black suits, so gave up and went to sit by the window, staring up at the night sky and wondering what it was all about, until Wayne and Stu drove past in their dad's Ford Focus, beeping their horn all along the road. They'd painted TAKE US WITH U on the roof of the car. Alan wasn't going to be best pleased.

**O**n the sixth day before the end, we found out why the aliens had left. There was an asteroid the size of Mil-

ton Keynes heading towards earth. It was due to hit in little under a week. The breakfast news was full of it. Someone at the Government had leaked the information. The authorities had known about it for months. The aliens had been trying to help us find a solution but, given the size of the rock, there wasn't much they could suggest. That was why they had gone.

I didn't go into work. Didn't really see the point. I did phone, though. The secretary said: "Are you ill?"

"Haven't you seen the news this morning?"

She paused. "No. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. Anne was a skitish sort and I didn't want to panic her unduly. "I've got a touch of 'flu."

I turned back to the telly. The asteroid was somewhere out past Venus at the moment, but it was going at a fair lick. The experts said it would probably break up a little in the atmosphere. There was apparently a big plan to fly a load of nuclear bombs up into orbit in the space shuttle and blow the rock to smithereens, or at least knock it off course. Failing that—and the scientist being interviewed assured us it would work—the asteroid would probably hit Australia sometime on Sunday.

"At least it's only Australia," said Alan when I went round to him to return the hedge trimmer I'd borrowed off him five months previously.

He gazed at the trimmer with a curious look in his eye, probably wondering whether it was worth cutting back his Leylandii before the weekend, as I said:

“Well, according to the telly, the size and speed of the thing means it’ll probably wipe out all life on earth anyway.”

Alan sniffed, just as Margery pulled up on to the drive in the Focus. They’d tried to rub the TAKE US WITH U message off the roof without much success. Margery, a handsome woman if a little highly-strung, struggled out of the car weighed down with Sainsbury’s carrier bags. She looked a little harassed.

“It’s chaos out there!” she trilled. “I nearly had to fight my way out of the supermarket. There were people punching each other at the checkout.”

“Did you get any of that paté I like?” asked Alan mildly as Margery elbowed her way past me.

“No I did not!” she squeaked. “I got bottles of water and tins of beans. You can get the other bags out of the car. And why haven’t you barricaded the windows yet?”

Alan looked at me and gave a tiny, *what-can-you-do?* shrug. “I thought I’d trim the hedge, first,” he said.

I left Margery blustering and went back home. Halfway there I took a detour towards the corner shop. Perhaps it would be wise to get a few provisions in, just in case. Unfortunately, half the neighbourhood had the same idea. There was a crowd outside the shop and people were wheeling away their purchases in the trolleys. I edged towards the door as one of the staff was tacking a hand-written notice on the door. It said: CASH PURCHASES ONLY.

“We’ve had a call from head office telling us not to accept credit cards or cheques,” she said to me as we squeezed into the packed shop.

Deftly dancing around the suffocating aisles, I managed to extricate half-a-dozen microwave Chinese meals, a bottle of milk, some whisky and a packet of bourbon creams. At the till it was like a rugby scrum. One man had pretty much the entire contents of the meat cabinet in two big trolleys, and he was waving his Barclaycard at them.

“No plastic!” shouted the woman behind the till. “I’ve told you, cash only!”

The queue snaked around the shop. I waved my purchases at the girl who I’d seen putting the notice on the door, and gave her a twenty pound note. She cast a glance over my basket, nodded, and stuffed the twenty in her pocket. “Do you mind if I take the basket?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You can have it for a fiver.”

I only had a ten so I gave her that and picked up a copy of *Country Living* from the cardboard display bin that had been knocked over near the tills.

As I left the shop, glad for a bit of fresh air, a big 4x4 squealed to a halt just in front of me. There were four men wearing balaclavas and carrying baseball bats. One of them looked at me as they climbed out. “Give us your stuff!” he snarled.

One of the others pulled him away by his jacket. “Leave him. We’ll get



what's inside." He paused, as if reconsidering, then held up his baseball bat. "Give us your money, though."

I fished in my pocket and pulled out another tenner. He snatched it off me and shoved it into his jeans. "Right, inside. Tinned stuff, bottled water, powdered milk. Twat anyone who gets in your way."

I hurried back towards home. The main road was now choked with traffic, cars inching along and beeping their horns. I spotted Bob and his wife, their Rover loaded up with stuff. Bob wound down the window.

"Off on your hols?" I said.

"We're getting out," he shouted. "I'd do the same if I was you."

"Where are you going to go?" I said, looking at the long line of traffic stretching off out of sight.

"The Lakes, probably. Bit of high ground. Clean water."

I nodded. Bob's wife slapped him and pointed forward, where the car in front had moved ahead three or four centimetres. Bob waved and began to wind up the window, then stopped and brought it down again. He rummaged in his jacket and tossed a set of keys at me. "If you're staying here anyway, you wouldn't do us a favour and turn the engine over on the MG, would you? It's murder if it doesn't get a few revs every couple of days."

I picked up the keys and waved as the Rover jerked forward again. I wondered if I'd be able to sneak Bob's MG out for a spin while they were away. A lovely little car it was. British Racing

Green. They don't make them like that any more.

I got home just in time to watch the space shuttle taking off from Cape Kennedy.

**O**n the fifth day before the end, most of southern Japan was destroyed in a nuclear conflagration. I had to admit, things were starting to look a bit bleak. I'd had another largely sleepless night, mainly due to the traffic on the main road, a constant stream of cars and vans crawling along with bad-tempered honks. I wondered how far Bob had got.

Apparently a bit of sponge or foam had fallen off one of the space shuttle's engines as it orbited the earth, waiting for the asteroid to come into range. This had played havoc with the steering and the computers had gone all bonkers, plunging the shuttle back into sub-orbital space and sending it spinning down towards Japan. It had hit the ground and the nukes had gone up, several miles south of Osaka. The city and most of the surrounding area had gone.

The Russians said not to worry, they were sending a rocket full of nukes up as well. That wasn't much comfort to the Japanese, though. Someone with a beard came on the news and said that he believed the whole asteroid business was an elaborate con and that the United States had planned to bomb Japan all along. Exactly why, though, he couldn't say.



Some of the TV channels went off, mainly the digital ones. Channel Five stopped broadcasting as well, but hardly anyone noticed. ITV and the BBC just had news on all the time. Channel 4 played music videos, while BBC2 was given over to re-runs of Seventies sitcoms, which had a strangely soothing quality about them. I watched a couple of episodes of *Terry and June*, but couldn't get the pictures of the deathly quiet carnage in Japan out of my head.

I took a stroll. Most of the cars had gone wherever they were going and the road was pretty quiet. Since this morning there had been a tank parked at the bottom of our street, following on from reports of looting and violence closer to town.

I'd never seen a tank close up before. It was a pretty grand beast. Katy would have hated it. She was a pacifist, was Katy. Still is, probably. She'd not be coping with all this. I hoped there was no rioting near her house. I hoped she was okay. I considered phoning her again, but didn't really know what I'd say. For some reason I thought about Blackpool. Katy had loved going to Blackpool, loved the Prom and the noise and the sweet smell of candy-floss on the air, the clatter of coins in the one-armed bandit trays and the insane laughter of the automated clown at the Pleasure Beach. One year we'd been there someone had made a huge sand sculpture of a tank on the beach. Katy had wondered why the artist couldn't have made something less

ugly. All the kids seemed to love it, though.

There was a soldier sitting on top of the tank, the real tank at the bottom of my street, a sub-machine gun in the crook of his arm. He regarded me coolly.

"It's okay," I said cheerfully. "I'm not going to pinch your tank."

He didn't laugh. Didn't even smile. "Did you hear the Government's gone?" he said.

"Gone where?"

"Just gone," he said. "Half of them have left for some bunker in the Home Counties. Some of them are dead. Westminster is burning. No-one's in control any more."

I thought about this. "So who's paying your wages?"

He looked at me and blinked, as though he hadn't considered this before. He leaned into the turret of the tank and had a brief conversation with his mate. I hung around for a bit but the soldier ignored me. I wandered out on to the main road and over to Alan's cul-de-sac, but his house was all boarded up. I knocked but there was no answer, so I nipped round the back and borrowed his hedge trimmers again. When I got back to my street, the tank had gone. Mr Raines from number eight, who is in the Territorials, was standing in the road as I approached. He had a sub-machine gun exactly like the soldier in the tank had.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Squaddie gave it to me, just before

he pissed off," he said, his face set in a grimace. "Look, there's no Army any more. No law and order. We're going to have to organise ourselves into a . . . a Civil Defence Group. Do you have any weapons?"

We both looked at the hedge trimmer. I suppose it could give a pretty nasty cut, so long as you were within fifteen feet of a plug socket. "I'll have a look at home," I said.

I phoned Katy again, but got their answer machine. "We've got a Civil Defence Group in our street," I said proudly. I paused. "I love you," I said, then put the phone down.

Katy had left me because I wasn't exciting enough. Because, after my parents died, I just wanted to sit in their old terraced house and go to work and come home and watch TV. But what she failed to take into account was that I wanted to do all that with *her*, that all that was exciting enough for me. I wondered if she was finding all this exciting now she was with Steve.

A minute later I picked the phone up again and left another message: "I've got some Chinese ready meals and the electrics are still on here, so if you wanted to come over . . ."

Later on I helped Mr Raines and some others block off either end of our street with some cars.

"What if we want to go somewhere?" I said.

"Where's there to go?" said Mr Raines, his face in that grimace again.

Looking at the news later on, commentaryless pictures of London burn-

ing and riots in Birmingham and Manchester, I had to concede he had a point. I wondered how Bob was getting on in the Lakes.

**O**n the fourth day before the end, a huge lizard attacked Tokyo. As if Japan hadn't had enough problems. It was exactly like a dinosaur, two hundred feet from nose to tail. It ran with a loping gait, head down and tail up, its spine almost perfectly level. It was something to do with the bombs that had landed on Osaka, they said. Either a normal lizard had been mutated by the radiation and grown to monstrous proportions, or an ages-old beast had been in some kind of suspended animation below the surface of the earth and had been awoken by the blast.

It was amazing how people were prepared to accept just about anything these days.

It was quite gripping viewing. The news pictures showed them trying to evacuate Tokyo, but there was nowhere for the people to go, pretty much the rest of Japan being an irradiated wasteland. The monster rampaged across the city, flattening buildings and flipping cars with its tail. I caught myself more than once thinking *it's pretty realistic* before realising that it *was* real. Eventually they brought it down with fighter planes and it flopped, dead, in the street. The newsreader said the Japanese authorities had started to slice it up to use as emergency rations.

That afternoon looters kicked the





kitchen door in. There were three of them, kids about eighteen or nineteen, and they all had baseball bats. I was in the kitchen at the time and they booted their way in, pushing me against the wall.

“What do you want?” I said.

One of them slapped me. “Everything,” he said.

They took all the money they could find, which didn’t amount to much. They didn’t think to take the food, but one of them manhandled the TV off its stand.

“We’ll take this as well,” said the ringleader, slapping me again and ripping the stereo power lead out of the wall socket.

“What are you going to do with them?” I said. “The world’s going to end.”

They looked at each other uncertainly, then the ringleader punched me in the stomach, winding me. Then they left.

I boarded up the door with some wood I found in the shed and went upstairs to bring the portable telly down from the bedroom. While I was rooting in the wardrobe I came across my dad’s old airgun, and a box of pellets. Might come in handy.

We had a meeting of the Civil Defence Group in Mr Raines’s front room. Half of the households in the street had already deserted; gone to Scotland or the Lake District or to be with family. Mr Raines was very approving of my gun. The water had gone off earlier in the day and the

drains were getting backed up; there was a problem with rats but Mr Raines didn’t want us to waste ammunition on them. A rat-catching division was set up, consisting of Wayne and Stu, who had got fed up of being barricaded into their house and had come down to live in one of the deserted terraces in our street. We still had electricity; a lot of places didn’t.

By dusk Wayne and Stu had killed enough rats for Trevor the butcher to begin skinning them. There was a big pot put over a fire in the middle of the road and we had a bit of a street party. The rat stew wasn’t too bad; I’d been getting a bit fed up of Chinese. A dozen bottles of gin were found in Mrs Hughes’s house; her daughter had come to collect her two days ago. Everyone suspected Mrs Hughes liked the odd nip, but not to that extent. It was quite a jolly evening, until someone said that a girl at the top of the street had been raped. A Civil Defence Group meeting was called and Mr Raines led a small group of volunteers off to apprehend the most likely suspects. I left Wayne and Stu throwing up in the street and went to bed.

**O**n the third day before the end, a tsunami swamped the western seaboard of the United States. The last thing that I saw on the portable TV before the power went off was a wall of water engulfing the Golden Gate Bridge, then a roaring sound and the cameraman was swallowed up. It cut



back to the studio at the BBC, the only channel broadcasting now. The presenter looked like she hadn't slept for a week. She wasn't wearing any make-up and she had tears in her eyes as she reported that Los Angeles and San Francisco were now underwater. Half-way through the report she looked up to someone off-camera and said: "What? Wait. Where are you going . . . ?"

She sat there for a while on her own, and the lighting slowly faded. Then the picture went blank, and didn't come on again. I supposed that was it for the TV, then.

I was a little surprised that the electricity was still on. The gas had gone off two days previously. Either they had some kind of automated system still powering the national grid or there were some very dedicated people working to keep the country energised. And just as I was thinking that, the lights went out. That bugged me for the microwave ready meals, I thought. Rat stew from now until the end.

Mr Raines and his Civil Defence Group commandos had in the middle of the night "arrested" Roy the bachelor from the end house and strung him up from the lamp-post for the rape of the girl. Roy had always had the finger pointed at him whenever there was anything funny going on, and once the *News of the World* had published his name in a list of paedophiles and he had dog-muck pushed through his letter-box. They apologised and printed a retraction a couple of weeks later, say-

ing it was another Roy in another town, but by then the damage was done.

I was a bit shocked at that, but as Mr Raines said to me, desperate times require desperate measures.

I found a load of candles under the sink and dotted them around the sitting room. It was quite cosy. I finished the bottle of gin I'd pinched from Mrs Hughes's supply and picked up the phone. It was dead but I dialled Katy's number anyway, told the blank, empty air that I loved her, and cried myself to sleep on the sofa.

**O**n the second day before the end, the hungry dead rose from the cold, damp earth. The popular assumption that they would be mindless, shuffling husks with a craze for human brains did, fortunately, prove to be unfounded. They were, however, largely very grumpy.

The first sign was in the small, dark time before dawn. No-one was getting much sleep any more. In the quiet moments you could always hear the far-off sounds of violence. We had patrols in the street pretty much constantly, and there was always someone chasing rats or wailing. I'd done my bit and patrolled with my dad's gun for a couple of hours in the night, chasing off a couple of kids who were trying to sneak along the ginnel behind Mrs Reagan's house, so was trying to get a bit of kip. I'd just dropped off when there was a low rumble. I sat up in a blind panic, thinking that the asteroid

must have hit Australia, but the shaking wasn't in the ground, it was in my gut. It became a sustained, single note, rising in pitch. I assumed someone had got hold of a trombone or such-like. It lasted about fifteen minutes, and then stopped. There was a long silence. Even the sounds of gunfire faded for a moment.

Taking the opportunity to get my head down again, I was just drifting away when there was a hammering at the door. God, what now? I picked up the gun from the side of the bed and staggered downstairs.

"That's *mine*," said a voice as dry as Autumn leaves. "Give it here."

"Dad?" I said.

It was indeed. And Mum as well. Looking . . . well, looking exactly as they did the day they died. Dad was in his black suit, his fob watch tucked into the pocket of his waistcoat. Mum had that blue dress on that she had used to wear for dancing.

"I thought you were going to paint the window frames," said Mum.

I looked out of the door. There were more people in suits and dresses—and one or two in shapeless white gowns—staggering up the street, stopping at doors. At the houses they used to live at.

"That sound this morning . . ." I said slowly, finally understanding.

"The Final Trump," said Dad, wearing that self-satisfied face he always used to pull when something was going against him. Only happy when it rains, my Dad. "And me not even baptised."

Mum was rubbing the flaking green paintwork on the windowsill. "The last thing you promised me was that you were going to do these windows," she said.

At the top of the street I could make out the corpse of Roy the bachelor twitching and kicking at the end of his rope. "I didn't do it!" he managed in a choked voice before the noose cut off his air supply and he died again. Within seconds he was dancing about again and shouting. I hoped someone would cut him down soon.

Dad pushed past me. "You going to leave us standing on the doorstep to our own house?" he said. "What have you got to eat?"

"A couple of microwave Chinese meals," I said. "There's been a bit of a problem with food the last few days."

Dad sat down in the armchair while Mum started picking up the dirty dishes and tutting at the layer of dust on the coffee table.

"I can see we're going to have to take charge around here," said Dad.

There was a hammering at the door.

"That'll be your grandad," said Mum.

Dad had died of a heart attack two years ago and Mum had gone quietly nine months later. I suppose they were lucky; Old Mrs Potter had been hit by a bus last Christmas and she'd turned up at home in a right mess. It was a bit of a shock for her husband.

The return of the dead raised all kinds of questions in people's minds. Presumably this was Judgement Day,



then. The Civil Defence Group set up a big prayer session in the street. It was quite eerie, watching the living and the dead come together and stand there in silence while Mr Ogden, who was a lay preacher, read from the Bible. At the point where he asked that we all be forgiven for our sins, Roy the bachelor coughed loudly but no-one could meet his eye. They made Mrs Potter stand at the back because she was a bit upsetting for the kiddies.

Come sunset there was great excitement; the asteroid was finally visible to the naked eye. It looked like a very slow-moving comet high in the night sky. I supposed the Russians hadn't been able to blow it up then, and that expert on the TV who had said it would burn up in the atmosphere had been wrong. I wondered what they were doing in Australia right now.

**O**n the last day before the end, Katy came home. "I knew you'd still be here," she said, collapsing into my arms and sobbing. It was just like a film.

She was filthy and her blouse was all torn. She'd walked it all the way from her house. It had taken all yesterday, all night and most of the morning. It had been slow going because of all the gangs—they were on the lookout for anyone with food or weapons. Women were especially in danger. Worst of all were the gangs of the undead, the ones who hadn't eaten or had a woman for many long, cold years. She'd come cross-country, hiding in ditches and

crawling on her belly past campfires which rang with laughter and screams.

"Where's Steve?" I said when she'd calmed down a bit.

"Gone," she said. "Three days ago. You know his parents were part of that weird Christian sect? Steve had never been bothered with it, but when they decided to lock themselves in their church and his mum and dad told him that they'd built a huge bunker underground and filled it with food and water, he suddenly found his faith again."

"Didn't you fancy it?"

Katy dissolved into tears again, burying her head in my shoulder. "I begged him to take me," she sobbed. "They refused. Just left me in the house with no food, nothing to defend myself with. Oh, God. What's going to happen to us?"

Mum shuffled out of the kitchen. She looked at us and frowned. She'd never liked Katy much. "Oh," she said. "One more for tea, is it?"

Mum had made a pie. From what, God only knows. At the mention of food, the others came out of the sitting room. Dad was followed by grandad and grandma, Uncle George, Auntie Linda, Cousin Alfie, and then a raft of stern-looking people in stiff Edwardian collars. It was getting pretty busy here.

"Let's go for a walk," I said.

Everyone was out in the street, pointing at the sky. You could see the asteroid in daylight now, a blazing orb in the atmosphere. "As big as Milton Keynes," I said, wonderingly.

“When’s it going to hit?” asked Katy, hugging my arm.

I pondered for a moment, revelling in the closeness of her body. “If I’ve worked it out right from the first reports, tomorrow.”

She swooned dramatically into my arms. “Oh, God,” she said in a small voice.

Mr Ogden the lay preacher was suddenly beside us. “Indeed,” he said. “The fiery judgement of heaven is upon us. We are having a vigil in the street this evening, begging for forgiveness and asking to be admitted through the gates of paradise when the calamity strikes. You’ll join us?”

“Will there be rat stew?” I asked.

Mr Ogden frowned and walked away, clutching his Bible. People had become quite a bit more serious over the last couple of days. I suppose approaching apocalypse does that to a person. That and the lack of water for a good bath. Most of us were beginning to smell, not least the risen dead.

“Do you fancy it?”

“What?” said Katy.

“The meeting. Begging for forgiveness and all that.”

Katy wrinkled her nose at me like she used to do. “What else is there to do?”

I thought for a moment. “We could go to Blackpool,” I said.

She looked at me. “Blackpool?”

“Yeah, you know. Candy floss and sticks of rock. We could go on the log flume and walk along the Prom. Stroll to the end of the North Pier. Go up the

Tower. Watch the world end. That kind of thing.”

Katy gestured at the barricade of cars at the end of the street, the distant sounds of gunfire. “How would we get there?”

I fished the keys to Bob’s MG out of my pocket and dangled them in front of her face. “In style.”

It only took us a couple of hours. Most of the fighting and looting seemed to have stopped. I suppose people probably wondered what the point was. Everyone seemed to be in their houses, waiting for the end. Blackpool was deserted.

We broke into an empty bed and breakfast place near the front and managed to find some bread that was not totally stale and a few tins of beans. Then we found the best bedroom and made slow, quiet love.

It was mid-day. The sky was pretty clear. We couldn’t see the asteroid any more, so presumed it was about to hit Australia. The tide was in, and we sat on a bench at the end of the North Pier, me crunching rock and Katy sucking on a lollipop in the shape of a baby’s dummy. We hadn’t gone up the Tower because there was no power to work the lift. Besides, Katy was worried there might be wild animals from the circus roaming around. I didn’t think there would be, but we thought we’d better not risk it.

“Should we talk about where it all went wrong for us?” I said.



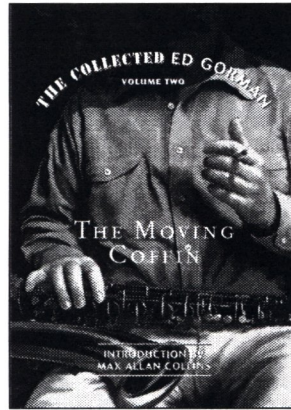
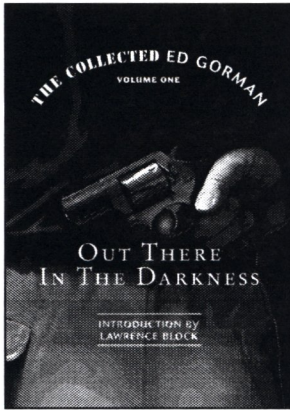
She thought about it and shook her head. “No point now, is there?”

Far, far away there was a thud that reverberated along the pier. Katy held my hand. The horizon rippled and there was a distant roar.

“This is it, then,” I said. I felt all right, really. Pretty good, in fact.

Katy closed her eyes. There were tears running down her cheeks. Her hair was a mess and her face was filthy. She was beautiful.

“Kiss me quick,” she whispered.



**W**ith 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.

Reviewers and readers alike praise Ed Gorman for the originality of his stories and their sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes violent conclusions. Killers and conmen, hookers and hucksters, robbers and rogues . . . plus a dizzying array of everyday joes and jills who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—Gorman’s characters will stay with you long after you’ve turned over the final page.

“Gorman’s writing is strong, fast and sleek as a bullet. He’s one of the best.”  
—Dean Koontz

“His novels and short stories provide fresh ideas, characters and approaches.”  
—*The Oxford Book of American Crime Stories*

As with Jack Dann's previous stories in *Postscripts*, the following novelette is part of his *James Dean alternate universe*, which includes his novel *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean* and the forthcoming collection *Promised Land*. Although this story is entirely fictional, Jack says that the characterizations of Jack Kerouac, James Dean, Nicholas Ray and Elvis Presley are as authentic as he could make them. "Presley and Dean didn't play the dangerous game of 'King Of the Mountain' in Paris," he says, "but Elvis had been known to play the game I've described with his bodyguards in Memphis. And my depiction of Nick Ray, who was the director of *Rebel Without a Cause*, comes out of my personal experience: I worked with Nick on a film way back in the bright summer days of my youth."

Jack's forthcoming projects include the usual fistful of anthologies, a short novel entitled *The Economy of Light* (PS Publishing), a few short stories, and the above-mentioned collection *Promised Land* (PS again). A novel about the life of Niccolo Machiavelli is in the works.

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# King of the Mountain

## Jack Dann

### ONE

Eleven pm, sitting in Pan American's first class lounge at Idlewild Airport, drinking double shots of Canadian Club and chasing them down with Coca Cola, then boarding a brand-spanking new Boeing 707 jet for Paris.

Drinking and sleeping and talking in the hollow darkness.

James Dean and Jack Kerouac on their way to Paris to talk Elvis Presley into taking a part in their film, *On the Road*.

Kerouac was drunk and constantly peering into the flat, black reflection of the porthole window—"Everything's out there, man, that's the great killer illusion, that everything you could

dream of is out there on the other side of this window. Look out there. See, your reflection, face of God, man, perfect face of God, but beyond that is the deep, fucking never-ending water deep as forever, black and cold, freezing, like in here, and right below us are a million drowned sailors nothing but bones glowing in the dark like semaphores. I used to think about drowning all the time. Every time I was on a ship, listening to the creaking and the rolling rolling of the waves, man, I'd dream about breathing in all that water and slowly sinking through all those miles of jade water, sinking past the fish all lit up in their own neon like Kandinski nightmares, falling, and when you get to the bottom, when you reach your final resting place all those black fath-



oms down, then that's when you find repose beyond fate. After choking gagging fear, bliss." Pausing, breathing heavily, as if he had been running instead of talking. "And then, man, you depart from participation in the dream, you stop clinging to all this shit around us which isn't real. *None* of it is real. Not the goddamn airplane or the goddamn water waiting like death below. Or the fishes. Or the drowned multitudes. They're all just fucking temporal accumulations of atoms, that's all."

Kerouac turned to James Dean, shaking him. "Hey, Jimmy, you listening or what?" His words were slurred; *listening* became *lissing*. "I'm trying to wake you up, man."

"Go back to sleep, Jack."

"No, man, we're all asleep, that's the problem. But if we can wake up, then we won't be scared. Wake up, assholes," Kerouac shouted. "Time to get enlightened."

He did, indeed, wake everyone up around him.

A stewardess rushed over to Kerouac; but before she could say anything, James Dean said, "I'm really sorry about this, Miss. This is Jack Kerouac, the writer, and he's been having kind of a bad night."

"I can see that, but we *do* have other passengers in this cabin." The stewardess was petite with long, auburn hair pulled back into a French twist. She reminded Jimmy of a cheerleader he'd had a crush on in high school. Janie

Newcomb. She too had widely-set green eyes and large breasts, which made her look pudgy; and Janie had the same kind of intense baby face. "And I really don't think it's anything to smile about, Mr. Dean."

"I'm sorry," Jimmy said, but you remind me of somebody.

"I'm sorry, too," Jack said. "I was just trying to wake everyone up."

"Well, please keep your friend quiet," she said to Jimmy.

Jack leaned over Jimmy and groped for the stewardess' breasts. She slapped his hand away and stepped backward. "If I have to, I'll get the captain."

"No, I'm sorry," Jimmy said. "He's just had too much to drink. I'll keep him under control. I promise."

"You look like my daughter," Jack said to the stewardess, "except I never had a daughter. But you're a little baby girl aren't you? *Mémère* would love you. You're not Jewish, though, are you?"

"Jesus Christ, shut the hell up, Jack," Jimmy said. Then, directing himself to the stewardess, "I'm really sorry. I promise he'll be okay. Could you just bring us some coffee . . . ?" After she left, Jimmy said, "What the hell's wrong with you? You've been drunk for three days, and it's got to stop now or this goddamn film is off. Elvis is a goody-goody, a bible pounder, you really think he's going to want to deal with you rolling around like a skid row drunk?"

Jack giggled. "I am a skid row drunk."

"Then fuck it. It's off."

"You don't mean that, Jimmy. Not after we wrote the script together. It's pure bop prosody, word jazz, real music, and you ain't never seen anything get written so fast, tell me that's not so. We were connected right into the music of the spheres, man." Jack spoke in a soft voice now, the same melodious voice he'd used on his recordings with Steve Allen—those records sold almost as well as *On the Road*. He'd just cut another record for jazz impresario Norman Grantz, which was easily outselling his new book, *Dr. Sax*.

Jack seemed to have suddenly, impossibly sobered up. He apologized to the stewardess when she brought coffee and swore he wouldn't be any trouble to anyone for the rest of his mortal life. He slugged down a pill with his coffee. "You want one?"

"What is it?" Jimmy asked.

"Bennie. Sober you right up. Wake you right up."

"I'm not drunk."

"Bullshit, you're as pried as I am."

Jimmy laughed. He'd taken a few Percodans earlier, just to take the edge off. "That's a good trick, just flicking a switch and turning sober."

"You want me to flick the switch back?"

"No. They'll put us in leg irons or something."

"Kinky-do," Jack said. "I squeezed her soft tits. Did you see that?"

"Just don't do it again."

"She looks like a cheerleader."

Jimmy laughed. "Yeah, I thought the exact same thing."

"You see? Our minds are connected."

"Not that connected."

"I wonder what she'd be like if we woke her up," Jack said. "She's probably the mother of us all." Jack turned the reading light on. "How many times you got laid?"

"That's a stupid question," Jimmy said. He turned the light back off.

"Everything's important. How many?"

"I don't keep count. How many have you fucked?"

"I've fucked two hundred and forty-five women," Jack said, still talking softly, almost in a whisper. "Beat that, asshole. That's twice the number that Casanova screwed, and he got all the credit."

"He wrote a book about it."

"Well, I'd better do the same, hadn't I? Maybe I'll start with our sweet waitress."

"She's a stewardess, not a waitress, and don't even think about it," Jimmy said.

Jack turned slightly red, as if he was working himself into another state.

Jimmy had heard enough stories about Jack's outrageous behavior from Alan Ginsberg; and Bill Burroughs wrote fairly regularly, regaling him with nasty gossip about Kerouac, about how Jack used and discarded all his friends and wouldn't even lift a finger



to help Neil Cassady, who was doing time in San Quentin for possession of two “stinking lousy” joints of marijuana.

Indeed, Jimmy could see the change in Jack since he’d met him at a poetry reading at the Zigzag Café in Greenwich Village. Jack had gained weight. He looked puffy and blousy and was binging and drinking even when he was on the self-proclaimed wagon. Although he was famous now, although *On the Road* was a bestseller and he was proclaimed the oracle of the beats, he was usually mistaken for a bum instead of a beatnik—a term he loathed.

But Jack had, at least temporarily, straightened up his act, Jimmy thought. He had shaved, gotten a bad but very short haircut, bought an expensive suit, which already looked as if he had been living in it for a month, and packed away his check flannel shirt and stained and baggy chino pants. He looked robust, ever the outdoorsman, if you didn’t look too closely. Inexplicably, his breath, fouled with booze, smelled sweet . . . and reminded Jimmy of Pier Angeli, sweet pizza pie Pier who listened to her mother and married a good boy, not a beatnik like Jimmy. Jimmy giggled at the idea.

“What’s so funny,” Jack asked, his voice thick with meanness. Jack was buzzing—the amphetamines had kicked in—and could slip out of control in an instant.

Jimmy sensed it and said, “No, man, I wasn’t making fun of you. I just had this weird thought. I was thinking

about how your breath smells because it reminds me of Pier, you know, Pier Angeli, the actress. I told you about her, she’s a bitch . . .”

“They’re all bitches.”

“Yeah, well, I had this image of myself as a beatnik. Came right out of the blue. So that’s what I was laughing at. Not you. Me.”

Jack nodded. In the airplane darkness, he was a shadowy hulk beside Jimmy. “I hate the term beatnik. That asshole Herb Caen, who whores for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, another goddamn Communist Jew bastard, he came up with it. Thought it was really cool, like Sputnik, and sonovabitch if it didn’t catch on. I ran into him at the El Matador and told him I thought he was a stupid asshole and to stop running us down.” He laughed. “But I couldn’t give a cold shit about any of that now. I’m out of it. Completely. I leave it to Bill faggot Burroughs and Alan to get famous jerking off the week-end sandal-slapping, goateed, wannabe poet beatniks.”

“You see them anymore?” Jimmy asked, curious to hear Jack’s response.

Jack shrugged. “I don’t see Bill ever. Alan I see every once in a while at readings, stuff like that.”

“Why . . . what happened?”

He shrugged, then went silent.

“Who’s Mémère?” Jack asked.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“You said it to the stewardess.”

“I don’t remember saying anything,” Jack said.

“Is she a girlfriend?”

"You're a shrewd bastard, Jimmy, you know that? One shrewd bastard."

"What do you mean?"

"I must've told you that Mémère is my mother. That's French. I'm French Canuke, remember? Canada, Canada, hallelujah. So don't fuck with me. My mother's name is sacred, she's a goddamn saint, so watch what you say."

"I didn't mean any disrespect."

"None taken, but watch your mouth, that's all." Softly. "Sorry. You honor your blessed mother. You said she talked to you in visions. I remember that. You know . . . you know. Sorry, man."

Jimmy nodded, and he could sense his mother, an immanence in the jittering, electrical darkness of the cabin. He imagined her rising up through the depths of the sea far below, rising up from all graves to counsel him, to be with him,

"You know about Mémère from Burroughs, don't you?" The tone of Jack's voice changed, accusing. "That skinny faggot's been writing to you, hasn't he?"

Jimmy shrugged, and the presence of his mother dissipated. He took a long pull on a cigarette, let the smoke choke him, kill him a little. He breathed in his mother, then exhaled her. He was stoned. The booze was heat, the pills concentrated sunlight and moonlight and electric light, and he needed sleep; but Kerouac had woken him up. He wouldn't sleep now. He probably wouldn't ever sleep

again. He'd just close his eyes and see colored snakes snapping through blackness . . . faster creatures than Jack's neon fish swimming in the slippery depths below. "You introduced me to Bill, remember?"

"Yeah, I introduced you to a lot of people. So what's Auntie Burroughs saying about me now?"

"Nothing."

"Must be something. He still carping about how Mémère lives with me? Well, don't you think I owe her that little bit after she's taken care of me whenever I was down and out? Which was most of the time. I made a promise to my father that I'd take care of Mémère, and all my old so-called piss-ass friends can choke if they don't like it . . . and, yeah, she don't like Alan and Bill and some of the old gang, why should she? She doesn't like Jews. What am I supposed to do? Convert an old lady? Alan got all bent when she kicked him out of our house in Long Island. Since then he's been slandering her everywhere . . . and badmouthing me. Christ, she's an old lady. She thinks Alan and Bill are murderers and perverts—well, she's right about them being perverts—and she just doesn't want them in the house. So what? Why should they give a shit? Anyway, she's got her reasons, and they're probably good ones. She doesn't want me any more fucked up than I am. She thinks they're a bad influence on me. She's right."

"What about me?" Jimmy asked.

"Mémère would love you, man."



You're a movie star. You're rich." He giggled. "You're from Indiana."

"What's so good about that?"

"You're not from the prick-sucking city . . . and Mémère would like you. You'd remind her of Gerard."

"Who?"

Reverently. "My brother. He died."

"I'm sorry."

"Gerard died when I was four years old. He was ten. He was always sickly. Rheumatic fever. He was a saint. Not like I told you about Mémère, who is saintly, I mean that, but flesh and bone. No, Gerard was a real saint. I tried to imitate him through life, but you can see what a failure I was. Mémère used to call me *mechant* . . . bad one. She still does. She still tells me I should have died instead of Gerard. She's right. I should have." He laughed. "God knows, it's not for lack of trying." Jack paused, stared into the black, reflective window, then said, "Ma told me that she saw Gerard riding up to Heaven in a white chariot. She wasn't the only one. The nuns came to be with him when he was dying. They believed he was a saint, too. I swear to God, what I'm telling you is true. Small birds would light on Gerard's outstretched hands when he stood at the window. But they didn't come to him at once. Mémère told me this. He'd call them to his pillow, pray for them to come to him. Mémère used to hide in the hall, near his door. If you knew Ma, you'd know she'd do that. Then one day, when he saw the tragedy of man's alienation from the birds of heaven, he

cried. 'Momma, Momma, why don't the little birds want to come into my hand? They know I won't hurt them.'

"No, Gerard,' Ma said, 'they don't know. They're only little birds.'

"But Gerard was right. They knew, and they came to him after that, just like they came to Jesus, who was come to the world to weep. Gerard used to see angels. He saw them, man, and he could draw them. He drew pictures that were impossible for a child to draw. I still have one, an angel sitting on a table, like it was Christ himself, or Gerard, knowing he was going to be eaten. I showed it to Dali—you know him, the artist who uses cum to stiffen his mustache?" He laughed. "Twitty old dip. And I showed it to Willem de Kooning and Jack Pollock, and it blew their minds. They couldn't believe it was drawn by a ten year old with no technical education. Pollock, who'd be jealous of a tree if it was taller than him, said Gerard must be an idiot savant, and we ended up bashing each other's faces in over that. Wasn't a savant. He was the little fire that the rain put out. Little Buddha. Little Christ. Shadow of Christ."

Jack laughed at himself, then he sat quietly in the darkness, as if he'd read all his lines, emptied himself out.

"You and Elvis will get along real well," Jimmy said. "Man, if I don't say so myself, I'm a genius. Was a brilliant move to bring you."

"I should think so," Jack mumbled. Then, "Why?"

"You and Elvis got a lot in common."

“Yeah, what?”

“You got Gerard and he’s got Jesse.”

“Who’s that?”

“His dead twin.”

“So what’s that got to do with me?”

Jack asked.

“Ask him.”

“Go to hell. We need another drink.”

“No we don’t,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah, we do.”

Just then, as if on cue, the stewardess stepped over to Jack.

“Did you push the call button?”

Jimmy asked Jack.

“No, Mr. Dean,” the stewardess said. “This is a bit embarrassing, but could you sign this, Mr. Kerouac?” She was holding a paperback copy of *On the Road*, and she stood well out of Jack’s grasping reach. “And Mr. Dean, could I also impose upon you for an autograph for my daughter? She has pictures of you pinned up in her room, and it would mean the world to her.”

“Then the world she will get,” Jack said. “It would be my great pleasure to sign your book, Miss . . . ?”

“Just Esther.”

“A good biblical name,” Jack said.

“And, please, don’t write anything . . . you know . . . because my husband will see it,” she said to Jack.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, and I’m sorry if I made any untoward advances to you. I was quite drunk, but I had good reason.”

She stood beside Jimmy, awkwardly waiting for Jack to return her book.

“You wanna know why?”

“I don’t think that—”

“It’s because everything you probably think about me is true. I’m a no good shit.” He spoke softly, soberly, solicitously. He asked for a pen, then scribbled something on the title page of the book. The stewardess gave Jimmy a piece of red and gold letterhead stationary, and he wrote “Best wishes from James Dean.” Jack handed her back the book; she looked to see what he had written, then turned and started to walk away. Jimmy called her back to give her the pen and autographed stationary. She took them and disappeared without a word.

“You asshole, what did you write?” Jimmy asked.

Jack laughed. “I told her that I thought she was a lovely girl and I wanted to lick her pussy. She probably has a cat. Everybody has a cat. She can tell her husband I meant the cat.” He pushed the call button on the arm of his seat. “I’d better tell her that. She’s probably dumb as a door and won’t know how to handle it.”

“I think you’ve done enough to the poor thing.”

Another stewardess appeared, this one older and stony faced. “Did you need something, sir?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “The other girl.”

“She’s unavailable, sir.”

“I don’t give a shit if she’s unavailable, I want her.”

“Jack, give it up,” Jimmy said.

“Shall I call the captain, sir?”

“Well?” Jimmy asked. “Do you want the captain?”



“Yeah, Goddammit. I want the captain. He can bring me a drink himself.”

Jimmy apologized; the stewardess nodded and asked Jack what he wanted.

“Same as always. Johnny Walker Red neat.”

“That’s not what you were drinking,” Jimmy said.

“Is now.”

“I’ll get that for you right away, sir, but if there are any further problems, any at all, the captain will attend to you.”

“Yes sir, ma’am. I’m twitching in my booties.”

“Great,” Jimmy said. “You’re going to fuck everything up. You’re bound and determined. Well, we’re not seeing anyone until you get your act together.”

“I want to see the dream captain.”

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“The captain of dreams. He who makes everything better. The father of mother. The great white father.”

“Give me one of your pills,” Jimmy said.

“Won’t wake you up. None of this will wake you up, especially the booze. Will just poison you.”

“Thanks for the lecture.”

“I used to think you were the great white father,” Jack said and gave him a Benzedrine tablet.

Well?” Jimmy asked, swallowing the pill and following it with a slug of scotch.

“Well, what?”

“So now you don’t think I’m the great white father, right?”

Jack smiled and settled back comfortably into his chair. “No, man, I still think you’re the great white father. Or will be, if you ever wake up.”

Jimmy was wide-awake and buzzing, ready for the morning landing into Orly Airport. Impossibly, Jack had fallen asleep, an amphetamine twitching dream sleep; and he mumbled to Mémère and Gerard and squeezed Jimmy’s hand.

## TWO

Jack pounded on the polished door of suite 417 of the Prince de Galles Hotel in Paris before Jimmy could stop him.

“You’re going to blow this whole thing,” Jimmy said.

“No, I’m not, man. Cool out. They’re going to be happy as little twats to see us.”

A young man who looked to be in his early twenties opened the door. He was sleepy-eyed and greasy haired; the side of his pudgy yet delicately featured face was red, probably from the pressure of whatever he’d been using as a pillow. Fat and pear shaped, he wore a huge black tee shirt emblazoned with an American flag and baggy blue jeans slung too low under his roll of belly. He looked at Jack belligerently and said, “Yeah?” Then his gaze fixed on Jimmy, and his expression changed; he leaned his head back inside and said, “Hey, man . . . hey, guys, wake up, sonovabitch, it’s James Dean.” To Jimmy: “You *are* James Dean, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you must be . . . ?”

“Jack Kerouac.”

“Yeah, the guy with you, right?” he asked Jimmy.

“He’s a famous writer,” Jimmy said.

“Piss off,” Jack said. “I don’t need that shit.” Then to the fat boy, “We came here to see Elvis. He’s expecting us. You going to let us in or what?”

“I’m Jerry,” he said to Jimmy, ignoring Jack, and then stepped aside.

Jack walked into the room first. It smelled of sweat and sleep and hashish.

“Holy mother of God.”

“You’ve got that right,” a woman said in a cockney British accent. She was tall—probably six feet, red haired, fair skinned and freckled, big breasted, small hiped, and naked. Her hair was teased into a frizzed bouffant, which needed a combing, and her mascara was smudged. But she was beautiful . . . as were the other twelve or thirteen women in various states of undress. They curled on couches like cats, stretched out on the thick carpet with pillows and blankets; most were still asleep, or groggily waking up, dazed, stoned, or drunk, or hung over. There were pillows everywhere. Elvis must have ordered half the pillows in the entire hotel. The high windows of the huge salon were curtained, but the bright morning light seeped in.

“Eartha . . . ?” Jimmy asked, as he gazed at a woman who was a dead ringer for his friend Eartha Kitt. She had been under a blanket with one of Elvis’ bodyguards—Jimmy recognized

him—and when she sat up and smiled dreamily, Jimmy suddenly felt stoned, although it was more the combination of jetlag, fatigue, and a hangover than a contact high. He imagined that he was stirring milk into black coffee.

But she wasn’t Eartha.

This dark beauty was wearing a bright green silk shirt, completely unbuttoned.

Jimmy nodded to Elvis’ red haired, baby-faced bodyguard, who indicated possession by resting his hand on the Eartha look-a-like’s lap. “Welcome to the party. Man, do you *always* arrive so early?”

“Sometimes,” Jimmy said.

“What the hell does he mean by that?” Jack asked.

“I went to visit Elvis at Graceland early one morning, and that’s where I met that fine specimen of a man,” Jimmy said, pointing at the bodyguard. Then he put his fingers to his temples in mock deliberation. “Now let’s see if I can remember, your name is . . . Baby.”

“Got it in one,” Baby said.

“And you—” he said, turning to a burly, dark haired boy, who got up from under a blanket he was sharing with a woman with short cropped blond hair and a triangular black eye patch over her left eye—“are Lipton.”

“Like the tea,” Jack said, seeming to be enjoying himself hugely. He stared hard at Lipton’s woman, obviously interested.

“Fuck off. And don’t ever call me Lipton again. It’s Lips.”



The women giggled, and the Eartha look-a-like asked, "Are you *really* James Dean?"

"Well, can't you see?" Jerry said, obviously in awe of Jimmy.

"I thought you told me that Elvis was a goody-goody bible-pounder," Jack said to Jimmy. "This doesn't look like bible-pounder territory to me."

"Watch your mouth," Lips said.

"That's an odd thing for someone with your name to say," Jack said, goading the boy.

"Who are you, sweet cheeks?" one of the girls asked Jack. She, too, had an English accent.

Jack introduced himself, and the blond haired woman who was with Lips said, "I heard of him. He's the king of the beatniks or something. What's that book you wrote?" she asked, turning to Jack coyly. She had a beautiful heart-shaped face, a full Clara Bow mouth, and bobbed hair—the picture of a 1920s poster girl, yet her sexuality wasn't entirely feminine; there was something uncomfortably androgynous about her. She was naked and beautifully boyish. The eye patch and the silk headband were nice touches, though.

"On the Road."

"See, I told you."

Lips put on his pants, and said to Jack, "Okay, y'all. Your time's up." But he didn't push his luck; he didn't advance on Jack, who looked stronger and healthier than he really was. Jack was big, wide shouldered, barrel-

chested, and, as he told Jimmy, "handsome as all outdoors."

"I came to meet the great man," Jack said, and he shouted, "Wake up!"

"That's it," Baby said. "You guys are out of here." He called to a heavysset, sullen youth in chinos and a black tea shirt. "And this is Clinton."

"Clint," said the youth, standing in front of Jack and trying to stare him down.

Baby stood before Jimmy, who felt the surging rushing of adrenaline and said, "You really want to fuck with us? You really think Elvis is going to back you up? Because I promise you, man, you're ass is going to end up fired."

"Hey, man," Jerry said, "there's no need for talk like that. It's all cool. Really. Clint, Baby, hey, come on, Lips, these guys are guests of the boss, he told me they was coming."

"He didn't tell *us* nothing about it," Lips said.

"He probably did, and you forgot."

Baby laughed and broke eye contact with Jimmy.

The tension was broken.

Elvis' boys drifted back into the heart of the yellow wallpapered salon, and then all the girls were standing around Jimmy and Jack.

"Elvis won't be up until . . . dark," the Eartha look-a-like said.

"He's in there with two Blue Belles who have sacrificed their virgin bodies for God and country, while we . . . alas, while we can do naught but yearn and wait." That said by the tall, naked red-head with the bouffant.

Laughter.

“What the hell’s a bluebell?” Jimmy asked.

“We’re Blue Belles. All of us.”

“Where’ve you been, Mr. James Dean? We’re almost as famous as you.”

“Or you, Mr. Beatnik,” said the woman with the eye patch. She and Eartha Kitt’s look-alike stood away from the others . . . and away from Lips and Baby.

Jack cut through to the naked flapper cajoling him and said, “I’m no beatnik. I got a job.”

“Oh, yeah, honey, and what is that?”

“To deflower little virgins like you. What’s your name?”

“What do you think it is?”

Jack shook his head and said, “I don’t have time for games and bullshit.”

“Ah, busy man, hey?”

“Right.” He took a quick look around the room.

“Gypsy.”

“What?”

“That’s my name.”

“That’s no kind of name. What’s your real name?”

She shrugged and started to move away.

“Why do you wear a patch?”

“Because I had cancer,” she said directly. “Do you want to see what’s behind the patch?”

Jack grinned nervously at her and said, “No, I don’t think you should get completely undressed until we know each other a little better.”

She grinned back at him and pulled

off her headband. “There, is that better?”

He looked at her: freckles all over her face and shoulders; no make up except for heavy, bright red lipstick, which was smeared a bit; small breasts, nipples erect; muscular thighs; and a flat, pale, white ass. “You cold?”

“No. Why, should I be . . . ? I think the idea is that you’re supposed to tell me you’re going to keep me warm.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“What about you, hey?” She moved slightly closer to him.

Jack glanced around the salon, as if casing it, then shrugged, resigned. “We’re working with a guy who wears a patch sometimes.” “Hey, Jimmy,” he shouted across the room, “what’s wrong with Nick Ray’s eye that he wears a patch?”

Jimmy needed a pill, Percodan, something to cool him out and smooth out the pain, the ever-present ache from the accident, bone deep, bone aching pain. Elvis was going to wake up any minute, and the entire deal would be fucked; and Jack was out of his gourd again and screwing around with Lips’ woman, and there was going to be a fight, no way around that, and—

“Hey, Jimmy, you just go deaf or what?”

“I heard you. Lower your voice, people are supposed to be sleeping here.”

Jimmy had found a huge fruit bowl on a side table set for tea, and he was wolfing down an apple. He sliced off a piece of mottled blue Stilton cheese



and fingered a sticky square of quince paste.

"Isn't that right about Nick, though?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Sometimes he wears an eye patch."

"Why?"

"He says he's got something called lazy eye, that's all I know," Jimmy said. Then he mumbled to himself, "I think he wears it for show."

Jimmy felt the anger rise like bile in his throat. He was pissed off at Nick, pissed off at everybody, but especially Nick. You just couldn't trust *anybody*, they'd all turn around and screw you, like Nick, case in point: all that bullshit about how he had to go to Canada to make that stupid Eskimo movie with Mal Malenotti and Tony Quinn, all that supreme crap about how Nick was an *artiste* and had to do his own thing. Jimmy could feel his ears burn, as though he was being humiliated, right now, right here in front of all these women, in front of Elvis' asshole bodyguards, in front of Elvis himself.

As if *he* was naked.

*Fine, man, go for it, Nick. Knock yourself right out. I'll do On the Road by myself.*

"Hey, that's one hell of a face you're making." The voice was soft and deliciously throaty. "Is the cheese that bad? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Anybody ever tell you that you look just like Eartha Kitt?"

"Yeah, everybody tells me that. I can sing like her, too. My name's Kathleen, but everybody calls me Kit." She had buttoned her green shirt, which was

long enough to cover her crotch and part of her buttocks. "I saw you staring at me when you first came in."

"Yeah."

"Everybody does." She smiled at him and said in her refined British accent, "I'm the token nigger in the Blue Belles. I owe Eartha a lot."

"Why?"

"God gave me her face, and the Blue Belles gave me a job. The Lido isn't a bad gig, trust me."

"What's that?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "You as innocent as Elvis?"

Jimmy finally focused on her. "I know Eartha. She's my . . . sister."

Kathleen nodded. "Yes, it stands to reason you'd know everybody, and now you know me." She spread some cheese on a biscuit, topped it with quince paste, and offered it to Jimmy. "Do I look like Eartha all over?"

"I don't know, it's not like that with me and Eartha. I told you, she's like my sister."

"Well, I'm not anybody's sister, so tra la."

"Wait," Jimmy said. "What the hell is all this?"

"All what?"

"You, all your friends, screwing around with those assholes."

She laughed. "It's all about Elvis, honey. Excitement. The big trip. We just all came along for the ride. What are *you* doing here?"

"Business."

"Like what, a movie?"

"Maybe."

"Why are you eating like that?" Kit asked. "You stoned?"

"Maybe a little, but mostly tired."

"Jetlagged."

"Yeah."

Jack came over with Gypsy in tow, and she proffered them a silver hash pipe shaped like a French horn. The resinous smell was strong and sour: molasses and lime and the taste of morning hangover saliva at the back of the throat. Jimmy and Kit each took a deep toke.

"Jimmy, this is Gypsy," Jack said, as if only now thinking to introduce them, and then he said, turning to her, "You ever read Ashvagos's *Life of the Buddha*?"

Jimmy had heard that line before.

Gypsy nodded. "Of course. Have you read Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, or Jung's foreword to his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*?"

Jimmy laughed, but Jack was assured as God and said, "Yes, I've read everything, and when I win the Nobel Prize I'll tell the world that all things are different forms of the same thing . . . Universal Mind—you, me, Jimmy, Miss Eartha Kitt, over here. You see, Eartha Kitt right here proves it. She opens the truth out to us all. It's all about the identity of indiscernibles. If you can't tell the difference, then there ain't no difference. She *is* Eartha Kitt, and I'm you. We're all the same mind, Buddha mind, gold mind, silver mind, diamond mind, sapphire mind, and we can wake each other up." He closed one eye and gently touched Gypsy's eye patch. "You

know where you can find that . . . what I just said?"

"Where?" Gypsy asked.

"In my book *Some of the Dharma*."

"So you wrote about Kit and me and Mr. James Dean in there, right?" Gypsy asked sarcastically.

Jack laughed. "That's exactly what I did, or what I'll do. Same difference. Jimmy's in the book. He's God, man. I told him that when I first met him. My book is the holy bible of Buddhism."

"So where do I get this book of yours?" Gypsy asked.

"I'm the book. I'm writing it right now in two-line daydream flashes of enlightenment."

It was Gypsy's turn to make a sour face.

"You want to hear something from it? Let me enlighten you. This is straight from the book: 'The true man eschews women, has no children, and seeks no return to the dreary wheel of life and death. He is constantly on his guard against lust and concupiscence and cupidity.'" He shrugged and took a drink from a water glass; it was liquor, either scotch or rye. "But after one of these, my poison of choice, I'm game for anything." He patted Gypsy's buttocks, tickled her anus.

"I guess you are," Gypsy said.

"Cut it out, Jack," Jimmy said.

Jack grinned. "I don't think she would like that at all, man." He put his arms around Gypsy, but she pulled away from him.

"You need to get prettier, Jack Kah . . ."



“Kerouac, and I’m pretty enough.”

“Now, here, hold still, this will help,” Gypsy said as she rolled a wad of sticky quince paste between her fingers and then painted it over Jack’s thick, dark eyebrows. “That’s better,” and then she pulled a rose from a vase, broke the stem, and slipped it behind Jack’s right ear. “We’re going to transform you from Buddha man into satyr man, what do you think of that?”

Jack laughed, unpeeled a banana, and gently mashed it into her blond crotch.

“Hey!”

Gypsy unbuttoned Jack’s shirt and rubbed watermelon all over his hairy chest.

“That’s cold,” he yelled and threw an apple at Jimmy.

The hash seemed to burst into flame inside Jimmy’s chest, lighting him up, stoning him out. Everything happened in the dit-dot space of a second and stretched like spittle strands of glue on dark mahogany panels being pulled apart, wider and wider, until time was space and the apple soared backward; and Jack caught it, but it was small and red and frightened with a life and personality of its own. Then it jumped forward back to its true time, and shot dangerously toward Jimmy.

Kit was tearing at Jimmy’s shirt. Everything was wet and funny. An orange struck his face, stinging him. The girls were rushing over to the table to grab their piece of fruit and join in the sticky joy of a food fight, and Lips and Baby and Clint joined the melee,

pouring yellow juice and brown soda and liquor over the girls, licking juice and jelly from their skin, tumbling in molasses glee. Arms and legs, thighs and breasts and cocks and cunts sliding pushing sticking, and Jimmy listened intently to the sounds of sucking, sweaty bodies making suction slurps, the ooh-ah moaning of fucking, blind-date passion, the world resinous as hashish and clingy and tenacious. The women sucking fucking splaying themselves one atop another, the boys prodding, pushing, squeezing, pleading. Even Jerry got lucky and was gasping and grasping at the bouffant redhead, statuesque earth mother of wry tenderness and sympathy; but even she squealed out from under him. He was a mountain shifting, his tiny tree erect and quivering between thighs the color of splotched stone. The yellow room was dark, full of heat and hashish and tropical smells, and the drapes were thick slabs of meat holding back the piercing eyes of light looking in from the outside, the light that would fry Jimmy’s skin, burn him brown, then black; and Jimmy heard whimpering, a sound just like a small dog makes, and Eartha’s voice talking with a funny English accent—

“Jimmy, you’re okay, don’t cry, you’re okay, it’s just the dope, man.”

Jimmy and Kit were under the window, bathing in that dangerous light, swimming through the dancing dust motes; and Jimmy was ever so stoned, and Kit was Eartha—Jack was right—and she was his sister holding him, pro-

tecting him, seeing into him with her half-closed and dilated eyes of fire; her breath was hashish, her scent was pungent and dark and deliciously raw, and when Jimmy sighed “Eartha”, Eartha whispered “Kit”, and they moved together, against each other, Jimmy stuck into her, oil and butter, smooth sucking between her legs; he was piercing the brown eye between her legs, the eye blinking him deeper inside her, and he blinked and said, “Can you feel the curve of my dick?”

She giggled, low, throaty, and clamped her legs around him, closing him off to the prying sun and dust and the nattering, sussurating, gyrating, food fighting ghosts that occupied the rest of the room. She cried “Elvis” when she came, and Jimmy remembered oily, pimple-faced Elvis visiting him at the Passo Robles Hospital after Jimmy’s near fatal car accident on Highway 466.

Jimmy made a crying noise as he came, a cry of fear that he had lost himself and had, indeed, become Elvis; and then Eartha was snoring, her face buried in Jimmy’s neck, and Jimmy felt the coolness of the air on his penis, the tickle of sticky pubic hair. He looked up at the ceiling, at the chandelier above him, at the deadly crystal darts ready to be launched at him.

### THREE

It was dark outside, the electric darkness of a Times Square; and Jimmy was muzzy-mouthed, disoriented, and

his muscles felt watery, rubbery: the familiar after-effects of a hashish high. He also had a pounding headache just behind his eyes. Jimmy sat up and looked up through the curtains at the glittering jewels-on-velvet Champs-Élysées and the dramatically lit Arc de Triomphe. Curled beside him was Kit, sweet, beautiful Kit, who looked like Eartha, but had none of her resonance, none of her voodoo telepathic Creole witch magic; she was a nice girl, a regular girl, not a light bulb. Neither was Jimmy a light bulb just now. He was still groggy as the Blue Belles started getting dressed, fighting for the bathrooms, picking up clothes and food and pillows, cleaning as best they could.

Kit got up and helped the six-foot tall red haired woman tidy up the table. They disposed of the tablecloth and piles of linen napkins, which were stained and burned—the boys had set them alight with their new toys: clear-cased butane lighters. Jimmy and Kit had missed that; they had either been asleep or were too drugged out and busy with each other to notice anything but their own sweet molasses afternoon pleasure.

“Come on, Jimmy,” Kit said. “Are you going to get dressed and help us or just hang around on the floor like the goddamn sheik of Arabee?”

“Hang around on the floor,” Jimmy said.

She kicked him playfully. “The room service boys will be bringing breakfast any time now.”



The food came about a half hour later.

Three room service waiters removed the old glassware and trays and bowls of fruit. They replaced the linen tablecloth and napkins and then made two trips back to the suite, each time laden with trays stacked with food: bowls of gravy and mashed potatoes, huge mounds of burnt bacon swimming in grease, a five-layer coconut cake sliced into large wedges, deep fried banana-and-peanut butter sandwiches, double battered fried chicken, loaves of bread, quarts of milk, tomato juice, and steaming coffee.

Jimmy was starving, but when he reached for a piece of the coconut cake, Kit pulled him back.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nobody eats anything until Elvis starts.”

Jimmy laughed. “He’s not God.”

“Fuck that,” Jack said, and took a piece of bacon.

Jimmy did the same.

“There, you see?” Jack said sarcastically. “We finally made a stand.”

“This whole thing’s crazy,” Jimmy said, talking loudly to Kit so that everyone else could hear. “I heard he rented the whole floor. So why’s everyone sleeping in this one room, and on the floor? I was too stoned to think of it, but we should have just taken one of the other rooms.”

“Because of security,” said Jerry, who was now standing in the hallway that led to Elvis’ bedroom. “All the bedrooms are for Elvis.”

Jimmy shook his head in disbelief; and then everyone’s attention was directed to Elvis who strode into the room, past Jerry, and stood smiling in front of Jimmy. His face was scrubbed clean. His hair was sprayed instead of greased back and a wave teased over his forehead. He was dressed in the latest Parisian style—a beige sweater cut to emphasize his broad shoulders, continental slacks, Italian loafers—and he looked more like Jean-Paul Belmondo or Alain Delon than the old Elvis, the pimply-faced, nervous, uncertain boy wonder. “I’m really happy to see you, Jimmy. I really am. Gerry told me y’all had quite the time together while I was in dreamland.”

Jimmy smiled shyly, shook Elvis’ hand, and said, “Seems we did.”

“Y’all better start eating,” he said to everyone, “before everything gets cold”; and then he stacked at least twenty rashers of bacon on a large plate and grinned at Jimmy.

“Army seems to have made a man out of you,” Jimmy said. The sullenness and sulkiness and shyness were still there, but only as affect; this was a different Elvis.

“You think so? You really think so? Maybe. Yeah, maybe. Everything feels different.”

“Yeah . . . how?”

Elvis looked down at the floor for an instant, as if he was going to revert to old habits, but then he looked at Jimmy and said, “Dunno. It’s hard to explain, but . . . it’s more like the way I feel when I’m onstage, like your whole

body gets goose bumps, but it's not goose bumps. It's not a chill either. It's like a surge of electricity going through you." He laughed at himself and shook his head. "No, that's all wrong. I mean, that's how it feels when I'm onstage, but, man, I ain't calm when I'm up there, and I don't calm down for hours after I leave the stage. But like I'm calm now, so it's different, you know what I mean?"

Jimmy knew what he meant. It was control, and he, Jimmy, was still in control. "Like you can just turn something on, and, bam, the electricity, like you said, comes on. I've talked about this with Marilyn... Monroe."

"Yeah?" Elvis said; for all his newfound fame and access to show business personalities, he was still obviously impressed.

"We do it. It's like wriggling your ears or something. You just suddenly figure it out." Jimmy could see Jack coming toward them, and he shook his head, warning him away. "But it's a quiet thing," he said to Elvis, "isn't it? It's like focus, not the jittery shit you said you feel when you're onstage or on the set."

"That's it, exactly, man. I've always been nervous, though, ever since I was a kid."

"Well, welcome to the club," Jimmy said, lighting up on cue. He had Elvis... or thought he did. "But, you know, sometimes the electricity, like you said, doesn't work."

Elvis nodded, but looked uncertain,

nervous, but only for a second. "I guess so..."

"Like with Marilyn," Jimmy continued. "All those hours with her makeup guy, and all that shit, that's so she can cross over, you know what I mean? So she can be Marilyn Monroe on the set because she can't take the chance that it won't work, that she can't flick the switch. And sometimes, even with all the preparation, it doesn't work."

Elvis shook his head in commiseration, then said, "Well, I guess so far it works for me... because I believe in the Bible. I believe that all good things come from God, and I don't believe I'd sing the way I do or anything if God didn't want me to. Maybe that would help you, too, Jimmy, you know what I mean?"

Jimmy nodded—*Christ on a crutch, here he is banging two chorus girls, probably doing up every kind of upper and downer known to man, there's a floating orgy going on in the living room, and he believes it's all God's will. Yeah, go get it, buddy. Okeydokey*—and waved Jack over to introduce him to Elvis, just as the phone rang.

Jerry picked it up.

"Hallo...? Yeah, will screw you, too, buddy." He carefully placed the handset on the cradle.

"Who was that?" Elvis asked.

Jerry shrugged.

The phone rang again, and a crew-cut boy—Elvis' Army buddy who called himself Mr. Bitlow and was nicknamed Bit—said, "I'd better take it."

"Yes? I'm very sorry, sir. Yes, I



understand. Could you hold on for just one moment, sir, while I check?" He covered the transmitter with his palm, looked at Elvis and said, "It's the manager of the Lido, and he's really pissed-off. I mean really pissed-off. Says he's been calling for hours, and that he's going to sue us and the hotel. Says we got all the Blue Belles here, and we're holding up the entire review. He can't start the show, and he says this is the last time. If we don't get them back pronto, he's going consider it a breach of contract and fire the lot."

"Shit," someone said.

"He can't do that. He can't fucking fire *everybody*."

"Cool out," Elvis said, and took the phone. "Hello, sir, this is Elvis Presley, and I'm truly sorry for any inconvenience, sir. It's all my fault . . . Yes sir, I'll have all the girls over to you right away. I'm going to put them in cabs right now, so don't you worry, sir, you're going to be seeing them in a few minutes . . . I promise. Yes sir, you'll see, and they won't never be late again, that's a promise. Good bye, sir."

He handed the phone to Bit, who hung it up, and said to Jerry, "You spoke to that man like he was a piece of shit. No wonder he's mad." Jerry's ears turned red, and Elvis didn't humiliate him further in front of the girls. He turned to Bit and said, "Do me a favor, man. Go downstairs and have the hotel put something together, you know, flowers and candy and champagne. And . . . toys." He asked the girls if the

manager had children. "Yeah, Bit, get some dolls, you know, anything."

"Everything will be closed, it's—"

"Tell them it's for me. They'll open the store." He waved the girls out of the salon. "And Bit, make sure there's cabs for everyone . . . and that they get in them." Then he ordered Jerry to open two suites for Jimmy and Jack so they could shower and freshen up.

"You need clothes? I got everything, man."

Jimmy and Jack picked out new suits, shirts, and socks; and then cleaned and buffed, burping up bits of undigested chicken and bacon, jet-lagged, and hung-over, they got into a white Cadillac limousine that was parked beside the ivory and gold columns of the hotel and cruised down Avenue George V to the Champs-Élysées. The chauffeur was young and waved his arms wildly as he talked. Where would Elvis wish to go before stopping at the Lido—the 4 O'clock Club, the Crazy Horse, the Carousel, the Folies-Bergère, or the Moulin Rouge?

Not tonight. Tonight was different.

They were going to the Lido first, but not until Elvis showed Jimmy and Jack the sights of Paris. They drove around and around the floodlit white boulevards. They drove in circles "Up to the Arch and back, one more time," Elvis said over and over. The brightly lit Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe were gauzy and unfocused, as if they were underwater. The world was damp stone and reflecting glass. Rain spattered and windshield wipers slid

and squeaked to the beat of this sizzled, soused, sleepless, jazz-lit, jetlagged, waterlogged, electric light Paris night.

Then back around . . . around and around, down the Champs-Élysées yet again.

To number 78.

“There, the Lido.”

#### FOUR

**T**he Blue Belles had just started dancing when Jimmy and Jack arrived with Elvis and his “bodyguards,” who had become known as the Memphis Mafia. Heads turned as Joseph Clerico, one of the owners, met them before they could reach the crowded, sumptuous bar.

“*Bonsoir*, my friend,” Clerico said to Elvis, ignoring the others. He was middle-aged, handsome, and very well dressed in a dark suit and cuffed shirt with a gold clasp under the collar, which pushed up the knot of his red and blue striped silk tie. “You caused us a bit of a problem tonight.”

“Yes, and for that—”

“No worries, it is all in the past,” Clerico said, smiling. “The girls, they brought your gifts for Pierre-Louis.”

“Pierre-Louis?”

“My manager . . .”

“Oh, yes sir, sorry, the guy with the gray hair.”

“You are very generous, oh, yes, but you should not spend your money on such things in future.” Clerico made a sweeping gesture with his arm, indicating that he wished Elvis and his body-

guards to move toward the swimming pool ahead. There must have been two hundred people seated at tables around the stage and lounging by the swimming pool. A few bikiniéd naiads were swimming and splashing in the champagne colored water. “We are proud to have you and your company as honored guests, but . . .”

Elvis didn’t say anything.

“But my brother, he is, how do you say, he is more of a temper, and I had to talk him out of firing our wonderful Blue Belles. Just like that he would have done it.” Clerico spoke softly, and Jimmy thought of him as some sort of a suave, French version of Mafia boss Sam Giancana. In fact, he could easily imagine this place in Vegas or Reno, although it was far more opulent than any casino he had ever seen. He could become dizzy just looking up at the ceilings; there were naked showgirls with diaphanous fairy wings swinging on circus trapezes over the goggling guests, who were tucking into their veal medallions with morel mushrooms and duck foie gras with stewed figs. The plates and crystal glassware were displayed like geometrical components of a modern art composition on the pearl white tablecloths.

Clerico continued. “So if this happens again, I am afraid it would not be good for the girls. They will be fired, and I would never wish to tell someone of your celebration, uh, I think of your celebrity, that you would not be welcome here. My brother and I, we wish this to be your home. But, as my poppa



used to say, you should not make a shit where you eat.”

Elvis’ ears turned red, and Jimmy figured that it was time to tell the bastard to fuck-off . . . time to find another club. The owner was certainly making a meal of it.

“ . . . so we forget all about it now, yes? And maybe tonight, you will sing for our guests? To, how do you say, wipe clean the slat?”

“Slate,” said Bit, who glanced at Jimmy, as if they had a mutual understanding . . . as if they both were thinking the same thing. Jimmy, for his part, thought that Bit was the only normal person hanging around Elvis.

“Of course. Slate. Well, will you honor us with a song tonight?”

“I don’t know if we’re going to stay,” Elvis said nervously. It was the old Elvis.

“Of course you will stay. As my guests.”

“Maybe later,” Elvis said.

“That’s good enough for me,” Clerico said, as he led them toward the pool.

The Blue Belles were dressed in see-through gauzy outfits and huge feathered headdresses, and they danced and sang on the stage above the pool as a sixteen-piece orchestra brayed behind them. They all waved in unison as Elvis walked toward them, as if that was a practiced part of their routine. The audience roared and clapped. All heads were turned toward Elvis, and Jimmy felt a trickle, a tickle in his chest, but it wasn’t from booze or dope; it was just a

small adrenaline rush of envy. Jimmy looked for Kit, as if the electric bleeding inside him was sexual desire instead of its uglier cousin. There she was, tall and dark and statuesque on high heels, executing a synchronized pirouette. Gauze floated around her arms and shoulders. Her breasts were bare, her nipples the color of powdered chocolate. She saw him, looked directly at him, smiled, and, yes, it was his gonads, it was the juice flowing . . . he was in control.

They passed the long, striated marble bar with its overhead chandeliers of frosted globes stacked in inverted pyramids. All the seats were taken by women, who were sipping their aperitifs while their well-dressed men stood around them, trying to keep out of each other’s way and gawking at the Blue Belles, who were now singing and stripping while naked angels swung from the ceiling in ever-higher arcs. A teenager wearing a very revealing strapless evening gown rushed over to Elvis shouting “*Elvees . . . Elvees, j’t’aime, j’t’aime,*” but Clerico gently propelled him forward, and an adult, probably her mother, grabbed her; and someone shouted Jimmy’s name.

He heard his name distinctly, but didn’t turn. He was still a goddamn star. He waved at Kit.

“Hey, Jimmy. *Jimmy!*”

It was Nick Ray’s voice.

Jimmy turned around, and there was Nick, cutting himself out of the crowd, looking wired and intent, with a cut crystal glass in his hand. “Christ, man,

I've been calling your hotel room all day."

"We weren't there," Jimmy said. "We went directly to see Elvis. Hold on a minute while I call Jack. He'll be happy to see you."

"But not you, right?"

"What do you mean?" Jimmy asked warily.

"Like I said. Hold off on Jack for a few minutes. I want to talk to you first."

"Elvis and the rest of them are going to wonder where I went."

"Then we'll deal with it then," Nick said. "You look like shit."

"Thanks. You look pretty good, actually."

Nick grinned and led him to the far end of the bar. He was wearing a black silk shirt buttoned at the collar, no tie, and a charcoal gray suit tailored in the continental style. His curly hair had just been cut, and he looked every bit the successful European film director. As he would say: "It's all smoke and mirrors."

Jimmy ordered a glass of champagne.

"I didn't know you had such an educated palate."

"When in Rome . . ." Jimmy said.

"This sure as hell ain't Rome, thank God."

"So what'd you want to say?"

"Shit, Jimmy, you're going to make it as difficult as possible, aren't you?"

"Are we still partners?" Jimmy asked bluntly.

"Yes, of course we are."

"Then why—"

"Because I got fucked up," Nick said, interrupting him.

"How'd you know what I was going to say?"

"You're pissed off about the Eskimo movie."

Jimmy laughed. "You always told me not to call it that."

"Look, I fucked up."

"I'm not your mother. You don't have to explain anything to me."

"I let you down. For that I'm sorry."

"You didn't let me down," Jimmy said. "I just kept working on the script with Jack. I got plenty of other stuff to keep me busy. . . . Look, Nick, you and me ain't married. You don't have to be monogamous. You can make all the films you want to. With whoever you want to." Dramatic pause. "But I do wonder if you're a hundred percent with this project."

Nick shook his head and sighed. "I'm the one who set up the meeting with Elvis. I've spent the last month turning the script into a shooting script."

"When are you going back to LA?"

"When you go."

Jimmy nodded and watched the gossamer showgirls swinging above, and he remembered the trapeze in Uncle Marcus' barn, remembered slipping, falling, breaking his front tooth; and he became dizzy with the memory, with its strength and power; he could smell the hay, the stink of the animals, and he wanted to be home in Illinois, not in Paris or New York or LA.

"I'm sorry about all that stupid bullshit I laid on you."



Jimmy laughed. "You were probably right. Like you always said, you got to go your own way, have your own vision. Sometimes collaboration can poison it, and you end up with—I don't know, with something bad."

"Well, I managed that quite well on my own."

"I saw the Eskimo film," Jimmy said. "I didn't think it was that bad."

"It was shit."

"You couldn't help it that the plane carrying all your location footage crashed. That would do in anybody's film."

Nick nodded and Jimmy sipped his champagne. It tasted sour and watery. *Who the fuck am I trying to impress? I should have ordered whiskey.* There was no taste to whiskey, except for the sour wood—that's what he thought it was, although wood probably couldn't be sour, and he never tasted wood, anyway—and then the burning warmth as it settled in the chest and stomach. The rush . . .

"Everything had been going too well," Nick said. "I just couldn't stand it, I guess. Had to try to fuck it up, and I did." He laughed and sipped his drink. "I picked the perfect picture to do it with. Nobody wants to talk to me just now. Couldn't even sell *The Savage Innocents* into the States."

"You will."

"Yeah, when your hair turns gray like mine."

They both started laughing, nervous laughter that neither one could stop until, like children, they were ex-

hausted with it; it was like trying to stop crying.

"I had to sell the fucking car, would you believe that?"

"We make this film, we get Elvis over there, we'll buy ten cars," Jimmy said.

Nick nodded. He was back in. "We should have made *The Savage Innocents* together. I was wrong to cut you out."

"Give it up, man, I wouldn't have done the film, anyway," Jimmy said, lying. "I had too much going on. Anyway, would you wish that turkey on your best friend?"

"That's the only good thing that came out of it, that you didn't get burned, too." Nick smiled in spite of himself. He paused, then said, without looking at Jimmy, "You know about my problems getting insured . . . because of my drinking."

"I heard something."

"How come you never asked me about it?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Dunno. I just figured we'd work it out."

Nick handed Jimmy his glass. "Here. Take a slug."

Jimmy sniffed at the rim. No smell at all.

"It's Perrier. I've been straight, stoned sober for almost a month. I also stopped gambling. That's all over, too. That's it. I can't risk falling off the wagon again. If I do, everything goes. Everything . . . Okay?"

"What can I say? Sure."

"We go back to square one, you and me," Nick said, but it was a question.

"Whatever you want, Nick."

"You're not going to buy what I say, are you?"

"Jesus Christ, give it up, Nick. It's okay. We're *okay*."

Nick nodded and said, "That's it. You'll never see me kiss ass again. So from now on, it's business."

Jimmy raised his glass. "You know, this stuff tastes like shit."

"That's because you just asked for champagne, and they gave you . . . shit. Hey, *garçon*," he called to the barkeep. "*Une glass du Bollinger pour mon ami.*"

"So how'd you know you'd find me here?" Jimmy asked. He tasted the champagne; it was good.

Nick shrugged. "I figured I'd see Elvis and his gang of children, and maybe you'd be with them. I tried calling through to his suite, but kept getting a busy. Phone must have been off the hook."

"Yeah, probably . . . Have you talked to Elvis about the film?"

"Yeah, once, but it didn't come to anything. His minder, Bitsnog, or whatever his name is, won't ever give Elvis the phone. So I started coming down here, figuring I'd catch him. He seemed happy to see me, but wouldn't talk business until he spoke to the Colonel and until you were here, too. So much for being the guru."

"Isn't you. Nobody can get through. It's all fucked up. I've seen it, close-up." Jimmy shook his head. "I can't figure why he's surrounded himself with all those idiots. Put them all together and you'd still be short of a brain . . . except

for the guy who wouldn't put you through, the one you call Bitsnog." Jimmy chuckled.

"I can't believe we're having such problems getting to him," Nick said, "not after all the press he got for *Left-Handed Gun*. He wanted to learn everything we knew, be part of everything . . . like you when we did *Rebel*. I was supposed to meet with him last week; it was all set up. Then it got changed until you got here, and we still don't have a date. The Colonel has to have nixed it, and Elvis probably just doesn't know how to tell us, so he's hiding out. You probably could have saved yourself a trip."

"Nah, it was worth it to see you, man."

Nick smiled and nodded. "Yeah, well, there is that."

"I think if anything's going to happen, it'll happen like this."

"Like what?"

"Like you said . . . like we did with *Left-Handed Gun*. We've got to lead him down the rosy path, make him want to do it."

"I sent him the script," Nick said.

"Yeah . . . ?"

"Nothing. I asked him about it when I bumped into him here. He said he didn't know anything about it. I don't think he ever saw it."

"He saw it. I'd bet my balls on it."

"I can't blame Elvis. It's the Colonel," Nick said. "When we talked last month, you told me the Colonel was interested."

Jimmy shrugged. "He's interested.



He's just playing games. He wouldn't admit it, but he's got to be worried that Elvis might not be as hot as he was. You know about the reissue of *Loving You* and *King Creole*?"

"No," Nick said. "What about it?"

"Paramount reissued both films as a double bill. Bombed big time. It was pulled in less than a week. The exhibitors hated it."

"Maybe that can work in our favor. Bird in the hand, and all that."

"The Colonel will fuck us around until Elvis is out of the Army," Jimmy said. "Until he figures out how hot Elvis is with the folks back home . . . and with the studios."

"If he's hot, we're out."

"Our chances won't be good. If the fat bastard has his way, Elvis will be doing those asshole musicals for the rest of his life."

"So then all this is a waste of time," Nick said, playing along with Jimmy.

"You wouldn't be here if it was. Elvis has the bug. He wants to act. He wants to direct."

"You could've fooled me, and I don't know about three directors on one film."

Jimmy laughed.

"If he's as earnest as you say, he would've taken our calls . . . my calls," Nick said. "He would have read the script."

"I think he's like Billy Burroughs," Jimmy said. "I think we just got to get to the right Elvis, Jimmy said."

Nick shook his head. "You stoned?"

"No . . . well, maybe something

residual. Burroughs had all these personalities. I think Elvis is like that. Not as bad, but the Elvis we worked with on the film isn't the one out there by the pool."

"So what do you propose to do?"

"I just told you."

## FIVE

"Put your skates on," Elvis said to Jimmy. They were sitting together on a bleachers style bench. "You ever done this before?"

Jimmy shook his head, but he was lying; he knew how to roller-skate, and ice skate, too. The klieg-lit, cavernous rink of *La Main Jaune* on Rue du Caporal-Peugeot was empty, except for a few of Elvis' boys who were trying out their rental skates.

Elvis had rented the roller skating rink between midnight and 8:00 AM for the duration of his leave in Paris. He had his own key, and Jimmy couldn't see anyone who looked anything like management overseeing the proceedings.

"I invited a few of the waiters from the Lido, so we could have teams, you know what I mean? They'll be here anytime."

"No, man, I really don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"It's something we used to do at the Rainbow Roller-dome back in Memphis," Elvis said. "When I found out I was going into the Army, no matter what, I rented out the Rainbow for a week."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was just pissed off, I guess, and needed to kick some ass.”

“Pissed off?”

Elvis smiled. “You think I was gung-ho to join up? You gotta stop reading those magazines. It was the Colonel’s idea that I should just do the regular thing. I guess he was right, I don’t know. But . . . fuck the Army, man.”

“So you want to kick ass tonight? How?”

“Hey, Gerry,” Elvis shouted. “Bring me and Jimmy some of those knee guards and arm protectors, and give some out to Nick and Jack over there.” Jack and Nick were sitting and talking with Bit: they were doing their jobs: staying away from Jimmy and Elvis.

Jimmy needed time to talk to Elvis alone.

Jerry brought over the gear; Elvis took it, thanked him, then waved him away. “You know how to use this stuff?” Elvis asked Jimmy.

“Yeah, I used to play basketball.”

“Well, this is more like football.”

“What is?”

Elvis smiled. “You know, Jimmy, I got a lot of respect for you and what you done.”

“What do you mean?”

“What you done with your life, and what you did for me when my momma passed over.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Jimmy said, “except stand around in a suit.”

Elvis didn’t laugh, but Jimmy knew he had him.

“And I talked to Jack about his brother,” Elvis said. “What was his name?”

“Gerard, I think.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Gerard. Jack thinks he was a saint.”

Jimmy nodded.

“My brother Jesse is a saint . . . like that . . . like Gerard. But . . .”

“Yeah?”

“When Momma died, it was like he died all over again. Like his spirit was alive as long as my momma was alive, and then . . .” Elvis shrugged and looked like he was going to start crying right in front of Jimmy.

“It’ll be all right, man.”

“Momma thought the world of you, and I know you fixed it up with Jack to talk to me about his Gerard so’s to help me about Jesse.”

“I don’t know about that. I just thought that, like, you guys had something important in common. That’s why I think you’d be good working with Jack. We still got to do another cut on the script for *On the Road*.”

“Nick sent it over, but it’s already set, man. It’s a shooting script.”

“Nick always has to have everything nailed down. You know, so he can visualize it.” Figuring that Elvis might catch him out, he said, “And then, of course, he directs as if there wasn’t a script at all. It’s all collaboration, like with *Left-Handed Gun*. The shooting script is for the money people. He sent it over to you for your input.” After a beat, “He doesn’t think you got it, though.”



"I got it."

"So how come you gave Nick such a hard time getting through? He says he's been hanging around here just to try to catch up with you."

Elvis shook his head, as if he was angry, frustrated. "I don't know what to do, Jimmy." He looked down at the smooth, scuffed floor.

"About what, man?"

"The picture . . . everything."

Jimmy didn't say anything; he waited for Elvis to continue.

"You know, tonight was the first time I performed in fifteen months?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Yeah, it was good to be back on stage, but, man, I thought I was going to shit my pants, I was so jittery."

"Everybody loved you. I was expecting you to do your pelvis thing, though." Jimmy grinned. "I didn't expect you to sing 'Willow Weep for Me'. It was beautiful. You got a beautiful voice. I didn't know you played piano."

"I'm not doing what I used to do," Elvis said. "That's what everyone expects me to do. I been working on my technique. A buddy of mine—he ain't on this trip with us—he's teaching me how to breathe right and extend my range. I got three octaves, but I have trouble on the top. He—that's my buddy—studied with Professor Lee Roy Abernathy. You know about gospel music?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I'd rather sing gospel than anything. Professor Abernathy wrote 'Gospel Boogie'. Everybody knows

about him . . . I mean, if you know about gospel."

"Yeah," Jimmy said.

"Who's your favorite singer?" Elvis asked.

Jimmy grinned again. "You, I guess."

"Don't bullshit, man. Who?"

"Shit, I don't know."

"Mine is Mario Lanza. He kicks ass, man. So does Dean Martin, Vic Damone, Jackie Wilson, and Sam Cooke."

"Yeah?"

"But since I been in the Army, there are all these new singers getting all kinds of promotion, and, shit, they can't even sing. They got no talent, and they can't even goddamn sing. You ever hear a guy called Fabian? Some newspaper in California said he *unseated* me." Elvis shook his head. "I don't know what everyone's going to expect when I get out. I just don't know. It's all changing. All you hear now are assholes like Frankie Avalon, Bobby Vee, and Pat Boone . . . man, Pat Boone is fucking everywhere. Paul Anka's not bad, though, you think?"

"No, he's okay."

"The Colonel says it's important that everything is done exactly right when I get out."

"And what's exactly right?" Jimmy asked carefully. "You really want to make more pictures like *Loving You* and *King Creole*?"

"They done okay for me and the Colonel."

"So did the film you did with me and Nick. That did *great*."

"The Colonel says it was good, but..."

"But what?"

"The Colonel says it's the formula that will keep us on top."

"On top of what?" Jimmy asked, sneering.

"Just on top. He's done good with my recording contracts, twenty-five percent more on everything new I record, and he got me favored nations publishing royalties."

"What's that?"

Elvis laughed and said, "Beats my ass, Jimmy. But the Colonel thinks it's good."

"Look, you want to do *On the Road* with us or not?" There it is, Jimmy told himself. Shit or get off the pot.

"Yeah, I do, but if it means going against the Colonel..."

"What then? What if it does? What if it fucking does? Is he your boss or what?"

"Ain't like that, Jimmy. You know how it is. He takes care of the business."

"This film will be important for your career. More important than anything else."

"You don't have to sell me. Nothin's going to sell me."

"Well, then I guess I wasted my time."

Elvis stared hard at the floor and said, "It would be easier if Momma were here."

"You know what she would tell you."

"Yeah, she liked you, Jimmy, but that's not what I meant. If she was alive,

I'd get a sign... from Jesse, or from God directly, like I did when I drove out to California to see you when you had your accident. When I was in the desert and saw those rings circling around that big red moon, like smoke-rings they were, and I saw them clear as anything."

"You told me about that."

"Probably did." After a beat, Elvis said, "You know, I memorized *Rebel Without a Cause*? Every line."

Jimmy smiled. "Yeah, Elvis, you've only told me about a thousand times."

"And a pal of yours been hanging around with us. He'd be here now, if I'd sent him some money, but too much shit going on to think about everything. Anyway, I got enough people hanging around. I wasn't meaning you. You know that, right?"

Jimmy nodded and asked, "Who're you talking about?"

"Nick Adams."

Jimmy grimaced.

"He's says he's your best friend in all the world, that he used to live with you. He got a part in *Pillow Talk* with Rock Hudson and Doris Day." Elvis laughed. "Sure as hell won't be *Rebel Without a Cause*. Or *On the Road*. He's dying to be in *On the Road*."

"I'll bet he is."

"He did a good job in *Rebel*," Elvis said. "You think so, don't you?"

"I guess."

"You think there's a chance for him in *On the Road*?"

"You want him in the picture?" Jimmy asked.



"Yeah, would be a good thing to do."

"Okay, then he's in."

"He's told me a lot about how Nick—Nick Ray—and you directed *Rebel*."

"Nick directed *Rebel*," Jimmy said. "Not me."

"Yeah, okay. Nick Adams told me about how Nick cast *Rebel* by making everyone play King of the Mountain. He had everybody climb up a platform or something, and the winners got the roles."

Jimmy laughed. "Wasn't exactly like that. Leave it to Adams to fuck up the story."

"I been doing a lot of thinking about that King of the Mountain stuff. I think it's a sign."

"Of what?"

Elvis smiled and nodded. "Like I told you about the Rainbow Roller-dome back in Memphis, me and the guys used to play this game. Gerry called it War, but then the name got changed to King of the Mountain." He paused. "I changed it. You see what I mean? It's a sign."

"So what happens in your King of the Mountain?"

Elvis laughed. "Everything. Anything. It's war, man. Whoever's left standing wins. I pick the teams. Odds got to be with me."

"Yeah?"

Elvis shrugged. "If you want, we can play tonight." He paused. "If your team wins, I'll do the picture."

"And if my team loses?"

Elvis shrugged. "Then you can talk

to the Colonel and do whatever you were going to do anyway. I'll do everything to help you, but I won't go around the Colonel."

"If we win, then you'll tell the Colonel to fuck off."

"If he's against me doing the film."

"That don't make any sense," Jimmy said. "You going to make old Nick over there go head to head with Jerry?"

"Either you understand signs, or you don't." Elvis mumbled, as if he had suddenly gotten woozy. "Go ask Jack."

Elvis looked toward the large entrance. His eyelids were heavy, his face slack. The boys from the Lido had arrived, along with the Blue Belles.

"Hey, Elvis, man, you okay?" Jimmy asked. But Elvis was somewhere else, working out the details of his signs, dreams, and portents.

## SIX

Chicken. It was going to be a game of chicken. The chicken run from *Rebel* on skates. The Lido waiters standing beside Jimmy and Jack were chuffed. They were stoned out and eager to beat the crap out of Elvis and his team. Nick was playing along out of sheer macho, but didn't look quite as convincing; he was obviously trying to mirror the others. But he could skate . . . better than the others.

The Blue Belles had arrived and were watching from the edge of the rink. Kit waved to Jimmy. The air smelled of old wood and metal, lingering sweat, beer, and carbolic.

“Remember, anything goes,” Elvis shouted. He was standing on the other side of the rink with Baby, Lips, Clint, and Bit, and a few big boys from the Lido. He put a whistle in his mouth to start the game, then thought better of it and skated across the great expanse of sea-smooth wooden floor toward Jimmy. “Here, man, this is only fair,” and he handed Jimmy some white pills. “Nick, Jack, you guys should try these, too. All the boys on my team took them. Aw, fuck it,” he said, and handed pills out to the Lido boys on Jimmy’s team. Then he shouted to Jerry to bring over some coffee. “Gotta take it with caffeine, man. It’ll make the pills work faster. Those little pills will give you more strength and energy than you can imagine. Keep you slim and trim, too, and they’re perfectly safe. I know all about medicine, and these are prescribed by doctors to overweight people every day.”

Jerry brought a mug of tepid coffee for everyone to share. He seemed to take the game very seriously, and seemed irritated with Elvis for asking him to be familiar with the enemy. After he left for his side of the rink, Jimmy took two of the amphetamines. “These pills don’t seem to have done him much good,” he said to Elvis, referring to Jerry.

“You should’ve seen him before the pills,” Elvis said.

Jack started laughing and nodding. He was out of control, already stoned; and Jimmy noticed that Elvis was looking intently at him. They drank their

coffee and made small talk until everyone was buzzing, stoned, drunk, excited. The skating rink was vibrating with the thick energies and noise, and Jimmy tasted metal, the after-taste of the pills, and he tasted tequila and mint; and Elvis was talking to Nick. “Man, you don’t have to do this, you know. It could get rough. I’ll give you guys one of mine, one of the bouncers from the club, how’s that? And you can cool this one out and tickle the girls over there.”

Nick shook his head. “I’m forty-eight, not eighty-eight.”

“Well, sir, that’s pretty old to be doing this sort of a thing.”

“Then let’s just do the picture, and forget all this shit.”

Elvis shook his head sadly, and wouldn’t look directly at Nick.

“Then you better watch your ass, Presley,” Nick said, which got Jack laughing again. As Elvis skated away, Nick sang

The Hun is in the dell

The Hun is in the dell

hi ho the merry ho

The Hun is in the dell

“What the hell is that?” Jimmy asked. The laughter was infectious.

“Game we used to play when I was a kid . . . during the War. I was always the Hun.”

“Figures,” Jimmy said. “Look, man, Elvis is right. Why don’t you sit this one out?”

“I can feel the pills kicking in,” Nick said. “I’m God,” and he started singing

Oh my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall.



Well my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall.

Well my name it is Sam Hall.

And I hate you one and all.

Yes I hate you one and all.

Goddamn your eyes.

“I changed my name to Sam Hall when I was three years old,” Nick continued, talking fast; and, indeed, everything was moving fast, Jimmy could feel the jag, could feel the needle sharp rush, a coruscating wave of needles, cold, cold needles washing, piercing, running through him, running him through, and he was ready, ready, ready to be the Hun, to be Sam Hall, I hate your Goddamn eyes is right. “German names weren’t popular at the outbreak of World War One. You know what my name was, Jimmy, I told you.”

“Yeah, Sam Hall.”

“Goddamn you, Jimmy.”

“You told me your family name was Konkell, or something like that,” Jimmy said, buzzing, burning, needle focused on Elvis, who was on the other side of the rink now with his own team, waving his arms, shouting something incomprehensible, then putting that green whistle into his mouth—

“Kienzle,” Nick said. “No wonder you can’t memorize a goddamn line.”

“Fuck you.”

“And I sang the Sam Hall song for Carl Sandburg twenty years later.”

“The poet?” Jack asked.

“None other.”

The whistle piercing, high-pitched.

Echoing, shouting, the rattling, ball-bearing whirring of the Chicago Cus-

tom roller skates, air whooshing and crepitating in Jimmy’s ears, needle breezes of amphetamines blowing through him, opening his lungs, and Nick and Jack screaming “Goddamn your eyes Goddamn your eyes” as they rushed toward Elvis’s team.

Elvis screaming.

Lido boys screaming in French.

High-pitched Blue Belle screaming.

Then Jack, who could barely stand on his skates—who had skated on the sidewalks as a boy, but that was all—lost his balance.

“Sonovabitch bastard!”

Jack’s leg swept out. Nick jumped agilely over it. Jack fell on his back, momentarily out of the fray. Nick collided with Lips. Jimmy smashed into Baby, elbowing him hard in the ribs, then slipped between two of Elvis’ Lido boys, who went for him, and then the deafening screech of Elvis’ whistle, and the teams reformed. An instant later, everything moving fast, fast as the thrumming in Jimmy’s head, and Jack said something about how he wasn’t going to sit on his ass this time, and Elvis rushing toward them, whistle clenched between his teeth, the whistle of a train screaming, Jack screaming, Nick screaming, Jimmy screaming as they threw themselves at the boys coming for them. In a moment of needle drug clarity, Jimmy realized how dangerous and stupid this all was, and an instant later everything was black anger.

Jack elbowed a Lido boy in the face.

The Blue Belles booed.

Nick fell underfoot.

As did Lips.

Bit pulled Nick out of harm's way, and one of Jimmy's Lido boys kicked him in the chest for his trouble. Jack went after him, and the game was instantly transformed into a no-holds-barred fight.

But Jimmy didn't see anything but Elvis.

Fuck the picture *On the Road*. Fuck Elvis. Fuck Paris. Fuck the whole goddamn deal, including Nick, and he went for Elvis. This was going to end it, crack it wide open, and he flew at Elvis, his skates leaving the ground, but Jerry intercepted him, protecting Elvis.

Jerry crashed into Jimmy, sending him flying floating as all the amphetamine needle pinprick blow-out explosions calmed, became as smooth and straight as the floor, and Jimmy now had all the time in the world as he drifted, airborne, a God, just like Nick, and time was going so slowly now that Jimmy could have counted to five . . . if he had wanted to.

He hit the floor hard, and blacked out.

Elvis woke him up and said, "You won, man."

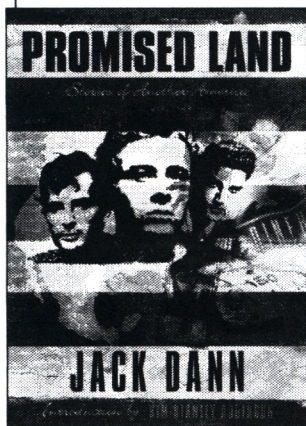
And then he woke up again.

In hospital.



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*“The Unforbidden Playground” is part of the story-cycle provisionally titled Leaving Fortusa that John Grant has been working on for the past couple of years, with the aim of assembling the whole into a book; among other published segments have been “Q” (Sci Fiction) and “The Hard Stuff” (Nova Scotia). “Unfortunately,” he says, “I don’t get nearly as much time to write short fiction as I’d like, but I seem at last to be nearing the end of this set of stories . . . which I shall of course, once it’s completed, describe fashionably as a ‘braided novel.’” His (unrelated) novella The City in These Pages is due from PS next year. His novel The Dragons of Manhattan, originally written as an online thrice-weekly serial for the webzine BlueEar, is being serialized in print in three parts by Argosy. He’s currently working on the nonfiction book Corrupted Science, which is coming next year from AAPPL, ghostwriting a YA fantasy novel, developing a vast encyclopaedia of film noir . . . and trying to get the final pieces of Leaving Fortusa done.*

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# The Unforbidden Playground

## John Grant

**T**he future Pope had time for not much more than a scream of panic before the first tiger leapt on him, grabbing his head in its jaws, sinking its teeth in, and wrenching. A fountain of arterial blood rose like a fluttering red feather. Before this the man had been trying to sing some refrain in Latin, but his voice had gotten ever less resolute as the gladiators taunted him until finally he’d fallen silent as the gates were opened and the starving tigers rushed in.

His death, when it came, was swift and merciful, to the huge disappointment of the crowd—me included. We’d expected something a bit better—a bit more protracted—out of the old man. To future generations he’d be known as a refreshingly open-minded successor to the conservative John Paul II, as a great reforming Pope, who lived

into his nineties and who died in his bed, but of course he wouldn’t have known that as the jaws closed around his face.

John Paul II himself had put up a much better show, in my personal yesterday.

Still, the sense of anticlimax was short-lived, and the rain of stale bread rolls and empty beer cans into the blood-strewn arena dwindled swiftly to a mere trickle. We’d been promised a spectacular finale to the day’s festivities, and it looked as if that was exactly what we’d get. No fewer than a dozen crosses were being brought in, and elsewhere in the ring the gladiators were piling the kindling for the mass pyres. The spit of the slow roast was already turning. The screaming would surely rip the clouds asunder . . .

First, though, there were the boring



bits. The Emperor of Fortusa, the second in Fortusa's inaugural dynasty, had come here for the day, journeying all the way from the Home Time, as we had, to delight in the Circus of the Dying alongside us. Well, not exactly alongside us, for as always there could be allowed no risk of the God-Chosen One being sullied by proximity to the lesser; but his head and shoulders had been visible to us all throughout the long afternoon, and he'd stood several times to deliver the inevitably fatal verdict demanded of him.

He rose now, and silence spread across the crowd. It held for only a few seconds before being replaced by the swelling tides of chanted "Hail to Thee" and "Thou Art One with the Lord" as we all rose to our own feet and bowed toward him, our arms upstretched above our heads, our pointing fingers indicating the object of our worship. He smiled his holy smile and looked out upon the moving human carpet that we formed.

At last he hushed us, and we sat down again on the hard plastic stadium seats.

An aide brought a microphone on its stand and placed it before the Emperor, muttering obsequies as he did so. As an afterthought, he made minor adjustments to the invisible prompt-screen.

Then came the speech.

Like all of us here, I had nothing but love and veneration for the Emperor whom God had chosen, out of His

great fondness for the human race, to place among and over us, but at the same time I felt my love fraying a little at the edges every time I had to sit and listen to one of his formal announcements. We all knew what was going to happen; we didn't need to be told about it in advance, nor have explained to us why it was being done. The crosses were waiting, the pyres were built, the torches were smoking in the gladiators' hands, the shambling files of chained sacrifices were being led in, the anticipation was wet in every mouth.

"My friends in Glory!" the Emperor began, as always. "My friends in Freedom! We are here to see the triumph of Fortusan Justice over the accursed of the earth, those whom God, speaking through myself, his humblest vassal, has condemned for their sins. Each of these miserable miscreants before you is visibly a Traitor by Birth to the fortunate land of Fortusa and its Empire, the Empire from which the radiance of God's blessing will never recede until time itself is at an end. Is it not said that the sole punishment for Treason to the Empire is and can be . . ."

There was much more in this vein, but I'd stopped listening by then. I'm sure the same was true for most of the rest of us; only the holiest would be hanging on to the Emperor's every word as if all this were new to them. The thousands of us here in the stadium had come here from the Home Time to see niggers and kikes and queers crucified and burned; we sat

through the speech as an obligatory preliminary, no more.

But we kept expressions of respectful adulation on our faces; this was obligatory too, of course. There were gladiators stalking the aisles and stairways, swords and whips in hand, to insure our due reverence.

At last the Emperor sat down, with a final grin and a wave for all of us.

The band struck up something by Souza which, after a few minutes, was deftly modulated into the statelier cadences of Psalm 23. The chorus-master raised his baton and, from the high balcony above the Emperor's box, the choir began to sing. Many of the crowd joined in, but I think most of us had little attention to spare for singing—

*Yea, though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death, I  
will fear no evil:*

*for thou art with me; thy rod and thy  
staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in  
the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil; my  
cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow  
me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the  
Lord for ever.*

—because a gladiator had put his torch to the first of the pitch-charged pyres, and a gush of flame and dirty black smoke shot into the windless air. The screaming began in earnest . . .

Afterwards there was the usual rush for the exits, everyone deciding they needed to get back to the Home Time real fast. I hung back a bit; there was little to drag me away except duty. I watched the Emperor and his aides leave their box, the heavy chain-metal curtains falling behind the shoulders of the last of them as he scuttled in the wake of the God-Chosen One. I watched the gladiators—who doubled as attendants and stagehands—as they cleared up the arena in a desultory fashion, raking the sand and ashes, stooping occasionally to pick up any smoke- and grease-encrusted trinket that one of the Enemies of Empire had managed to smuggle past the precursory screening.

When only about a hundred of us were left in ones and twos around the huge stadium, I got to my feet and picked my way down the steps, over the crumpled Bud cans, the food wrappers and the half-eaten hot dogs, to the tunnel that led to the outside. There was only a short walk awaiting me after that; the circus was the only publicly available destination here, and so was well served by entryways nearby.

Today had been a good day's entertainment, and my clothes and body stank of smoke and charred flesh as testimony to the fact. I had a few reservations about the pacing of the show, and would say as much when I wrote my review of it this evening. Although the finale had been invigoratingly flamboyant, it had been upstaged earlier by what was for me the highlight of the



program: a passel of dykes had been griddled while their severed breasts were tossed around mockingly between the gladiators in a bizarre parody of a ball game.

I was thinking about the wording I was going to use in my review, which was why I didn't really register the little knot of people slouching a little too casually near the end of the tunnel, their bodies no more to me than irregular obstructions at the edges of the bright rectangle that led out into the sunlit square; the sunlight is always much cleaner-seeming in other locales than it is in the Home Time in Fortusa. The gate attendants must have left a few minutes before; as for the audience, none of my fellow-stragglers happened to be using this particular exit tunnel. Even if I'd noticed, this wouldn't have troubled me. There were occasional rumors of locals daring to interfere with visiting Fortusan citizens, but I'd dismissed all such tales as wild exaggerations or outright urban legends. One of the first things our armies made brutally clear when they arrived in a new location was the human cost of any such insolence.

The first I knew of anything untoward was when the noose dropped around my arms.

Before I could react, someone hauled on the rope from behind, tightening the bond so that, pinned to my sides just below the elbow, my arms were useless for any attempt at self-defense.

I turned, swearing, dropping the

palm puter into which I'd been muttering test phrases for my review. The person at the other end of the rope was a young woman. In the split second or so that I saw her, all I had time to register was the mixture of hatred and determination on her face as she yanked the rope yet harder.

Then someone else was dropping a dark cloth hood over my head, knotting its drawstring at the back of my neck.

I tried to let out a shout of rage—astonishment was all that had stopped me from doing so before—but my legs were being kicked from under me. I fell heavily face-down on to the tunnel's concrete floor.

The breath was blasted out of me by an impact on the middle of my back. The person kneeling there leaned forward and dug the tip of something sharp into the side of my throat.

"One more word and I cut your cock off and make you eat it."

The girl I'd seen, or another.

I didn't doubt the hoarse threat, not for one moment. I'd seen enough amputations during the day to know how easily flesh could be parted from flesh.

I lay still.

After some seconds had gone by, during which all I could hear were the sounds of my captors' strained breathing, one of them twisted my head savagely to the side. The front of my hood became abruptly damp, and then the aromatic fumes of the wetness filled my senses . . .

“You’re awake.”

It wasn’t a question, nor even a statement of fact, but an order.

The person doing the ordering was sitting on the far side from me of a beaten-up gray metal desk. Rust smeared through in several places along the edge facing me. An articulated table lamp was at his elbow, its adjustment springs loose from age so that its head drooped at an impotent angle, half askew, so that the light dazzled me. He made no attempt to move it. He had a very pale, round face, the effect of the mouth’s sensitively solicitous line marred by a nose that had been broken long ago and never properly reset. His eyes were brown, soft-seeming. Behind him stood a taller, bulkier figure obscured from the chest upward by the gloom. Although I couldn’t see the standing guy’s face, I could feel his gaze upon me.

I tried to move, but I was tied into the upright chair in which I was sitting by tight hoops of electrical cord. My hands had been duct-taped to my thighs, my ankles to the chair legs. If I needed a pee I was going to have to ask my guardians very nicely and about ten minutes ahead of time.

I sensed rather than saw that I was in a small, dusty, rectangular, totally enclosed room. The air smelled as if it had been breathed a thousand times before. Someone had been sick in here maybe a week ago, and whoever had cleared up the mess hadn’t been able to get rid of all of it.

They hadn’t gagged me. I was surprised about that.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t have invited you here more formally, Mister, uh”—the guy with the broken nose consulted my ID booklet, holding it closer to the light as he squinted at the bar code—“Mister Frelitsen.”

“Christopher,” I prompted. My throat felt like a car engine in serious need of oiling.

“Christopher.” He raised an eyebrow interrogatively. “Not Chris or Kit?”

“Christopher’ is preferred,” I replied. He was quite consciously letting me get a handhold on my self-composure. I silently thanked him for it, then wondered if he was simply one half of a good-cop-bad-cop routine. The big man behind him still hadn’t made a movement.

“My name is Anzil, Christopher.” My interrogator put the ID booklet down and linked his fingers together, regarding me solemnly. “We’ve brought you here with no malice in our hearts but because we would like you to help us.”

I said nothing.

“I can see you don’t believe me.”

I didn’t.

He half-turned his head and looked upward out of the lopsided pool of light. “Jake, would you . . . ?”

His larger companion moved silently around the table and approached me.

“Tell me what you want!” I said, my voice beginning to rise.



“Jake won’t hurt you,” Anzil reassured me. “Not at the moment, anyway. He’s going to loosen your bonds.”

Stooping over me, Jake did more than that. Using a primitive wooden-handled craft knife, he carefully cut away the duct tape around my wrists, then looked at me out of the corner of his eye as if assessing me for potential violence before kneeling down and slicing open the tape at my ankles as well. When he was done, he stood back and watched me warily, as if I might be a firework whose blue touch-paper he’d just lit.

I rubbed my wrists together, then peeled the tape away from the flesh on each of them, trying not to pull too many hairs out. My captors hadn’t fastened me tightly enough to cut off the circulation, something else that surprised. And Jake, for all his size, didn’t look like anyone’s typical thug. He was older than I’d expected, too—either that or he was too poor to afford the customary treatments. There were smile lines around the corners of his mouth. Even now he was on this side of the desk, where the light was a little better, I couldn’t see his eyes well enough to read any expression in them, but they seemed sympathetic toward me.

“If you prove cooperative, Christopher,” said Anzil, drawing my attention back to him, “we’ll untie the ropes, but for the moment you’ll understand our necessity for caution.”

I grunted. I had no idea what I would do if I was cut free of this chair,

but quiet cooperation wasn’t top of the list.

“Let me tell you why we want your help,” Anzil continued, leaning back relaxedly, his hand toying with my discarded ID booklet, pushing it this way and back on the enameled table top.

He glanced quickly at me as if seeking my permission to carry on speaking.

“We know who you are. Oh, not you in particular—at the moment all you are as an individual to us is a collection of data and statistics.” He tapped the ID booklet with a fingertip to emphasize his point. “But we know plenty of other things about you, the things you share with the rest of your fellow invaders. We’ve—I myself have—interviewed enough of you people in basements like this one to have learned many of your shared characteristics.”

I looked down at my forearms, resting on my thighs. They were lumberjack-muscle, and one of them bore an old, faded biker tattoo. I wondered if in reality, despite his seeming confidence, he knew only what he saw of me.

“You’re a citizen of the glorious Empire of Fortusa,” Anzil was saying in a dry, slightly bored voice. “You come from what you call the Home Time, which according to your documentation is in your case about sixty years hence.”

I took petty pleasure from the fact that he was wrong in this. The true figure was more like eighty.

“Oh, no, wait a moment,” said Anzil, sitting up straighter and taking another

look at my ID. “Seventy-eight years.” He smiled at Jake, standing now just behind me. “I’m confusing Christopher with that woman last week—what was her name? The one with the long red hair and the bad language?”

“Isobel,” said Jake. His voice was quite deep, but lighter than his size would have suggested.

“That’s right. Isobel. How is her treatment going, do you know?”

“She’s responding.” Jake spoke a little dismissively, as if he wanted to add: “But not very well.”

“I hope she succeeds,” said Anzil. “I grew to like her, after she’d calmed down a little.”

I was fed up with this cozy colloquy.

“You know how the Empire responds to those who harass its citizens,” I said.

Anzil nodded. “We do.”

I waited for him to say something, but he didn’t.

“The Empire avenges any slights to its people with the utmost expedience and ruthlessness,” I parroted. This was the warning which, before we’d first left Home Time, we’d been tutored to deliver in the unlikely event of any trouble. “It has power you can only dream of. Its arm of retribution stretches forever, and its wrath is infinite.”

For a second or two I thought Anzil was going to yield to temptation and burst out laughing. “Christopher, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you how many times I’ve heard those self-same words.”

This wasn’t the kind of reaction I’d been told to expect. Where was the terror? The sudden urge to prostrate himself before the Empire’s might?

Anzil leaned toward me, putting both his elbows on the chipped enamel in front of him.

“What the Empire does, Christopher, by way of vengeance,” he said in a conversational tone, “is nothing—exactly nothing. The Empire reckons there’ll always be a certain amount of natural wastage during its people’s jaunts away from the Home Time. If the unfortunate aboriginals of the locales you ‘liberate’ rose up and slaughtered you parasites wholesale, it’d be a different matter, perhaps. But the Empire doesn’t have the energies, or the will, or, more important, the resources to do anything about individual cases. You Fortusans have the illusion your Empire and its repulsive figurehead, the ‘God-Chosen One’—or whatever crap you’ve been indoctrinated into calling him this week—care one slightest shred about you as people. Numbers, yes—they can understand numbers. If we made a serious dent in the numbers of you who came here, then they’d be stirred to do something, because we’d be threatening their image as the all-powerful conquerors. But one here and one there? You’re statistically insignificant. Why should your Empire or its Emperor care?”

I had no real answer for that. There wasn’t a fiber of me didn’t know he was wrong, but his words seemed to have



tied up my thoughts every bit as tightly as his cables were tied around my torso.

“There are Fortusans who die here of natural causes,” Anzil was saying thoughtfully, seeming to address my ID booklet rather than me myself. “The state of physical health among you people is abominable, for obvious reasons, so the occasional fatal heart attack is only to be expected. Acute liver failure, too. Your hoodlums—sorry, the brave officers of the glorious Imperial Army—are supposed to make a point of carrying home with them any incidental casualties, but in reality of course they’ve got better things to do with their time—like clean up the mess in that obscene edifice you were enjoying yourself so thoroughly in yesterday.”

“I’ve been here overnight?”

“Oh, yes.” Anzil waved away the subject of how long ago it had been since I’d been seized. “So you see, Christopher, of each day’s mob leaving the Home Time in search of entertainment, there are always a few who never make it back. What the Empire is never able to admit to itself is that, in addition to the victims of illness and accident, there are also some who choose of their own accord to remain away from the Home Time.”

“You’re lying!” I said. Who would abandon God’s beneficence to live elsewhere than Fortusa?

“Haven’t you noticed the air tastes better here?” He smiled at the incredulity my face must have revealed. “Oh, I don’t mean here in this base-

ment. We do our best with air fresheners and the like, but somehow the stink of incarceration can never be completely scrubbed away. What I mean is the air out in the open. And don’t you see that the trees are greener, the sky bluer? When was the last time you saw a butterfly in Fortusa? When was the last time, in bed with your partner, you could say whatever you really thought without worrying that it might be reported? When was the last time you had the freedom to believe the evidence of your eyes when you saw that your Emperor had no clothes? There’s a lot here that can seem very attractive to your compatriots. No wonder a few of them decide they’d like to sneak out from under the claws of your Empire.”

What he’d said about the greener trees and the bluer sky was true enough. I’d noticed myself only a little while ago that . . . No, it was *yesterday* I’d remarked to myself upon the way the sunlight seemed clearer here. What I hadn’t properly noticed was myself noticing it.

But I was still disbelieving that there could be people who’d willingly give up all the benefits of Empire citizenship for the dubious attractions of some lesser locale.

Anzil smiled at me again, and I could tell he knew exactly what the thoughts were that moved through my mind.

He gave another dismissive wave. “You’ll find out for yourself, Christopher, in due course, as your detox program progresses.”

“Detox’?”

“I use the term loosely. But, figuratively speaking, that’s what we’re about to start doing. We’re going to flush out all the toxins that have been created in your mind. You’ve been systematically poisoned all your life, Christopher—not by potions or philters, although we suspect your beloved Empire sometimes employs those too, but by the incessant misrepresentation of reality. We’re going to get rid of those poisons for you, Christopher. With your permission, of course.”

A few decades ago, someone coined the term “the principle of conservation of reality” to describe the then currently favored explanation of how travel into the past could be accomplished without disrupting the present. The notion was that you could never consider the universe as belonging only in the *now*, because for the universe, constructed as it is of spacetime rather than just of space, the true *now* encompassed all of time from the Big Bang through to the eventual dissolution. In other words, all of the journeys of hypothetical future time travelers into the past could make no difference at all to the present reality, because they were already a built-in part of that very same past which had brought the present into being. The fact the people of the present could detect no traces of the activities of time travelers showed not so much that the posited time travelers did not in fact exist than that they’d done nothing sufficiently drastic

or anachronistic to attract attention . . . or perhaps that, even though they had, it had been rationalized to become a non-anachronistic part of history.

In short, the chrononauts couldn’t change anything because their doings had *already happened*.

The explanation is, of course, now known to be fallacious, but the term “principle of conservation of reality” still has a very real meaning, even if it’s not the one its coiner originally envisaged.

The truth is that, so far as the universe is concerned, the only important time is the *now*. The present, wherever that happens to be for the universe right now, is the only moment that has any significance at all. You can tell where the universe is at this stage during its long voyage through time by knowing where in time you yourself are, right at this instant.

This has implications for both the future and the past. The future is in its particulars unknown to the universe as yet, for the simple reason that it hasn’t happened. All you—and the universe—can tell about the future is that it will be based in part upon the foundation of the present as you are experiencing it right at this moment.

It may not be based, however, on the present you were experiencing just a few seconds ago.

And that’s the iceberg-tip of the implications the universe’s perpetual *nowness* has for the past. So far as the universe is concerned, the past is already over and doesn’t matter any



more. The universe conserves its present reality from one moment to the next irrespective of any alterations that are made to the past. The old story had it that a time traveler who inadvertently trod on an insect during a trip to the Mesozoic could fundamentally alter the nature of his own world, when he returned to it. The fact is that you can do whatever you want in the past without affecting your own world one iota. The past is the garbage the universe has taken to the dump and discarded: who cares if someone else comes along and rearranges your garbage once it's out of your life? It once had an important role in your life—it was the can that contained your baked beans or the fluorescent tube that lit your room until it died—but now its fate is immaterial to you.

The first person to discover this was a good citizen of Fortusa called Cello Prestrantra. She was one of the researchers who, at the Emperor's behest, began to investigate the possibilities of time travel. The Empire had conquered all of the countries it was ever going to be able to conquer, had therefore declared its own borders to be by definition coexistent with the boundaries of the world, and required new and virgin territories to subjugate, new peoples to tyrannize. The Emperor had in mind prehistory, figuring that anything done there would be long forgotten by the twenty-first century. Of course, his idea was born of complete irrationality, even though as it turned out he would be vindicated (a fact that

added, if addition could be made, to his reputation for infallibility).

The researchers themselves knew better—they thought. Once they'd reached the stage where it was possible for them to send back and retrieve not just subatomic particles, small artifacts, earthworms, laboratory mice, rats, chimps but human beings, they took the utmost care to interfere with the events of the past as little as was feasible. Despite the Emperor's edict that prehistory was to be the focus of their investigations, they used the excuse of the necessity to calibrate their systems to roam through known history as well.

Cello Prestrantra was joyriding in the Sistine Chapel, appropriately garbed and with a full range of linguistic implants, watching Michelangelo at work far overhead, when some oaf of an apprentice, assuming she was a streetwalker, tried to interfere with her. She responded instinctively, which was a mistake. As he staggered away, clutching his face, the would-be assailant fell against one of the legs of the scaffolding. The Master Painter himself, just preparing to descend for a bathroom break, was jolted by the impact, lost his footing, and fell to his death.

Prestrantra resolved to tell no one of what had happened, expecting to return to a Home Time for which the marvelous paintings of the chapel ceiling either had never existed or had been completed by another hand. Instead she discovered in her history books that Michelangelo had lived for

years after completing his enormous commission. Her accident with the apprentice had changed nothing.

Other colleagues checked her results, by making increasingly dramatic alterations to known past events. Nothing about Home Time changed. Every piece of evidence in their own *now* pointed to the fact that the past was as it had ever been: immutable. You could go back and kill the yourself of ten seconds ago and you'd still be alive in your own *now* to go back and kill yourself. In theory, you could go back all the way to the birth of the universe and stop the Big Bang from happening, and it really wouldn't matter.

Of course, the God-Chosen One was delighted to learn of this. He'd been envisaging the rather unrewarding prospect of conquering a few thousand tent-dwelling tribespeople, but now the whole of history was there for his grabbing. The ENTRY IS FORBIDDEN signs had been pulled down from the fence around the past, and the gates had been swung open to permit the Empire into this enormous, near-infinite playground.

A playground where it didn't matter what you did, because there were no consequences.

And that applied to the people the Empire found there, too. After all, they were dead already, or as good as—so the reckoning went. They were of less significance to the present, to the ongoing *now*, than the least of the symbiotic bacteria inhabiting the Emperor's gut.

The inhabitants of the past—even the relatively recent past—had no chance of defense whatsoever against the mid-twenty-first-century technology the Emperor could bring to bear, importing it with lightning speed through the huge temporal entryways which that same technology could create. For reasons of whim, the God-Chosen One forbade any full-scale “liberations” of destinations located after the establishment of the Fortusan Empire in the century's earlier years; but any time before that was fair game for his ambitions of conquest. The entire earth of November 22 1949, including every living creature upon it right down to the smallest microbe, was razed, because for some reason the date irritated him. In a locale situated not many years before that, Hitler was assisted in the conquest of all Europe, his extermination facilities working overtime even though their efficiency had been increased a hundredfold, before himself being deposed when his Reich was established as an outpost of the Fortusan Empire. In a more recent locale, the Emperor's own youthful father—whom by now he had disavowed, claiming immaculate conception—was tortured most cruelly to a slow death; the broadcasting of the holovid is said to be what finally killed the old man in his cell.

All of these deeds were necessary, the Emperor told his present-day subjects, if the denizens of the past were to be brought successfully into the merciful arms of God. Further, the Empire



relied economically on the ability to ransack the past of its valuables—there was no longer any such thing as a finite natural resource, not now that the pipelines had been laid from the present into so many previous locales, with always the opportunity to open up another entryway.

As for his citizens in the Home Time?

They did what they were told, or they died. But even the prospect of a hideous death cannot forever quell the roilings of dissatisfaction if the dissatisfaction is deeply rooted enough, and not everyone, not all of the time, was prepared to accept the Emperor's axiom that, for them, freedom was to be found in relentless lifelong servitude.

They needed to be distracted.

Hence the bread.

Hence the circuses.

I already knew much of what Anzil recited to me, but I'd never before heard it all told in such a manner—reflecting such an unpalatable light upon the Empire, and upon the Emperor. Yet everything he'd said, both the unknown and the reinterpreted known, seemed to hang together consistently; it was enough like my own understanding of the truth not to set up too much of a discord. At the same time, it unsettled me considerably.

I tried to keep my face bland and unimpressed, but evidently I was

unsuccessful in this. From time to time, as Anzil uttered a new blasphemy and I tensed, Jake chuckled—not unsympathetically—from behind me.

At last Anzil came to a pause.

“I think that's enough for our first session,” he said in an almost consoling fashion. “I must have given you a lot to think about—too much, perhaps, for someone accustomed to having others do the thinking for him.”

“I'm unaffected by your lies,” I lied. “All you've been trying to do is twist the truth around until it matches your hatred for the Emperor, and for Fortusa, and even for God himself.”

“God?” said Anzil, pretending consternation. “I don't hate God. Why would I waste my perfectly good hatred on something that doesn't exist?”

He was one of the forsaken, the accursed. I'd suspected as much.

I tried to turn my face away from him to express my contempt, but something in his manner kept my gaze locked on his.

When next he spoke, he did so very quietly. “Think about what I've said, Christopher. Jake and I will lead you to a room with a bed in it where you can rest. I'm afraid there'll be a lock on the door, but you'll be freer to move around than you are now. And I'll come and visit you in the morning to see how you're getting on.”

While Anzil was speaking, Jake had been working on the knot behind me that held my bonds in place. With a somewhat theatrical gesture of deliverance, he unwound the rope, then

bowed in the manner of a humble servant. The effect was spoiled by the grin on his face.

They ushered me along a featureless, poorly lit corridor to an equally featureless, poorly lit cell, with a narrow and—as I soon discovered—hard bunk in the corner. Left on my own, I shifted the bucket as far as I could get it from the bed, then peed into it. A glass of water and a slightly age-toughened cheese sandwich had been left out for me on the locker by the bedside; I drank the water and ate the sandwich.

Then I lay down on my back, clasped my hands behind my head, stared at the ceiling, and tried to set my thoughts in order.

The light soon went out, but that made no difference. Sleep, I told myself, could not have been further from me as my mind raced over and over what Anzil had said to me.

But sleep stalked up on me swiftly, silently, and unseen, bringing with it nightmares of oily smoke and screams.

**W**hen I woke it was to find Anzil pinning sheets of paper up on the far wall of the room. I assumed it was morning, although of course I had no way of telling. Certainly I'd been asleep for a few hours; the piss erection that I rolled over to keep from Anzil's eyes was enough evidence of that. I lay there on top of it and wondered how I was going to get rid of it. I wasn't going to pee in the bucket in front of him, most certainly not if it was going to involve

the undignified erection tussle that customarily greets each new day.

"There's a bathroom down the hall," he said without looking back over his shoulder at me. One of the thumbtacks suddenly bent as he was pushing it in, and he cursed under his breath, shaking his hand in a convulsion of fingers and then sticking his thumb in his mouth.

I got up off the bed, keeping my back toward him, and moved to the door. I only half-expected it to be unlocked; this was likely some mind game he was playing with me.

But the handle turned easily, and I was looking out on the same dreary corridor I'd seen last night.

"It's along on the left," he said, still not looking at me. "Three, maybe four doors down. You can tell it by the drawing on the door."

I shrugged. If he was going to be fool or naive enough to let me out of his sight like this, I was going to keep my eyes peeled for any opportunity for escape, either now or later.

A few minutes later I was back, feeling refreshed in body albeit downcast in spirit. One end of the corridor was a dead end; at the other was a flight of stairs from the top of which I'd heard the sounds of a busy cafeteria. It seemed a safe assumption that the people up there were confederates of Anzil's and Jake's. Any bid for escape I might make was going to have to be from somewhere else. Assuming Anzil didn't plan to keep me down here in the sprawling basement for ever.

"Where's Jake?" I said in an attempt



to start a casual conversation. Anzil might let something useful slip during chatter where he most certainly wouldn't during a more formal interrogation.

"Oh, he's not necessary today," replied Anzil, shoving in the last thumbtack and standing back to admire his handiwork.

"How do you mean, 'not necessary'?"

"When we revive our targets," explained Anzil easily, "we like to have some muscle around, just in case they're tempted to get violent. Jake's actually pretty bloody useless as muscle, to be honest—he's got far too affectionate a disposition ever to want to punch someone out—but he's big and imposing. Most people take one look and decide that docility's the best defense."

"And the others?"

"Well, Christopher, they take a second look and come to the same conclusion." Anzil laughed, a light little patter of sounds that seemed almost feminine. "Come here and see what I've brought to show you."

The sheets of paper he'd been pinning up were maps—but weird and fanciful maps, unlike any I'd seen before.

"I recognize the Fortusan Empire," I said, pointing to the familiar shape, even though it was far too small. It had been hand-colored in orange and was off to one side of the relevant sheet rather than in the center. "But what's all the rest of the stuff?" I gestured

toward the shapes scattered over the remainder of the sheet.

"Other landmasses," said Anzil simply.

"You're joking, right?"

"No."

"And why's Fortusa so small in comparison?" It filled only a small part of one of the landmasses. I was still trying to get my head around that concept: "one of the landmasses."

"The world's a bigger place than you know."

"Why should I believe you?"

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. You could go out and buy a world map in any one of a thousand stores in this city today."

I didn't respond at once. A distant memory was tugging at me. I'd been barely more than an infant. My grandmother was bouncing me on her knee. I didn't much like being so close to the old woman. For that matter, I didn't much like the monthly visits to her my parents forced on me, but that maybe had less to do with her herself than the fact that most of the other people in the home where she was incarcerated looked as if they were already dead. She could at least move around, and talk, although there was something twisty in her bright blue eyes that frightened me. It frightened Mom and Dad, too, I could tell, but for all of that they insisted—mainly, Mom insisted—that Grandma Piggott should be allowed to fawn over her darling little Chrissy. "We owe my mother that much, Harold, whatever you think of her.

He's *her only grandson*, for the Good Lord's sake!"

Grandma Piggott's conversation consisted of long sequences of *non sequiturs* that each individually made perfect sense but which didn't belong together—or, at least, not in that order.

"I wonder what it's like in Parrace now," she said brightly in answer to a remark from my father about baseball.

Dad looked alarmed. That much I registered around the large coco pop I'd been given to keep me respectfully quiet in my grandmother's presence.

"Your papa and I," continued Grandma Piggott—this to Mom—"honeymooned in France, you know."

Mom nodded, eyes glazed. It was clear she'd heard this story a thousand times before.

"We walked arm in arm along the Sen every evening. They light up the Eye-ful Tower at night, you know. We'd eat at some little restaurant we'd find—a new one each night, but almost always the food was good. Snails, yummy—they were my favorite. I'd never had them before. Your father said they tasted like my cunt, Doreen, so one night I put garlic on it for him and he . . ."

That was when Mom shut the old bat up. The incident was engraved in my mind, though, because I didn't know what a cunt was, and all the way home in the car I pestered my parents to tell me. In the end, to divert my inquisition, they told me a little about the mythical land called France, where everybody ate onions and spoke funny

and hated God. "Your grandmother just made up this country for her own amusement, Christopher. Have you ever heard such a silly thing?"

But one of the places on Anzil's map, a big sea away from Fortusa, was called "France". I could read the name there in capital letters. Lots of other areas, some bigger and some smaller, were labeled with their different names in those same block capitals.

If Grandma Piggott hadn't just invented France—this idea had anyway never quite made sense to me, because it had been obvious the tale of being on honeymoon there was a well worn one—then maybe Anzil hadn't merely invented all those other places on his map. But the God-Chosen one told us repeatedly the Fortusa of the Home Time ruled the entire world.

How could the two contentions be reconciled? Obviously, one of them must be a lie, but who was the liar? I balanced the God-Chosen One on the one side against a half-senile old lady and a kidnaper on the other. For the first time in my life, I found it impossible instantly to accept the Emperor's veracity as an axiom.

An objection occurred to me.

"What Home Time does that map refer to?"

"Your own, as near as we can assess." Anzil pushed his forefinger upward on the crooked bridge of his nose, as if he habitually wore spectacles but had contacts in today. "You've got to realize, much of what we know about the Fortusan Empire at different



epochs is based on interviews we've conducted with invaders like yourself who've come here from different Home Times. Our maps are accurate—we know that. Some of the rest is a matter of piecing together bits and pieces of evidence. Some of the interviewees don't have much to tell us. Others—well, we're hoping that as a journalist you're going to be one of the others."

I was momentarily unnerved by the fact that he knew my profession, but then I remembered my ID booklet. What it hadn't told him was that I wasn't in the news department, but merely a stringer for the entertainments supplement.

"I may not be able to help you as much as you think," I said. "Besides," I added in a strangely reluctant undertone, "it's my duty as a patriot not to reveal to you any details of the Fortusan Empire in case they're Imperial secrets. That would be treason, not to mention against God's Law."

Anzil laughed. "One of the Fifteen Commandments, is it, Christopher? Or are there still only fourteen where you come from?"

"Fifteen," I mumbled, "and, no, it's not one of them."

Still chuckling, he directed my eyes to the next map along the wall. "If you'd come here from a Home Time thirty years earlier, during your own childhood, this is what you'd have known as the Fortusan Empire."

The hand-colored shape was completely different and much larger,

occupying most of the long straggly landmass on the left-hand side of the map. The untidy orange ran all the way from the top of the upper half of the landmass down over the thin bridge between it and the lower half; about the upper one-third of this lower bit was orange, with an extra blob of orange far below, near the tip. On the other landmasses there were occasional areas of orange, too.

"Ten years after that," said Anzil, putting out a hand to lead me along to a third map. Here the other landmasses were bereft of orange, as was the upper two-thirds of the top half of the straggly landmass. "And another ten years." A fourth map. The orange was gone from all but a belt covering the lower part of the upper landmass. "And now." Back to the first map, where the Fortusan Empire was no longer a belt but just its well known coffee-pot-on-its-side shape covering about half the area the belt had covered.

"You're telling me the Empire's shrinking?"

"Yes. And shrinking fast. Another few decades and it'll be gone."

"But that's senseless!" I exclaimed. "Our armies are everywhere in the world. There are holos of their victories every night on the set."

"Old victories, Christopher. Old victories. Or victories over old locales. And even most of *those* are old victories."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not just geographically that your Empire is shrinking. It's concep-

tually, as well. You're becoming technologically backward."

"We have the most advanced technology in the world!"

"No, in point of fact you don't."

I felt myself beginning to bluster. "We conquer with ease all of the foes of God that dare to stand in our way!"

"Not so."

"We conquered *you*, didn't we?"

"It's nearly two decades ago you conquered this particular past. If you tried it now..." He broke off. "No, you're not ready for that yet."

"For what?"

"The people here," he resumed, pretending he hadn't heard me, "could give you a fight for your money, now. And that's across a three-quarters-of-a-century bridge. Think about your own personal technology, Christopher. Sure, it's advanced by the standards of what we have here, but when was the last time something new came on to the market for you? Something new of significance? A better holo set, for example? Now that the Empire's managed to expunge all the Jew science, and the queer science, and the nigger science, and fuck knows what else kind of science your God-Chosen asshole's decided corresponds with his victims of the week, where do you expect the technology to *come* from? And how do you expect to replace stuff that breaks down when there's no one around any more who can remember the scientific principles that went into making it?"

"God will provide," I said in an attempt at piety. "He always does."

"As his mouthpiece on earth tells you? Has it ever crossed your mind that your Emperor might be no more God's mouthpiece than you are yourself, or than I am? Yeah, right: *me*? Me who sees the whole idea of God as a corrupting myth that should have died out centuries ago? The only reason you think you know your Emperor is your direct conduit to and from God is that you've been told that by the Emperor himself!"

"Not just by him," I protested. We were both getting fairly heated. I hadn't see Anzil agitated before. "His priests and aides and courtiers say the same thing, and they should know, being so close to him on a daily basis and all."

"You trust his *cronies*?"

"If you want to call them that..."

"Who depend on the continued reign of the Emperor if they're going to cling on to their own wealth and power?"

"They... ah... They're honorable men. And women."

"Do you believe the Emperor himself believes in this God he's always citing at you?"

"I... Well, he *must*, mustn't he? I mean, he *talks* to God every..."

Anzil snorted, in either disgust or triumph—I couldn't tell which. "You mean, he *says* he does."

He started pulling the maps down off the wall, not caring about the thumbtacks popping off and skittering away in all directions across the floor.

"Right now," he said, speaking in fits



and starts as he concentrated on the task at hand, “your blessed ’empire’—could erase the whole world—of whatever single period—it chose.—It’s got enough functional—busterbombs—still left for—that.—But all the rest of—your military technology—it’s—being used up or it’s—crumbling and you’ve—no way to replace it.—If it came to actual *conquest*—not just mass destruction—your Empire—would be lucky to—conquer—a locale in the—pig-fucking-ignorant sixteenth century.”

He began to roll up the maps. “And with every year that’s passing, your time, the Empire’s capabilities are diminishing. Soon you’ll be wondering if you dare open up a new locale in the Stone Age.”

I watched him wordlessly. Most people’s holo sets displayed in only two dimensions these days. The last time my own had broken down I’d had to replace it. The new screen was smaller, and sometimes I had to hammer the side of the case because the tube had decided to take a rest.

“That’s enough for today,” Anzil said brusquely. “Take care not to step on any of those tacks, Christopher. Jake will bring you lunch and supper, and books if you ask him nicely. Not the Bible, though—we don’t do Bibles around here, not since the ‘liberation’, savvy? Tomorrow, if I think you’re ready for it, perhaps I’ll take you outside for a stroll so that you can see the rest of this locale outside of the environs of the circus, maybe meet a few

people, chew the fat with them—you know the sort of thing.”

Before I could say another word he was gone.

**T**hat night I dreamed of Abigail and Bill. Abigail is my best friend, and the mother of my child; and, it comes to me almost as an afterthought, my wife. I love her very dearly, as I do our son.

Abalone, as I often call her in endearment, and I contracted our marriage as something midway between a convenience and a camouflage. We were both, by definition, fugitives from the law—Traitors by Birth, as the Empire decreed us, or even The Enemy Within. We came into each other’s lives because our parents had met each other at a WalMart party. While admiring together the goods their hostess had laid out, and delighting in the freedom of being under compulsion to buy, our mothers began gossiping about their wayward offspring. Mom bemoaned the fact that I seemed to be slow on the uptake when it came to acquiring a steady girlfriend—“someone nice and *wholesome*,” I can hear her saying earnestly. Mrs. Ingalls confessed that she was experiencing a similar frustration with her daughter, Abigail, who never dated the same boy more than once and had to be nearly threatened with physical force even to explore matters that far. Further comparison of notes led to arrangements for a strategic meeting to be held the fol-

lowing day at a local coffee shop while their husbands were at work; after all, the two women reasoned, if they themselves got on so famously, surely their offspring would as well.

It was a recipe for disaster, of course. By all logic, Abigail and I should have hated each other on sight. In fact, when our mothers threw us together the following weekend by organizing a two-family swimming party and leaving neither of us any avenue of escape, we immediately recognized a shared bond. It wasn't the shared bond our mothers had prayed for, or perhaps even anticipated. Obviously we were both outsiders, loners; it had never occurred to them why this was so. With my fondness for working out in the gym and my friendships among some of the rougher elements in town, I didn't fit in at all with my mother's mental image of what queers were like; by design, my lifestyle, a carefully cultivated exercise in obfuscation since at the age of fourteen I'd squared up to the truth about myself, didn't fit in with *anybody's* template of queerness. And Abigail, so pretty and feminine in her blue-check cotton dress the first time I saw her down by the river, with her straight blonde hair and her wickedly grinning mouth; why, she was surely every small town's ideal girl next door, destined to be hovered around by countless eligible young bachelors until eventually she acceded to one of their proposals and became an ideal wife and mother. It was a wonder she wasn't captain of the cheerleading team.

None of us was proposing to swim in the river itself, you understand. Its contents were a sludgy brown and smelled strongly of the pesticide factory upstream; nothing lived in those waters. But near to it had been built an outdoor pool which powerful infusions of chlorine kept more or less non-toxic. The company that owned the site advertised that in this way one could get all the scenic nostalgia of the old days of river swimming combined with the hygiene demanded by the modern age. The claim would have been more valid had not wafts of the river's dead stench periodically come billowing over the pool, smothering even the all-natural astringency of its chlorination.

Content to see that the pair of us had apparently hit it off at once, both sets of parents allowed their problem children more time alone during that long summer's afternoon by the river than perhaps strict decorum should have permitted. We left our families and the river bank behind and sat in my father's car, and talked.

For a few seconds after we'd finished settling into the car, making sure the doors were properly closed, discovering that neither of us smoked, trying to find something worth listening to on the radio and then switching the thing off, we both maintained a high dam of reservation; then, almost in unison, the two dams burst and the water came torrenting through. It felt strange admitting to a virtual stranger what I'd spent so very long keeping, for fear of my life, a complete secret—almost, even, from



myself. It was much the same for her, she later told me, although I could have guessed as much.

Neither of us, individually, had given any thought to the lives we were going to lead. Or, at least, we'd *tried* thinking about the future but, intimidated by the bleakness of the prospect, had backed off from the challenge. But our being thrown together was like a light being cast on to a swamp of uncertainty and suppressed misery. We were, as Abalone pointed out within the first five minutes of our conversation, made for each other—the ideal couple. Or we could become so.

An hour later we shyly broke it to our parents that we'd fallen in love—bolt from the blue, soon as we'd set eyes on each other, something just clicked, ordained by the Highest in His Wisdom, all the usual clichés.

Our families looked benignly upon us. They assumed we'd spent all this time in the car necking with each other.

Three months later we were married, and everyone agreed they'd never before seen a couple so deliriously in love with each other.

William—Bill—was an essential part of the camouflage, and obviously one that was more difficult to procure. The two of us shared a king-size bed at nights, of course, because there was no knowing the chances that some random police surveillance might detect it if we did not, and in the first few weeks of our marriage we even experimented with sex, to see if our instincts had been wrong and perhaps, in an appropriate

situation, we'd discover this. No such good fortune, although we were able to give each other a certain amount of pleasure, and would occasionally repeat the procedures in the time thereafter. But we needed to have a child. The would-be grandparents were nagging at us, and our mumbles about unluckiness were going to keep the pack at bay only so long. Our mandatory fertility check-ups had shown we were both perfectly capable of having children—that we were, indeed, both so ripe for parenthood it was a wonder Abalone didn't become pregnant just by talking to me on the telephone.

We spent a few astonishingly unromantic nights testing our friendship to the limits. Fortunately, we succeeded. By now we did genuinely love each other, and very deeply, even if it wasn't the love everyone else thought it was. I don't think that otherwise we'd have come through the trial of Bill's conception.

So here we are, the perfect family. It bothers both Abalone and me that, when Bill hits the ghastly inquisitiveness concerning all things sexual that comes with the onset of adolescence, we might have problems; if he uncovers the true nature of his parents' relationship he could, if devout enough, feel obligated to report the matter to the authorities, either spiritual or temporal or both. The result would be very much the same. We've agreed to meet the problem when we come to it, and to live just for the happiness of the moment.

The Home Time must be full of couples living a lie the way Abalone and I do, but I doubt if there can be any others who're as happy together as we are.

I missed my family so much it was sometimes hard to breathe.

**Y**ou understand, don't you, Christopher, what it was I was doing to you?"

Anzil and I were sitting with our friends Lettie, Harold and Jake in a small restaurant garden about a mile from the Center. Lettie was the young woman who'd lassoed me as I was coming out of the circus. Harold was the one who'd stuck the tip of a dagger into my throat, hooded me, and chloroformed me. The Center was the place I'd been taken, unconscious, after I'd been abducted from the arena's exit. The only name it had was just that: the Center. No qualifying adjectives, no impressively polysyllabic title. Strangest of all to me at first was that there was no sponsorship name attached to it, and I never did manage to get over the quasi-instinctive feeling that there was somehow something important missing. Anzil told me this locale had corporations aplenty, like any other locale so recent to the Fortusan Empire, but that they'd learned to keep a low public profile for fear of retaliation by the populace. So, no proud declaration of sponsorship. It was those same corporations, after all, who'd be giving the Empire its initial

muscle just a short while later. The money they channeled to the Center came almost clandestinely, although come it did. The corporations were desperate to reverse the evil their future selves were going to perpetrate.

"Of course I do," I told Anzil, smiling. "What do you think I am, some kind of dickwit?"

I mock-punched him on the shoulder.

For the first few days I'd treated the books Jake brought me as if they were sprung traps ready to crunch claws of steel around my arm if I so much as touched them. But then my daily sessions with Anzil had begun having their intended effect, and my first terrors were replaced by curiosity. One of those books had been about cults, and the attempts made by people to release victims from their clutches. The methods I read about were very similar to what Anzil was doing to me.

Which meant that he regarded the Empire as a cult, and the God-Chosen one as its charismatic but profoundly self-serving leader. The more I read about the cults that had infested this locale before the arrival of the Fortusan Army of God's Liberation, the more I came to think—and this was very, very difficult for me—that perhaps Anzil was right.

All cults depend for their survival on redefining reality in the minds of their converts. The only reality that is permitted is the one expounded by the cult leader, who claims that the basis for his pronouncements comes from a super-



natural Higher Authority; the ideal for the cult is that its acolytes are held completely shielded from the ideas of the rest of the world, even though this is rarely easy to arrange. All other versions of reality but the cult's are condemned out of hand as evil, and the leadership will take pains to use spurious logic and emotional appeals in an attempt to convince any adherent who might be lured by an external reality of its falsehood. Should those attempts fail, force is applied—first social force, such as temporary ostracism from the community, and then progressively more violent physical force, running the gamut from punishments the adherent is ordered to endure up to the ultimate measure: condemnation to death, either public or covert.

The parallels with the Empire did not escape me. And there were others. Cults cannot exist without identifying other groups of humanity whom they can vilify. The more benign cults simply put the entirety of non-cult members into this category: they are to be pitied as inferior human beings, looked down upon as of no importance, sneered at, perhaps even detested. This measure has the additional advantage that it effectively divorces neophytes from their families: they come to see that the love they'd thought they felt for those close to them was in fact just a lie. How could they ever have believed they loved what are in truth the scum of the earth? But for many cults this measure alone is not enough: there must be specific minority sectors

of humanity identified for especial loathing. People of different skin color or religious affiliation are usually first on the list—usually, but not always. Those of different sexual orientation are popular hate-targets, too.

It's very nearly impossible, once individuals have become completely enmeshed in a cult, to get them out again. This is by design, of course. They have been indoctrinated into complete belief in the false paradigm espoused by the cult, so that to alter their worldview cannot be a matter merely of winning over their heart and mind; demolishing the false paradigm, if not done with infinite care and patience, can easily result in the shattering of the individual's *self*. That self has been completely redesigned by the cult so that it is no longer conformable with human society at large, nor even with rationality; it cannot instantly be replaced with another.

The procedure used to reclaim the lost begins by presenting versions of reality that *overlap* with the one they have come fundamentally to embrace, and then pointing out the inconsistencies between the two largely concordant realities as if they were merely interesting intellectual puzzles—something for the “patient” to mull over in between sessions. And it's those in-between times that are the most important element in all this. Attempts to replace the cult's indoctrination with another through long periods of direct bombardment are doomed to failure. Most of the work of unpicking the false

paradigm must be done by the sufferer, not by the would-be rescuer.

What Anzil had done was put me through a crash-course version of all this. I could recognize it. Oddly, because in most psychological therapies it's counterproductive if the patient comes to understand why the therapist is doing what he or she is doing, in the instance of paradigm replacement it can actually be helpful—hence Jake's leaving of relevant books with me, mixed in among an eclectically chosen selection of innocuous others. I could pick a thriller, or a fantasy novel, or a mystery . . . or a factual book on cults. Sooner or later I was bound to choose the one on cults.

And I'd learned how to reclaim a person I'd never known I was.

Sitting in the garden with Anzil, Lettie and the others, I felt for the first time in my life completely inside myself. I hadn't just replaced one authority figure with another, the God-Chosen One with Anzil, because Anzil and I often argued—sometimes angrily—and I felt no fear in the disagreement: that was what human intercourse was supposed to be for, not the imposition of one person's will upon another. As with Abigail but never otherwise, my identity was expressed through those arguments, even the ones that ended in bitter recriminations. A person devoid of their own identity is capable only of mimicking love; for the real experience, independence of self is a requisite. I realized now that the love Fortusans so often and

loudly proclaimed for their God-Chosen Emperor was only a sham, because not freely engendered. The same, it seemed to me, was true of their professed love for God, because they'd been given no freedom to examine the credentials of a deity chosen for them by someone else.

What finally effected my cure was one day when Anzil was—or so it seemed—preparing to wind up our latest session. As if struck by something, he suddenly looked over at me and said: "Christopher, has it ever occurred to you to wonder why it is that the Empire itself is never subjected to visits by people from its *own* future?"

I should have recognized instantly from my reading that the question had been carefully rehearsed, but Anzil's acting was so perfectly polished that I accepted it at face value.

"They must have the same law as in my Home Time," I said. "That it's forbidden to go back to locales that lie within the Empire itself."

Anzil seemed to ponder this for a few moments, but then he shook his head.

"That doesn't figure," he said. "Why should people from non-Fortusan cultures obey Fortusan laws? You'd expect to have visitors from those other cultures, wouldn't you? And, even ignoring that, whatever your rulers might have told you, no empire lasts for ever—no human social structure at all, I think, but certainly not an empire. Look at the empire Adolf Hitler created that was going to last a thousand



years. Look at the empire Napoleon carved out of the world, or even at Genghis Khan. So whatever lies in the future for the Fortusan Empire can't be . . . well, if you go far enough ahead, *can't* be the Fortusan Empire."

"Surely the lack of visitors," I said, stooping to pick up a pencil he'd dropped and handing it to him, "is strong evidence that the Fortusan Empire's an exception to the rule?"

He wrinkled his nose, again seeming to give the suggestion his full consideration.

"Nah," he said, putting the pencil into his breast pocket and then tapping his thigh to show he was checking he had everything else with him. "Nah. Wouldn't the Fortusans of future eras at least want to find out their own histories?"

"Maybe the visitors keep themselves well hidden."

"Why would they bother doing that? The past is dead—we're agreed on that. Whatever you do that lies in the 'past' direction from your own particular Home Time doesn't make any difference. So why would future Fortusans worry about any effects their presence might have on you people?"

His hand was on the doorknob.

"There's always another possibility, I guess," he said, as if the notion had just occurred to him. "I may be talking nonsense, but try this on for size. What if there's no future left for the world once your Empire's done with it?"

As soon as the door closed behind him I realized there were several dif-

ferent ways in which his question could be interpreted. It could be that the Empire was destroying the world, or at least humanity; but if the Empire was as small and inconsequential in the Home Time as Anzil said it was—and as I now fully accepted it was—then it seemed to me it would lack the necessary power to wreak such catastrophic destruction. Oh, sure, as he'd said, it still had a few left of its dwindling stocks of busterbombs; but would the other, larger and almost certainly more technologically advanced nations of the world permit this to happen? And, anyway, would the Emperor contemplate his own suicide? (Mind you, I'd read about cult leaders who killed themselves alongside their flocks. I decided not to pursue that line of thought.)

Alternatively, Anzil might merely have been suggesting that the Empire itself had no future. Well, he'd told me before that the general reckoning was the Empire had only a few more decades before it fell apart. So why would he bother offering as a mere suggestion something that he'd already stated as a firm prediction?

Or had he been meaning to say that the Empire held no place in history so far as the people of the farther future were concerned? Looking back at the map of the past as you plan your itinerary for your next jaunt, are there not likely to be locales marked off as ones to be avoided? I could understand that temponauts might want to forgo a trip to the Fortusan Empire, because its

methods of dealing with the unwanted were harsh, and its authorities had informants everywhere. Sitting there on my hard cot in the empty room, I felt for a moment a little pride in the culture that had given me birth, the culture so powerful that even the people of the farthest future were frightened to venture into its territory; but then my metaphorical chest subsided again.

If they avoided Fortusa, it almost certainly wasn't because they feared it. They would be as much technologically advanced beyond us as we were beyond the people of the Middle Ages. We had nothing that could frighten them.

No, it was most likely of all that the future travelers left Fortusa off its itineraries because they regarded its particular locale as a cesspit.

Lettie and Harold were becoming openly amorous, and had lost all interest in the rest of us. Jake watched them with a benevolent smile on his face. I'd never been able quite to figure Jake out. He seemed always to be amenable to everything, and everybody. Anzil had been right when he'd joked about Jake being the lousiest of heavies if ever trouble broke out. He was like a great big affectionate teddy bear without the irritation of a squeeze-me-and-I-talk device implanted in his chest. I knew for a fact that Lettie was supposed to be "his girl," and yet he seemed quite content

to watch Harold's hand creeping up her exposed thigh—and with her apparent encouragement. Could he be so without jealousy?

Lettie's elbow knocked an empty plate off the white-painted lacework aluminum table on to the grass, scattering cutlery and a paper napkin. Without comment, Jake knelt to pick them up and put them back on the table. Neither Harold nor Lettie seemed to notice what he'd done.

"But one thing you've never asked me, Christopher," said Anzil, "is why I—why the Center—should have gone to so much trouble, risk, and expense reclaiming you from the cult of the Empire."

It was something I'd been avoiding thinking about. In the Empire where I'd been born and raised, no one did anything without having some self-serving motive in mind—not necessarily financial gain, although that was by far the most common. Actions taken for reasons of pure philanthropy were not actually illegal, and on occasion could be encouraged; but the cops and the priests (not that there was much difference) tended to keep a watchful eye on repeat offenders. Here, of course, everything was ethically different: acts of generosity were regarded as virtuous, or as part of a sort of karmic wheel whereby a kindness done today would result in one's receiving a kindness from somewhere completely different tomorrow. There were countless other ethical differences, too, and I'd gathered from conversations with



Anzil that these had grown more numerous and extreme since the arrival of the Army of Liberation; but this was the one that seemed most pertinent in my case. So, on the rare occasions when I allowed myself to think about Anzil's motives for rescuing me from the prison of false reality that had engaged me since birth, I assumed that this and all of his many kindnesses came from the goodness of his heart.

Over the past week there had been an additional reason for my not thinking too much about his motives. The day he declared that I was "finally free from your mental servitude" he and I had celebrated by coming here to this self-same restaurant. Later, emboldened by too much red wine, I'd confessed that I seemed to be falling in love with him. He'd laughed, explained that this was common between subject and therapist, that I shouldn't take these feelings too seriously because they'd soon pass, however powerful they might seem to me at the moment; and then he'd become more serious, staring at me with his own confession in his eyes. The upshot was that we'd become, tentatively, lovers. I lost my virginity to him that night—the physical exchanges between Abalone and myself hardly counted. Although she and Bill still visited my dreams on occasion, they had to make room for Anzil, and the ache of separation from them was becoming numb.

"I thought it was for the sake of my pretty blue eyes," I said now, trying to make light of the question.

"Your eyes aren't blue, Christopher," he said quietly, "although I'll grant you the 'pretty' part. But they had nothing to do with it. And I can't allow them to have anything to do with my future decisions, either."

I gazed across at Lettie and Harold. Surely those top two buttons on Lettie's blouse hadn't been open before? Luckily we were almost the only customers left in the restaurant garden, this long after conventional lunch hour had finished. The sole other diners were at a table at the far end of the area, half-shielded by the drooping branches of the hedge. They didn't seem to have noticed anything. Anzil seemed to be dumping me, almost before our liaison had truly begun. A week, that was all. Too short a time for me to have discovered everything about him.

I felt his hand on my knee.

"Look at me, Christopher. Look at me. It's your lover speaking. Remember me?"

I dragged my gaze toward him. "Lover", huh? Was that all part of the reclamation plan as well?"

"No, of course it wasn't. I've told you before, that was something I allowed to happen despite my better judgement. I never intended to fall for you, Christopher, and even when I did I didn't mean to let it show, far less to act upon it."

I was out of the habit of doubting his word. The sensation felt alien to me now.

"What will it take to convince you?" he said, reading my confusion.

I shrugged. What could I answer? “The truth”? But to say that would be to say he wasn’t telling me the truth already.

Harold and Lettie had stopped necking and were gathering their possessions around them. Time for them to go, they explained. It had been a lovely long lunch, but work was calling. Yeah. Right. It was pretty obvious from the shared smiles they thought the rest of us didn’t notice that work was the last thing on their minds. Lettie had the good grace to blush as she did up those rogue buttons on her blouse, but she didn’t blush for long. Soon she and Harold were leaving. As they stepped from the garden into the main restaurant his hand let go of hers and slipped to her ass.

Jake watched all this with that same look of passive amiability. Back in the Empire he’d have been at their throats with a broken bottle, or he’d have been calling the cops.

“I have made a point,” Anzil said once they’d gone, “of telling you as few deliberate falsehoods as possible since you first awoke in the induction chamber back at the Center. But I’m guilty of a certain amount of . . . misdirection.”

Conscious of the fact that, with Lettie and Harold gone, Jake was now free to concentrate his attention on us, I raised an eyebrow at Anzil, but said nothing.

“No, I don’t mean anything like that. Everything I’ve ever told you in bed has been from the heart—

you should know that, Christopher.” Clearly Anzil wasn’t as inhibited by Jake’s attention as I was. “I was talking about something I said long before that. I said to you that your Empire—sorry, *the* Empire, because it’s not yours any more . . . The Empire, I told you, wasn’t projected to survive more than a few decades. It was—will be—already shrinking fast by your Home Time, and I let you believe this shrinkage was just natural, or self-inflicted, or whatever. But that isn’t entirely the case.

“And there was a question I never answered. I guess you could point to that as a second example of my misleading you, if you wanted to be hypercritical.” He patted my knee again. “Don’t be, Christopher. Don’t think of me too harshly.”

“What question was that?” I said dully, finding words at last, no longer looking him in the eyes. It was depriving him of a small triumph, I felt, to refuse to meet his gaze.

“I asked you where you thought all the travelers from the farther future than the Empire might be. I gave you the impression that it was a question without any known answer, and left it at that.”

“I figured out the answer for myself,” I said. *And you thought I was just a dummy.*

“I thought you might.” This wasn’t what I’d anticipated. I’d expected something like a patronizing chuckle.

“Yeah,” I went on. “Those travelers from the remote future regard the



Empire as a hellhole, somewhere to be avoided at all costs.”

“Good, good,” he murmured. Raising his voice slightly, he added: “I do wish you would look at me, Christopher. I do wish you would *trust* me.”

“A difficult thing to do.”

“Oh, don’t go into a lover’s huff, Christopher. Would I do anything I didn’t think was right for you?”

“How can I tell?”

He gave an exasperated sigh.

There was silence between us for a few moments, and then Jake shocked me by chipping in.

“Just believe the guy, Christopher. He’s confided in me. I know how he feels about you.”

It wasn’t the most fulsome of reassurances—if Anzil could lie, what was to stop Jake doing the same?—but it was enough for the moment. I stopped eyeing the table top and faced Anzil once more.

“Right. Give me the truth.”

“Okay, here goes.” He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders. “You were half-right in your deduction about the pariah status of the Fortusan Empire. That conclusion must have upset you quite a lot—and no wonder, bearing in mind the severity of your indoctrination!—or you’d have let your thoughts lead you further. You’d have asked yourself why, even though they steered clear of the Empire, there weren’t any non-Empire visitors *here*.”

I was unsettled by the obviousness of what had never occurred to me.

“Okay,” I said slowly, stretching out

the word. “I’m your tame stooge, so I’ll ask you that now. Where are they?”

“Sitting in this garden with you. Two of them, anyway.”

I stared at him, stunned.

“You and Jake?”

He gave an uncertain smile. For all he’d walked the corridors of my mind during the past few weeks, he still didn’t know for sure how I was going to react to this. I could sense Jake tensing in the chair on the far side of the table.

“Yes,” Anzil said.

“You’re shitting me.”

“Why should I?”

I looked from Anzil to Jake and back again. They didn’t seem like people from the future. Jake was in his usual slightly ruffled, I’m-really-due-for-the-dry-cleaners-some-month-soon gray suit. If you’d met him in a bar you’d have assumed he was a traveling salesman engaged in the hopeless quest for Ms. Right but prepared to settle for Ms. Easy. For once Anzil was dressed informally, in blue-green shorts and a lurid shirt, as befitted the warmth of the day. Him you’d have thought of as an academic swot who’d tugged himself away from his studies just long enough to try, unsuccessfully, to be one of the good ol’ boys. The one you see propping up the bar with a beer glass at his elbow that’s been half-empty all evening, the one who’s pretending not to watch the door for each new arrival, wondering why he’s still on his own after all this time. It was impossible for me to think of them as emissaries from some future technological society.

“Shouldn’t you be carrying laser pistols, or something shiny?” I said.

Anzil grinned, this time without any qualification. “Pretty gewgaws to impress the savages, you mean?”

“Something like that.”

“That’s not what we’re here to do.”

“Then what *are* you here to do? Why aren’t you trying to stop what’s going on?” I waved a hand in no particular direction, indicating the circus, the torture camps, and all the rest. “If the Empire can import military technology to the past, why can’t you people do the same? Why can’t you grind the bastards into powder, send them packing back where they came from?”

Anzil’s eyes grew sad. “If we could, we would—believe me, Christopher. But the past’s a place that’s dead and gone, remember? It’s a playground where you can do anything you want without there ever being any consequences. We could kill a few thousand, a few hundred thousand, a few million brainwashed minions of the Emperor, and still there’d be more of them coming through—the *same* millions, just a little older, because their Home Time would still be in the past for *us*. Unlike your God-Chosen One, we don’t indulge in killing for killing’s sake.”

I spread my hands. “So you’re powerless?”

“Not entirely. And that’s where you come in.”

“Me?”

“You and thousands like you. Fortunsans we’ve . . . ah, recruited.”

“Abducted.”

“Well, yes, that too. You see, while your Home Time’s in *our* past, and therefore unchangeable by us, it’s not in *yours*. It’s your *now*.”

I was silent for a long while as I absorbed the implications of this. After a minute or two Jake shifted in his seat, but a quick flick of the fingers from Anzil stilled him. A red-breasted bird flew into the garden and hopped around on the grass, picking up crumbs of food.

“So you want me to go home, now?” I said finally, watching the bird and thinking that in my own Home Time there were so few birds left to watch. “I was right when I thought you were leading up to dumping me, only I didn’t realize how comprehensive the dumping was going to be.”

“Please, Christopher,” said Anzil. “This hurts enough without . . .”

I shook my head. “I don’t mean it that way. It’s just . . . this is all kind of a bit much, if you know what I mean. I’ve fallen in love with a man who’s—how far in the future do you two come from?”

“A very long time,” said Jake when Anzil didn’t answer. “A very long time indeed. I don’t know that you want to know exactly how long.”

I nodded. Was Jake talking merely centuries, or was the span something far greater than that? Of course, if it were too long there’d likely be physical or mental differences between them and the people of my own Home Time—at least, if all that Anzil had been telling me about evolution was



true, and I now believed him completely when he said he didn't make a habit of lying to me.

"So the person I thought came from a past locale in reality comes from a future one," I said, "and now he wants me to separate myself from him by decades—forever, really. Just one of those mouthfuls would be too big for me to swallow. You're asking me to . . ."

I let the words trail away.

Anzil, his eyes brimming, seemed still to be incapable of speech, so Jake took over his role.

"You're right, Christopher. We're asking you to enlist in our army."

"Army?"

"The Center, and others like it in every locale the Empire's 'liberated,' have recruited thousands like you already, Christopher, and the work never ceases."

"What's the idea? Arm us to the teeth with all the hi-tech weaponry we can imagine, and send us back through the entryways with every barrel a-blazing-o? I may look like a Fortusan Marine to you, Jake, but believe me appearances can lie."

I laughed without any humor.

He smiled politely. "That's not what we're asking you to do, Christopher. Like Anzil said, we don't enjoy slaughter, and we don't kill just for the sake of it. Even if we did—even if we shared the bloodthirstiness of the Empire—we wouldn't do it that way. You see, we already know how it all turns out, and it wasn't war that brought the Empire

to its knees, and then finally extinguished it."

Jake looked to Anzil, but Anzil still didn't show any signs of wanting to contribute to the account.

After a pause, Jake shrugged, and continued. "Maybe my friend here misled you more than he fully admitted. There *have* been visitors to the Empire, you see—just a few of them, there as observers and recorders only, and, so far as I know, none as early as your own Home Time. Even if they were visiting your era, you'd have known nothing about it. Watch."

He flickered out of existence, then a handful of seconds later reappeared, looking no different except for a faint trace of embarrassment on his face. "There's one of those shiny gewgaws for you," he said.

I revised upward my guesses as to how far forward along the timeline lay the Home Time of these two.

"Technology?" I said. "A power of mind?"

"Where Anzil and I come from," said Jake, his eyes evasive as if this were a subject he didn't want to get into, "we *are* the technology."

I couldn't argue with that. For one thing, I was uncertain what he actually meant.

"Lettie and Harold and their friends," he continued, "didn't just jump you after the circus at random. They'd been looking out for you. Just like with all the other invaders we've recruited, they'd seen recordings of you, and had been told you were next

on the list to bring in. We've watched you, you see, do your part to bring about the demise of the Empire."

"You are," said Anzil, speaking at last, "a very great hero, Christopher."

I have secrets that I keep from Abalone and Bill. Even though I know the time for keeping secrets from them will soon be over, that doesn't make me feel any the less guilty about my deceptions.

I came back through the entryway at the moment I was scheduled to return, of course, and so no one had means of telling that I had lost six weeks between the end of the circus and my homecoming. I seemed no older than when I had left, although occasionally Abalone looks into my eyes at night, as we switch the lights off in our bedroom, and sees some trace of all the things I'm keeping hidden. I know it worries her, but she has more sense than to ask me about it. It's as if she understands that in only a little while now she'll become an integral part of those secrets.

I never did write my review of that particular day's circus—I found I just didn't have the heart. I begged sickness, and my editors were understanding; what was one more or one less circus review, after all? My reviews are among the least important parts of the entertainments supplement, of hardly any significance alongside accounts of the God-Chosen One's latest holocaust appearances, or the newest movies about his early life.

If I had my way, I'd give up my career as a journalist altogether, but that's something I can't afford to do: "The wages of idleness," as the Prophet said, "is starvation"—starvation not just for me but for my wife and child, unless her parents decided to flirt with the outer edge of the law and take the two of them in. No, I have to keep on working, and, besides, my trips to earlier locales to report on circuses and other events occasionally give me an opportunity for a few hours or even days with Anzil.

Harold and Lettie are no longer there. They have been cycled back to their Home Time, which I have deduced to be several thousand years in the future. From remarks Anzil has let slip (if indeed he's let them slip; he is my dear lover, and I know there's very little he does that he does by accident), the earth of their Home Time is no longer humanity's base, but merely a largely desertified outpost where people come on occasion in order to visit its earlier history. The purpose of these future people is not to save the world through hastening the Empire's end—it was apparently too late to do that by the time the Empire had been established a mere couple of decades, such was the devastation the God-Chosen One caused. All the liberators from the future will be able to do is slow the planet's decline long enough for technology to be developed to permit a great migration. In a curious, back-handed fashion, you could say that the Empire will have been responsible for



humanity's becoming a space-based rather than a planet-bound species. This is in the same sense, however, that a plague like the Black Death eventually brought advances in medical science. Our distant descendants feel no gratitude toward the Empire, nor toward the God-Chosen One.

Jake, like Anzil, has passed up the opportunity for a few years' leave in his Home Time. He tells me this is because he is constitutionally disinclined to leave a job unfinished . . . and sometimes, in my more insecure moments, I wonder if this isn't a large part of Anzil's motivation, too, although at other times, especially when I'm with him, I'm confident it is his love for me that keeps him in the locale where my duties occasionally take me.

Myself, I am a freedom fighter . . . of sorts.

Engaged in a war . . . of a very real sort.

As Anzil and Jake promised me, I do not have to take up weapons and storm the ramparts of Empire, I do not have to go in glory to the forefront of an armed battle. That is not, they say, where wars are lost and won. The Empire's rule isn't based on its force of arms, but on the artificial reality it has created within the minds of all who live in Fortusa, a reality wherein the God-Chosen One—and hence, by extension, Fortusa itself—can do no wrong, whatever the evidence of our senses might be that great wrong is indeed being done. A reality in which our enemies become our enemies for no plau-

sible reason. A reality in which all's right with Fortusa because a beneficent God is smiling upon it. What has to be fought against is not the Army of God, or any of its Armies of Liberation, but the army of false ideas.

Just as in the book Jake once lent me about cults.

Killing or incarcerating the cult's leader, or razing the institutions of the cult to the ground and scattering the ashes, will not save the unfortunates who have been lured into it and then indoctrinated until life outside it becomes impossible. Instead, the cult itself must be discredited in the minds of its believers, first by letting the true reality insinuate the slightest glimmer of itself into the darkness of their fettered understanding, and then by slowly increasing the level of illumination until there is nowhere left for the shadows to hide.

The other day at the circus a nigger was tied to a stake at the top of a pyre, with only one arm left free. The hand of that arm was put on the head of an iron bust of the God-Chosen One. The nigger was told that he must keep his naked palm pressed against the God-Chosen One's brow even as the metal was heated until it was white hot; if ever he should let go, whatever the agony, the pyre would be lit and he would be burned alive. His shrieks of anguish as the metal glowed were drowned out by the laughter of the mob at his writhings. He had no chance, of course—the body's own reflexes are more powerful than any

conscious control of them could be—and at last, after three minutes or more, as the metal glowed red and the bones of his hand charred, he was unable to stop himself from snatching his hand away. The ignition of the pyre, the symbol of his failure, was greeted by loud and self-satisfied applause . . . directed not toward the sufferer for his bravery but toward his tormentors, for their cruelty.

Yet in my review of the circus I wrote a single sentence, in my description of this, in which I treated him not as a nigger but as a man—as a man of great courage, who had undergone intolerable pain and yet remained defiant to the end.

A hero, in short. But, more importantly, a human being.

I am a skilled enough writer that my blasphemy went unnoticed by my editors, and by the religious censors. I would be surprised if more than a dozen of my readers, anesthetized as they are to other people's suffering, registered what they read as in any way subversive. There have been no complaints received at the newspaper—at least, so far as I'm aware. Yet I hope that in the minds of all the others who let their eyes run over my words, inured as those readers are as yet to full understanding of what they read, there will have been planted a seed that will one day flower into something great, and glorious, and new.

Since my weeks with Anzil and Jake in that distant locale where the Empire thought it had the free run of the play-

ground without any adult supervision, I've been increasingly aware of the activities of other fifth columnists like myself here within the Home Time. Perhaps I saw the evidence of their peaceful insurrection before, but my mind was not yet ready for the seeds they set there to flourish—how can I tell? But now I can see that locked within the customary adulatory descriptions of the God-Chosen One there is derision, and disbelief, and disgust. Elsewhere there are the gentlest hints that there may be other nations outside the Empire, and that the citizens of those nations may be enjoying lives of far greater fulfillment than anything we here within can aspire to. Only the other day a science correspondent dared to mention evolution in the midst of his textual reappraisal of the meaning of *Genesis*, and so far as I know he has suffered no repercussions. Elsewhere there is a growing climate, though nothing is ever stated in so many words, that accepts even the existence of God must be treated as an hypothesis alongside others.

These are all just the touches of feathers against the barrel of a gun, of course, and each in itself does little or nothing to affect the functionality of the weapon, nor the lethal power it possesses to mow down those who would stand against it. But there are many feathers, and their number is growing every day, and even metal can be worn away.

One day soon, very soon, I will take my beloved Abalone, my constant



companion through this life, in my arms and say to her, “The power is within ourselves, not within the God-Chosen One, to make our lives into what we want them to be.”

I can already see the distress and confusion in her eyes, but I will continue holding her firmly in my arms as the little bird calms its fluttering against the bars of its cage and finds that the cage door has been left open just a crack.

I hope.

Ah, Abigail, to whom I owe so much, will you realize that I’ve begun paying

a part of my debt, or will you believe me to be demon-possessed, as the God-Chosen One and his priests would no doubt judge me?

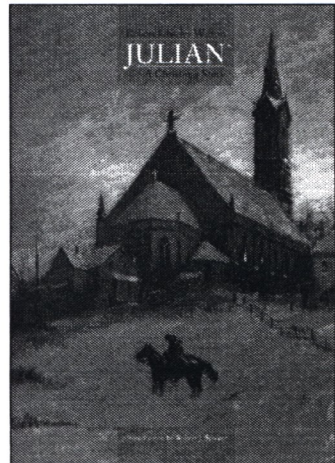
You will have the freedom to choose. I will not pretend to be giving you freedom while in fact giving you none.

If you make the choice I believe you’ll make, then it’ll be not merely the past but our future together, and Bill’s future, and the future of his children and of all the many, many generations of children yet to come, that will truly become the unforbidden playground. ☒

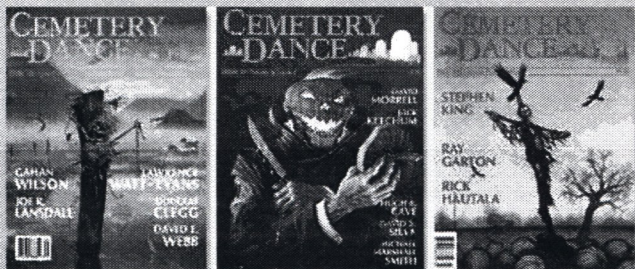
**I**t is the year 2176. The world has survived a catastrophic 21st Century, emerging from oil depletion, climate change, and epidemic disease with a drastically reduced population. And in the United States, it’s an election year.

Young Adam Hazzard lives in rural Athabaska, one of the sixty States of the Union. His hometown of Williams Ford is—or seems to be—safely distant from the conflicts of the day: an ongoing war with European powers for possession of Labrador and ever-simmering rivalries among the military, the civilian government, and the theocratic Church of the Dominion. But that illusion of safety is quickly coming to an end.

Adam has been befriended by Julian Comstock, a young aristocrat his own age, sent to Williams Ford by his family to protect him from the jealousy of the reigning President: his uncle Deklan. Adam, struggling to come to terms with Julian’s religious apostasy and the near-forgotten truths he has discovered in an antique book called *The History of Mankind in Space*, faces a wrenching decision about his own future . . . and there is much more at stake than he realizes.



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*Tim Lees's story collection, The Life to Come (Elastic Press), made the short list in the recent BFS awards, only to be pipped at the post by Joe Hill's 20th Century Ghosts—but, of course, if he had to lose then it's better he should lose to a PS title! Tim is currently at work on a couple of quirky mystery/detective novels, one of which necessitated a research trip to Los Angeles. "The city proved as thrilling, bizarre and dream-like as I had hoped," he says. "I've always liked that point where SF and surrealism combine, and to see it happen in reality was a delight." Tim is the proud possessor of a Sigmund Freud action figure, but it was not the inspiration for the present piece—at least not as far as he's aware.*

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# The Interpretation of Dreams

Tim Lees

Some worlds are worlds of sadness and despair. On Pirgos III, under a dark and maleficent sun, I suffered such depression that for days I scarcely left my bed, unable to escape the sense of torpor and futility that held me there. I felt my work would never be complete. Each time I drove out to the site, the progress made seemed less and less, and I became convinced some saboteur must be dismantling the structure in my absence. I would admit no other explanation, and railed against my co-workers, my servants and employers—traitors all, I said. I trusted no-one. Even on the day I left, the dome now gleaming beautifully against the sky, I nonetheless believed that I had failed. It seemed to me that I was fleeing in disgrace, preferring exile to the shame of staying on. As former colleagues shook my hand and wished me *bon voyage*, I read all kinds of hidden meanings in their looks, their tones of voice. Was this a

joke, their show of thanks? A vicious jibe? Or just a badly-held pretence, designed to ease the parting? What was the meaning of that sideways glance, and what made one man hold my gaze, as if deliberately searching me for signs of guilt? I climbed the ship's ramp as if climbing up a scaffold. My feet would barely move. At last one of the stewards had to leave his post, come down and help me on my way. I murmured protests as his strong, kind hands strapped me in my seat. I tried to fend him off. The pain of my neglected childhood, so long forgotten, suddenly seemed to sweep down and consume me, and I wept, as helpless as an infant, till my throat was hoarse, my eyes were sore, my cheeks crusted with tears.

And yet, within an hour of our departure, the gloomy mood began to lift. The dark psychology of that peculiar world no longer held me; I might have been recuperating from an illness, or exiting a long, dark tunnel—so dark

that I'd forgotten how the daylight looked. These last few months belonged to someone else, my Pirgosian self, as I immediately christened him. He had possessed my skills, my knowledge, and designed the dome for which I had been generously paid; yet his doubts and agonies were now almost unknown to me. Who had he been? Why had his stay been blighted by such misery?

I knew the memories would linger on, forestalling my return to normal life. They needed to be thoroughly absorbed, assimilated at a deep, unconscious level. I had reached, once more, a turning point, although its nature still remained obscure.

**I**n cryo-sleep, strange dreams pursued me. Herds of headless horses chased each other over blood-red plains, endlessly running, their hooves a thunder in my head. I had never seen a horse, except in VT, yet within days of my return to Earth, I met the Marchioness of K\_\_\_\_, whose husband owned one of the few remaining stables, much praised for its genetic purity. This seemed to me a sign. The Marchioness and I would become lovers, I was sure—but first, family business took me elsewhere.

**I** called my sister at the monastery. She had aged. It saddened me, the constant sense of loss that came with space flight, the lives of others rushing

on and vanishing, almost between one breath and the next. The sight of her on screen disturbed me. The stubble on her head was grey, deep grooves had cut themselves around her mouth, the skin under her eyes had bagged. She was our mother's age, at least.

She said: "You're back."

The tone was neutral, not even surprised. I told her I was hoping we could meet. We were like strangers, folk whose names had been passed on to one another by a third party. She was hesitant, but finally admitted she'd a four-hour visiting allowance due; she would receive me then, she said, although of course, she couldn't leave the monastery.

I had my reservations too, yet readily agreed her terms. I took a pinjet to Lahore, then hired a car and drove for the remaining thirty miles. The monastery was much as I remembered it—I'd been there no more than a year before, my time—though the new wing, built to house their growing archives, was now complete. Its fashionable curves and arcs clashed horribly with the hard, straight lines of the central complex, and the aesthete in me tutted, mentally re-shaping it to suit my tastes.

A reception room was set aside for visitors; bleak, austere, discouraging of lengthy stays. I clutched my gifts for her, wondering if I should have brought something more personal—reminiscent of our childhood, say? But it was hard for me to judge these things. Her illness and then, later on,



my travelling, divided us. I wanted very much to build some kind of a relationship—I felt a need for the security—yet wasn't in the least sure how it should be done. Even now, when she appeared, I knew my gaze was critical, evaluating more than welcoming. She moved slowly; she had acquired our mother's habit of tipping her head to the left, like some enormous bird.

"Joseph," she said.

I told her she was looking well, that it was wonderful to see her once again.

"I'm tired," she said. "I work late, these days . . ."

"It's going well?"

"It's going very well. Not that you care, of course."

I protested, and produced my gifts, the chocolates and the brandy. "It's the best," I said. "Two hundred years—"

"We'll share it out. We don't have personal possessions here. You should remember that. Still," she brightened for a moment, as if recalling better times, "thank you. It was a nice thought."

I talked a little of my recent job, avoiding mention of the cryo-dreams, the sense of which I was convinced I understood and wanted to keep private. But I did, in passing, mention that I'd met the Marchioness of K\_\_\_\_\_.

"Really?" she said. "The Marquis is our biggest patron. He part-sponsored my own project, the Hollywood Archives. We've got the most extensive library of ancient cinema materials in the world, you know. He's very sympa-

thetic to our aims. In fact, he has a number of related ventures—"

"Your aims," I said.

"Oh yes. Our aims." Her voice took on a harder edge, the way it sometimes had in childhood, admonishing me for some brief rebellion. She said, "We're made of memory, you know. We swim in memory; each one of us is at the vanguard of a wake of memory. And every time that memory fades, the universe fades with it. I think we all know this instinctively. Remembering is the true task of mankind. In this way we preserve, maintain, and sanctify. So I believe. The past," she half turned, as if to indicate the tracks of history behind, "the past is all that properly exists, and study of the past the most sublime and holy course in life. You can't blame me for choosing it."

"You threw away your opportunities."

"The past is fixed. The past is to be understood, examined . . . Never criticised."

I gazed around. The room was windowless. "When did you last set foot outside?"

"Outside? Oh—it must be thirty years. Or is it thirty-two?"

"Exactly! Things are changing there! You moon about the past while all the time the future's rushing in on you, except you won't acknowledge it. Besides," I added cruelly, "if memory is so important, it's interesting you can't remember just how long you've been here. Very interesting."

She sighed. "Well. Yes. Perhaps. But

our work here *is* important. You may not want to see it that way, but it is.”

“More so than mine?”

“I think so. Yes.”

She talked about her latest project, the film archives that had so come to dominate her life. She spoke of engagements, memes, subjective and tangential memory; used terms so esoteric and abstruse I was afraid our meeting would be swallowed in her pointless sophistry.

“The images on screen both mirror and oppose true memory. They’re real, in their way, and yet—” she made a chopping motion with her hand, “—objective memory, what we might call *universal* memory, is of a stage set, film crew, actors searching for the right way to deliver lines . . . The trivia that passes through each person’s head, the backstage politics, the memories of editors and sound-mixers. Of millions, millions of viewers . . . And out of all this, we’re able—we can reconstruct specific elements, motifs of the archaic world. We reproduce their thoughts, their lives. It’s like a sacrament. Communion with a long-dead age . . .”

I grunted. It sounded quaint and very much irrelevant to me; a game for primitives and kids.

She said, “We have the last remaining print here of a great family classic, *The Godfather*. We are rebuilding, bit by bit, the circumstances of its making. We have archives—diary extracts, comments from the time, phone calls reconstructed out of written notes. Even menus from the restaurants

where its makers ate. There’s one scene—”

I struggled, holding back a yawn.

“—scene 8, a key scene, though it lasts for barely thirty seconds, *wonderfully* self-reflexive. All the struggles and anxieties, the petty conflicts which had dogged production, the battle with the studio heads—all these are given full expression, cleverly encoded on the screen. An act of warning in its fictive form—perhaps an act of vengeance, too.” Her hands moved, as if to shape a picture in the air. “Woltz, the studio boss, wakes up in bed. There is a tiny spot of blood upon his sheets. We see it first. Then he sees it. He flings the bedclothes back. More blood, and more. He panics, and his panic is the panic of the industry. The studio, appalled at its expenditure! Frightened for its future! He screams. His voice—”

But it was all too much for me.

“*The Good Father!*” I sneered. “That’s a laugh! The only thing our Dad was good at was spending money—other people’s, for preference! In fact, I often think that, if it weren’t for him, we’d both have wound up rather better than we are. Don’t you? He didn’t exactly set a good example, did he?”

“I was . . . I was fond of him.”

“Oh, I was fond of him! Old rogue that he was! But still—”

“Please. Let me explain. This isn’t simply therapy. Memory provides the basic unit of the universe. Without the power of memory, nothing could exist. The past still trails behind us like a



comet's tail. My past, your past. That's why it's so important, Joe. That's why I have to do it. I've got my students, my successes. We talk together on the net. I'm still in touch with life outside, you see."

"Students?" I said. "How many?"

"Well . . ." she hesitated. "Three, just now. But it's a start. I *am* reintegrating, slowly. But my therapist says not to rush."

"I wouldn't say that thirty years is rushing."

"No. Well, it might be time means something different to us both, then. Don't you think?"

**T**he Marquis, as I'd hoped, was absent, and his wife became my hostess, guide, and (though she scarcely knew it then) my love. Her horses trotted round us, nervous in the presence of a stranger; their nostrils flared, tasting the air. She called them each by name. I made a show of interest, though in truth they soon began to irritate me, she doted on them so much—you might almost say that I was jealous! I watched her as she cooed and shushed, bending sometimes to share breath with this creature or that. Their long, pale heads craned up at her. Their sharp ears twitched. In their devotion, I saw echoes of my own. One, a favourite, its brow marked by a pure white star, would reach to place its dainty three-toed paw into her hand. Oh, how I wished that paw were mine!

At dinner, we sat opposite each other

at a great black table, she and I. (I had hinted that a simple fireside meal would have sufficed. She seemed determined, though, to treat me as an honoured guest—worse luck.) The dinner was exquisite, if not what I had hoped; the wine perhaps a bit too plentiful. I found my thoughts returning to my sister and our recent meeting. I was troubled in a way that I could not define. I spoke about our upbringing, the travelling, the huge, luxurious hotels where room service made up for real parental favour; the heads of state who visited, the businessmen and entertainment stars; the hushed departures, shuffling out at three a.m., lost luggage and abandoned toys; the fierce and hissing quarrels between Mum and Dad.

"I was warned," I said, "if anybody asked me where my father was, to say he was away on business. If I passed him in the street, then I was never to acknowledge him, not even with a glance. Only in private could he take me in his arms, admit I was his son . . ."

"A sad childhood."

"My sister," I remarked, "has never properly recovered. Her nervous trouble . . . She's obsessed with memory. The past. She finds life in the present . . . difficult."

I leaned towards her, gazed into her great, dark eyes.

"There's memory," I said. I laid my fork down on the table. "And there's dream." I placed the spoon across it at a right angle. "The first looks back, the second, forwards. Time flows in both directions." I gestured, tracing the sil-

ver lines of cutlery. "It's dream that links us to the future world. My sister likes to look in one direction only. I believe she finds it comforting."

"Dreams." The voice was resonant. "But dreams must be interpreted, I believe? No dream is ever quite so clear as memory."

"Oh no?" I picked the spoon up, waved it airily. "I think you'll find . . . if one just has a sense of self, a sense of . . . let's not call it destiny. Direction, say. Of where one's life is bound . . ." Her eyes were huge black pools, I wanted no more than to plunge in, lose myself inside the great, dark ocean of her soul. "What do you dream of, Fatima? Which way do you travel?"

"Travel?" She gave a brief, somewhat nervous laugh. "My life is in my duties, in the running of my household, care of my husband and my children, in—"

"I dreamed of horses, coming here. Horses! And then today—"

When the liqueur arrived, I suggested that we step out on the terrace, escaping from the servants' prying gaze. A crescent moon hung over us. I touched her arm. I stroked her soft, bare skin, I pulled her to me, fought to press my lips to hers. She twisted, wriggling in my grasp. How shy she seemed, and slender as an eel! I kissed her cheek, her ear, her throat.

"Fatima, Fatima my darling! Don't fight me! This is fate, this is foretold! If you just knew the way I feel—"

She cried out, and it seemed to me her cries were cries of pleasure, playful

protests from a woman who insists her man believe her hard-won, even while she slips into his arms. I told her of my love, my need for her, I praised her beauty and her intellect, the softness of her flesh, the smoothness of her skin, the glory of her hair.

"Oh Fatima! The moon shines just for us! The stars grow dim beside you! Your beauty is the beauty of the Milky Way, your name a hymn to all that's good in life, your eyes are like, like, like—"

She slithered from my grasp, stepped back, and with a poise more suited to an athlete or a dancer, raised her arm, a smooth, balletic curve, a motion of such elegance I watched it, fascinated—

—and she hit me in the face.

Several pairs of large, distinctly male hands helped me to my feet, and thence, with an unnecessary roughness, to my bed. I woke next day to find my bags already packed, a car waiting to take me to the airport. My head was throbbing. There was no sign of the Marchioness. The mansion seemed deserted, bar a single manservant, a fellow I had never seen before. He carried out my luggage. When I asked him where my hostess was, he replied—as I had once been taught to say about my father—that she had gone away, not soon to be expected home.

A too-bright sun leered down like an invective, taunting me.

I never saw the Marchioness again.



I worked on many worlds from that time forth. On Lagana, I watched whole cities build themselves around me, row on row of streetlights flashing from my fingertips like firework displays, whole office blocks assembling from the skyline down; a vast metropolis constructed in my name. I travelled constantly. I built cathedrals, brothels, counting houses. I was everywhere. On Andolini, in the Seventh Phase, I became convinced a tiny, parasitic creature—something between a rabbit and a snake—had nested in my gut and spoke to me at night, directing all the changes in my blueprints and materials, instructing me in skills which I had never previously known. I felt it in the warren of my belly, poking, probing, re-arranging everything I thought of as myself. Under its tutelage I grew my hair long, took to wearing jodhpurs and safari suits; I carried seashells and small pebbles to propitiate the gods.

Of course, on leaving, all such notions faded from my mind. I was embarrassed by my looks, puzzled by the broken shells that cluttered every pocket. I shaved my head and hired a tailor at our first civilized port of call.

But one thing I could not escape: the Marchioness's face would float before me, haunting me, a ghost I was unable, in whichever sense, to lay.

Long years had passed when I returned to Earth. My sister was now old, but calmer, able to take brief excursions from the monastery, an hour or more each day. Together then, we strolled

along the river, watching the children bathe, the cane cutters upon the far shore, our intimacy broken only by the putter of the taxis that drove to and fro, yelling for fares.

She gestured to the yellow hills, the scorched blue sky.

"You see," she said, "it's like a movie set."

"No, no. It's like a dream."

And she laughed—a harsh, cracked sound, but one which I had never heard from her before, not even in the furthest reaches of our childhood; and I looked at her, and found that I was laughing, too.

"Last time we met," she said, "I was in the middle of my thesis. I wanted to explain about that scene, that scene with . . ."

But I didn't want to hear. I told her, "Hush," and pressed my fingers to her lips. "Don't talk of work." Hesitantly, almost nervously, I put my arm around her, feeling the knobs and sticks of bone beneath her robe; and for the first time since our youth, we stood together, she and I, under an open sky, outside those dreadful monastery walls, and smelt the dust, the river, the smoke-tang of a distant fire; and I wondered how we could have stayed apart so long, why no handy omen or presaging dream had come to push me back towards her, point me on the road I ought to take.

She shivered in my grasp.

"They're both gone now," she sighed. "Mum and Dad. There's only us."

“Then we can start again. We can be free . . .”

“Can we?” Her smile was sad, ironic, and I clung to her, this ancient, shattered woman, whose childhood I had somehow shared; and I wanted no more talk of abstracts, no more longing for the once-was or the yet-to-come.

A bird rose from the cane fields, hovered for a moment, and then, with just a single flap, swept off towards the sun.

Our mother’s pain, our father’s profligacy. Neither one could touch us now.

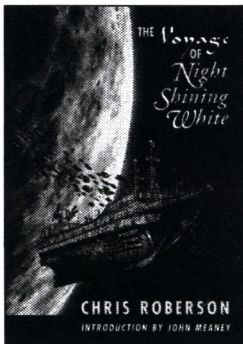
The future had at last arrived. ☒

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*Following the lessons of two literary masters, Peter Straub and Robert Aickman, "Kins" was a study in subtle disquiet, according to Mary. Some of her other short fiction can be found collected in Under Cover of Night, published by Flesh & Blood Press in 2002. In addition to the sale to Postscripts, her work is pending publication in Inhuman and Space & Time. She has just completed her second novel, and is at work on a third.*

---

# Kins

## Mary SanGiovanni

Peter lately dreamed of fire, and the smoky scent of burning wood and paper. In the dreams, he stood before the cabin in his pajamas. He squinted against the waves of heat and the intense light that wrestled the shore of Lake Cashmere from the otherwise pure, unbroken night. He watched as all that he had was devoured by the conflagration, and from inside the cabin, he heard them laughing. Peter wanted to laugh, too. He smiled up at the light, dusty touch of ashes as they floated from the burning building while stars smoldered like golden embers in the sky.

When he awoke, Sheila was rubbing his shoulder and murmuring soothing non-words.

"Was I dreaming?" Peter blinked and the wood beams of the bedroom ceiling grew clearer. He sat up, scratching the scruff of his face, and the darkness molded into familiar shapes—a mahogany dresser by the door, a

matching vanity against the far left wall, a picture window looking out over the lake on the right, a night table beside him with an alarm clock displaying a digital red 3:16 AM.

She sat up beside him. Strands of wavy blond hung over one eye and she leaned over and kissed his cheek. "You were laughing." She pulled the blanket over her waist. "It was better when you used to mumble in your sleep."

"That's because you knew I was talking dirty to you." He smiled at her, and she rubbed the close-shorn hairs of his head and winked.

"Not unless mumbling 'kins' is your idea of foreplay."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "That was the only word I could ever really make out. 'Kins.' And maybe 'liar' or something."

For one nagging moment, something tugged at the hem of his brain, then vanished beneath the skirts of his consciousness.

He grinned. "How about if I talk dirty now?"



“Don’t talk,” she said, her lips teasing around a smile. “Just do.”

The place on Cashmere Lake had been Uncle Martin’s, and when he died, he’d left it to Peter. It suited his needs—a bedroom, a couple of bathrooms, kitchen and dining areas, and a lofty den and office alcove. The knotted pine smelled clean, like the forest from which it had come, while outside, the light and lingering scent of algae washed in from the lake. Peter had loved the place as a boy, and loved it more now that it was his alone, his in which to hide away from a world sometimes crawling with colors, too noxious, too noisome and too alive. On the lake, it was peaceful. Picture perfect, Peter thought.

When Peter did have occasion to go to town, he found it little more than a mile up the main road, and it, too, boasted of quiet and calm. But he worked from home, pounding out a good two thousand words of moderately successful legal thriller and three thousand words of far more lucrative non-fiction a day. Sheila usually picked up the groceries and the occasional errand items on her way home from work. A boy from up the street—Jim or James or Jamie—delivered his newspaper. Peter rarely had to leave the serenity of the cabin on Lake Cashmere except to deliver manuscripts to the post office. And he liked it that way.

That morning, after Sheila drove away, he padded back to the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee. Over breakfast, she had told him a story about Naomi in Swimwear and Helen in Maternity and it reminded him of a fragment of his dream. Something about wisps of ash and paper, and burning wood. He frowned, shook his head, and sipped his coffee.

Part of the newspaper—her half—was folded open to the Macy’s ad that had sparked the conversation that morning. He took the rest and headed upstairs.

The house was silent without her. Even the floor boards and the walls settling into the foundation of the house were quiet. Peter wouldn’t have minded except that morning, the sudden absence of the muted sounds he had come to expect seemed unnatural to him somehow. He moved from the hallway and into his bedroom, his footsteps shushed by the carpets. Then Peter crossed to the closet and pulled out some clothes to lay across the rumpled blanket. Warm clothes—the cold weather slipped through the cracks of the cabin that late in the year despite the fireplace. In no time, the cabin would be dusted with snow.

The basket of clean towels Sheila had brought in from the laundry room sat at the foot of the bed. The idea of a hot shower appealed to him. It would wash away the weird up set that seemed to shake up like dust

and resettle into the pores of his skin.

As he turned from the closet, he cast a cursory glance at the oil painting on the right wall and thought again of snow falling like paper ash and heat on his face and Naomi in Swimwear who he'd never seen but imagined with honey-colored hair and green eyes and—

Peter stopped and the coffee sloshed in his mug, spattering the newspaper. He turned to the painting. The oils swirled in an impression of the lake right outside, of the view from that very bedroom. He frowned, crossing the room to look behind the painting.

Solid wall, where the window had been.

A rough impression, a fake view, in place of the window.

It wasn't the only change. He checked the house, the shower temporarily forgotten, and found other little differences from the night before, no more drastic and no less disturbing to him. The hollow of the fireplace in the den had been replaced with an electric insert and a heater that simulated the warmth of real fire by which he and Sheila often sat. The bowl of fruit on the dining room table now contained wax replicas of bananas, an apple, a pear, and an orange.

Peter frowned, and searched the grounds outside. They, at least, seemed to be in order. He went back inside to shower. Afterwards, he got dressed and

made another sweep of the house. The painting, the fake fireplace and waxy fruit remained. He tried calling Sheila, but he got the voicemail, and thought it silly to leave a message blabbing about wax fruit. He'd wait until she got home.

Peter got no writing done. Every word felt hollow. No satisfying click of a phrase, or forward momentum of an idea. He took a nap instead and awoke long before Sheila got home, a pervasive sense of wild, anxious abandon in his chest and heat flushing his face. He remembered snippets of a dream: the honey-colored glow of fire; laughter; waxy lips and oil-swirl eyes in a face he didn't recognize. He made another sweep of the house in the waning light. The changes to his cabin stood firm.

He pounced on Sheila at the door when she got home that night, taking her by the arm and showing her, with minimal comment, all the odd replacements in the house.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, Peter," she said when he presented the artificial flames of the fireplace.

"What do you see, Sheila? Or, what don't you see anymore? That's what I'm getting at. These are all different than they were last night. They're fakes. Replicas. Simulations of things. Our things."

"What're you talking about?" She picked up the wax apple. "These things have always been here."

Peter gaped at her. "Sheila, I had one of those apples yesterday. And I just went and bought firewood last week! It's out by the shed."



She looked doubtful.

"I'll show you, then." He dragged her outside and around back to the shed. The firewood wasn't there.

Silent, arms folded beneath her breasts, she stood next to him as he studied the tuft of grass where the logs should have been. He glanced at her. Peter could tell from the look on her face that she was cold, tired, but concerned. She seemed unsure whether to question why he didn't recognize household items that she claimed had always been as they were now.

Finally, she said, "Peter, honey, are you okay?"

He stared at her. "Tell me you're pulling my leg."

She shook her head. "Maybe you've been working too hard on the books, huh? Pressure of the deadlines, maybe. How about we have a nice glass of wine and—"

"You really don't remember the window?"

Sheila smiled gently at him. "Even if I did—and I don't, and I think I know your bedroom pretty well by now—how could a window have been deconstructed and filled in overnight? Think about it, Pete. Same with the fireplace. Who would do such a thing, if it were true? And why?"

**T**he next morning, Peter's eyes were closed, but he was awake. Awake and aware that the feel of the house was different. The air was stale somehow, and thin—not the knotty pine scent of

fresh air saturated with trees. Not even the scent of algae. Something else in the cabin was different. He knew it.

Sheila didn't try to wake him; he felt her kiss him lightly on the head and whisper, "Bye, honey. Get some rest," before heading off to work. He waited until he heard the front door close and then tossed back the covers and sat up.

Nothing appeared to be different in the bedroom. The window was still a painting—no reversion in the night, evidently—but otherwise the furniture looked as it always had.

Downstairs, he made himself some coffee and surveyed the kitchen. The sink, the countertops, the appliances all looked as they always had. No child's toy telephone or EZ-Bake oven. He smiled to himself as he took his coffee mug to his office to work. Maybe the day before was a fluke, a hiccup in the normalcy of everyday real life, a one-time th—

His relief snapped off abruptly as he looked at the stack of papers next to his printer. Peter couldn't recall getting much writing done the day before, let alone printing anything to edit. And Sheila never came into his office. But the top sheet of paper was labeled with the title of his thriller.

Beneath it, though, the text was utterly strange to him:

*"Word word word word-word word,"  
word word. Word word word word. Word  
word. Word word word quin word word.  
Word baby word word, word word word  
word. Word word word word, fire word,*

*word word word word. Word word, word word word, word—word word word word word.*

Cold discomfort churned the coffee in Peter's stomach. He drew back from the page as if it were hot enough to burn him, and turned on his computer. If Sheila was playing some kind of joke, some kind of cruel prank—

He called up the latest version of his novel in Microsoft Word. It was the text he remembered typing, just as he'd stared at it yesterday. His gaze trailed back to the printed stack of pages and rolled across the word "baby" a few times.

She'd wanted one. He and Sheila had only ever had a handful of fights in the eight years they'd been together, and more than half of them had been about babies. The one she'd lost before she met him, the one she wanted to have with him, the one . . .

The one he'd dreamed she'd had, without him. Instead of him. The one she left him to bring into a world that was sometimes crawling with colors, too noxious, too noisome and too alive.

Silly fights about what was, and couldn't be changed. And what might never be. Fights that didn't last long; she was content enough to rest on the subject for another couple of years, and go back to "playing house," as she put it. He didn't believe she wanted a baby as badly as she said she did.

He noticed the word "fire," too, and remembered dreaming of fire—yes, fire and ashes. And laughter.

Peter tipped the whole damned

stack of papers into the wastebasket by his desk.

He didn't mention the pages to her in bed that night. And she didn't mention the day before at all except to ask, "How you feeling, honey? Any better?"

He faked a smile and nodded. "Just needed some rest, is all."

"Get any work done?"

He studied her face and wondered what she was getting at. Was that a subtle hint that she had, in fact, printed those pages for him to see? His eyes narrowed at her. Why would she do that to him?

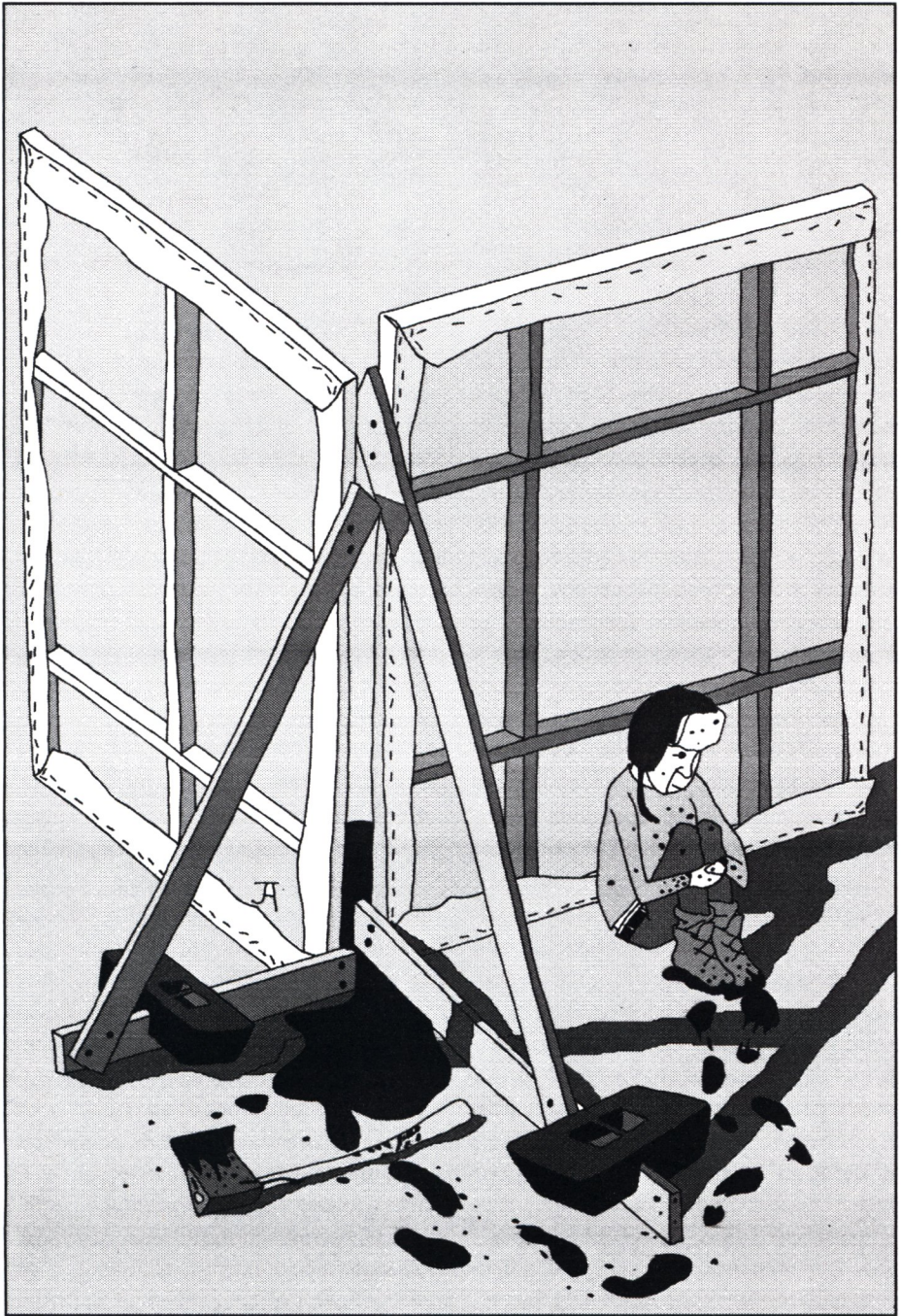
She stopped filing her nails and looked up at him. "What? Peter, why are you looking at me like that?" It seemed like genuine surprise in her eyes.

He shook his head and faked another smile. "Nothing. Nothing. Work was fine. Got a lot of words down today."

She nodded, and went back to filing her nails, oblivious to his implication. "Good, glad to hear it. Oh! I have a funny story about the girls at work. Helen was going on to Naomi about how she doesn't get out much since she got pregnant and how she joined this women-only gym and—"

Peter didn't hear much after that. His attention was drawn to a sound from the den. He held up a hand to pause Sheila's story, and she stopped talking.





“Hear that?”

“Hear what?”

He climbed out of bed. “Sounds like the TV’s on in the den. I’ll be right back.” A mild sigh—not impatience so much as resignation—followed him out into the hallway.

“I don’t hear anything,” she called.

“I’ll be right back.”

He saw the blue glare of the TV screen against the far wall of the den before he entered the room. The volume was turned down low, but audible. He heard canned laughter.

As he neared the screen, he saw a ventriloquist’s dummy, operating apart from any human hand, and a marionette with blond wavy hair tied by her own strings to a chair. The dummy held a very real knife between the breasts of the marionette, whose painted face was frozen in wooden horror. The light that played off their faces flickered maddeningly, giving the whole scene a reckless, jittery movement that seemed to infect his own den as well.

Then the dummy plunged the knife into the wood between the marionette’s breasts. Peter heard them both scream, and saw what looked like blood well up from the wood around the knife and dribble onto the low neckline of the pretty white dress. Then both picture and sound snapped off.

Peter stood alone in the dark of the den, staring at the faint afterglow of the TV. When he raised his hand to the power button, he felt it shaking as if it

had been under strain. He pushed the power button. The TV came on to a non-channel which kept up a steady stream of gray static.

Beneath its hiss, he just barely heard the canned laughter.

He jabbed the power off and hurried back to bed.

“What was it?” Sheila asked.

He shut off the light and climbed into bed, his back to her. “Nothing. Noise came from outside, I guess.”

**P**eter meant to unplug the TV the morning after, once Sheila had left for the day. He found he didn’t have to; in place of the TV, a large wooden box sat. A smaller square canvas had been nailed to its front to simulate a screen, and clothing buttons had been glued along the side to represent the Power, Channels, and Volume controls. Crude, child-like representations of a man with a knife and a lady in a white dress tied to a chair had been painted on the canvas. The shrieking cartoon mouth of the screaming woman was freakishly large and took up most of the bottom of her face. The squiggles of yellow hair covered one of her eyes. Dark red paint was splattered on her dress, on the clothes of the man standing over her (winter clothes, for the coming cold) and on the canvas in general. The frayed edges of canvas around the rip between the woman’s breasts were dabbed in red paint, too.

In fact, some paint had puddled and dried on the floor. It was much



darker—a brown, almost—on the carpet than it was on the canvas.

Peter left it as it was for Sheila to see when she got home. She couldn't refute the television. She'd watched one of those CourtTV docu-dramas with him before bed earlier in the week. And no way, no how would she be able to tell him there was anything decorative about the picture on the canvas. Definitely not a conversation piece one picked up from Linens 'n' Things, or Bed, Bath, and Beyond.

Pulling on a coat, he went outside to check for other changes. He didn't expect to find much. The TV was enough, for chrissakes. But he had to be sure. Had to be.

When he'd reached the place where the grass gave way to the pebbly sand of his shoreline, he felt a sharp pain and saw a flash of white before landing squarely on his backside. Throbbing pain pulsed down into his eye from his forehead. He rose, touching his head, and winced at the lump he felt forming beneath his fingers.

He scanned the area in front and slightly above him for a low branch or something that might have fallen on him from one of the nearby trees. But the scene before him lay as it always had: a perfect, unobstructed view of the lake.

*Wait*, he thought. *Not quite as it always had.* And his heart sank.

With his other hand, he reached out in front of him, slowly groping forward, and felt the solid, textured surface of canvas. He felt upward as high

as his reach allowed, and followed it as far as he could along the pebbly beach to either side, until the trees kept him from going further. He gave a dissatisfied grunt. The whole length of his shoreline was an enormous backdrop.

When he was little, he remembered his dad telling him that all those places he saw behind Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* movie were giant paintings, meant to suggest great distance and expansive kingdoms, before the movie people could do it electronically or even with blue screens. His property, the whole of his view, was obstructed by just such a painting. It was large and incredibly detailed. It looked like the real view, by God—but it wasn't. It *wasn't*.

Peter wondered with a growing sense of dread and awe whether there really was a lake behind the backdrop or not.

He ran back into the house and grabbed his car keys. He'd drive out around the lake to the other side and see, that was all. He'd simply get in the car and drive around the damned backdrop and see.

Peter cruised about a mile down the isolated road that snaked along the circumference of Lake Cashmere. As he studied the lakefront properties, his head throbbed across his face and he felt hot. With each new property he approached, he was hopeful. At the sight of each set of cross-beams holding up the front and usually a side of a house, a shed, even a doghouse, he felt those hopes crumble. Beyond the building

fronts, matte paintings of the lake stretched across his view. He rolled his window down to take in the fresh, clean wooded air, to bury the disappointment—and the abject panic—under great gulps of the real and natural, but even the air outside was stale.

Fake. It was all fake. He turned around and drove back, and hoped to God there was a house to return to.

When he pulled into the driveway, that was when he first noticed one of them.

In the rearview mirror, Peter saw a dark gray SUV parked across the street. A mannequin sat in the driver's seat, its chiseled jaw firm and slightly amused, its hair combed in a jaunty black wave over its forehead. Its hands were positioned on the wheel as if it were driving the motorboat hitched to the back down to the lake.

*Mike from Sporting Goods*, he thought wildly, and barked a clipped laugh into the empty air.

Peter got out of his car and made a wide arc into the street around the front of the SUV. There was no license plate. No new dealer tags, either. He frowned, squinting from the glare of the sun off his windshield. From that angle, he couldn't see the mannequin's face. He crossed around to the driver's side window.

Its head now turned, it stared at him with painted eyes, not entirely lifeless, from the driver's seat. Its hands rested casually on the wheel, as if Mike from Sporting Goods or whatever this thing was had pulled over for idle chit-chat

with a neighbor on his way to the lake.

His feet felt numb as he moved towards the SUV. The unblinking gaze of the mannequin as it watched his approach seemed more aware, and self-aware with each step. It saw him. It was bracing itself for confrontation, he knew it. Peter glanced at its hands. One was clenched in a fist now.

He considered just lashing out and punching it right in that vaguely smug and smirking face. But he was held captive by the idea that maybe, beneath their static composure, their cool patience, they had lightning reflexes. That maybe Mike from Sporting Goods was simply waiting for him to make a move before it clocked him one and unhitched that motorboat and dragged Peter down the road to the dock.

Instead, Peter sized it up from where he stood. A seam ran along the base of its neck, where ostensibly mannequin heads are attached to mannequin bodies. Likewise, he found seams around its wrists. They appeared to mark distinct and separate parts, and he found himself wondering if they could remove those parts at will. It made Mike from Sporting Goods seem less alive, and more chilling in its presence in an SUV across the street from his house.

It was unlike any mannequin Peter had ever seen, even in Sheila's department store.

Peter took a deep breath. He lifted a shaking hand and pointed at the mannequin. "Look, you. I'm going inside



now. I'm going to come out with a baseball bat. If you're still here when I come back, I'll smash you to bits. I swear I will."

He turned, and it took all his will not to look over his shoulder to see if the door had opened, if Mike from Sporting Goods was leaning in a casually threatening pose against the door frame, or if it was covering ground between them with jerking movements of its stiff legs.

Peter made it to the porch and dove for the front door. Just inside, he stopped and listened. There was a low rumble of engine being revved. He waited a moment, then looked out the window again. The SUV was gone.

**H**e'd resigned himself by 10 p.m. that Sheila wasn't coming home. He knew that she was someplace else. Sheila was where the real lake was, and the real fireplace, and the real bowl of fruit, and the real window. Peter was alone with the mannequins.

He saw them on and off over the next few hours. One, dressed for the cold, was propped against a snow shovel like something from a Lands End catalogue. Another joined it later—a brunette with full painted lips in an evening gown that caught the moonlight in sparkling silver. By two in the morning, a third, dressed in army fatigues or hunting camouflage—it was hard to tell in the dark—hovered close to the woman. Peter didn't sleep well. Even once he'd vowed not to check the

window again, he thought he could hear the stiff cadence of their murmured speech.

The following morning was the first in a long time where Peter woke alone. He went to look out the bedroom window, remembered the painting, and uttered a distracted laugh, then went downstairs and opened the front door. The ground outside was dusted with a light snow. He took a step onto the porch and ran a finger through the thin accumulation on the railing. It felt cool but not cold, and soft, and sparkled with tiny flecks of glitter. Just like he remembered from the department store holiday displays.

The mannequins from the night before were gone. When he turned to go back inside, he saw the newspaper on the front porch.

He crouched down to look at the front page. There was a black and white picture of a crime scene divided into two frames. The first showed a man sprawled on a rooftop, a long gun lying next to him. Next to that picture was one of several beings lined up on the sidewalk in a neat row. Not mannequins, but non-human figures with vaguely human shapes, blurred and slightly broken, with faces that didn't seem to quite fit their heads.

A halo of red had been scribbled around their bodies and the body of the man. Crayon blood, laid down in frantic waxy strokes.

The headline above the picture read "DIE DIE DIE DIE, DIE DIE." Peter picked up the paper and rose, turning

toward the door. Next to the picture, the entire text of the story was composed of that single word “die”, repeated in long sentence strings posed as quotes and exposition. He tore away the first page and looked on its reverse side. Different headline, different story, same endless stream of “die die die” for lines of newsprint. He tore at another page, and another. The drawings accompanying the pictures got more cartoonish the further in he scanned, but the text never changed. When he saw the Macy’s ad with Mike from Sporting Goods standing next to a mannequin in a pale bikini, he tossed the newspaper off the porch and went inside, slamming the door behind him.

After showering, he dressed and went outside again. The newspaper lay on the snow where he had tossed it, but he barely paid it attention as he stepped into the snow. Beyond it, across the street, two mannequins watched him. He saw them from the corner of his eye as he clomped through the billows towards the side of the house but he refused to look at them. Their gazes, patient but hostile, followed him as he turned the corner. In fact, the charge of their hostility was the only real sensation in the otherwise still, stale air.

Peter kept an assortment of tools inside the shed for maintaining the property. The ax he’d used to chop the wood—the one he often left by the woodpile—was gone. However, he was relieved to find the other, smaller one still hanging from its c-shaped hook inside the shed. He lifted it quietly off

its hook and for a moment, savored the solidity, the reality of the hard wooden handle in his hands.

Then he went back out into the yard. Little crossed his mind during his mission out to the shed and back, except how little he felt. There was no fear, only a pervasive sense of defensiveness. And a growing feeling of utter loathing.

Peter knew he wasn’t dealing with some kind of living dolls, or even a kind of creature that he could at least identify with as another form of life, however strange. These weren’t simply department store mannequins imbued with sentience and feeling. They were fake people with empty ideas of love and existence and the future. Even their animation was stilted, a mockery of grace and movement.

In fact, the only real thing they seemed able to feel at all was hate.

Hate for Peter. And the feeling was mutual.

The two across the street struck conversational poses, and then remained very still. *Still as statues*, Peter thought, and laughed inside.

He focused on the one facing him. It had honey-colored hair and green eyes, and wore a striking yellow bikini. Naomi from Swimwear. The other, who Peter could only assume was Helen, rested one hand on a distended belly and gestured with the other as if to illustrate a point. The movement was stiff, unnatural, and the mannequin seemed comfortable only when it had resumed a motionless position.



Peter hoisted the ax into the air, and with purposeful strides, crossed the lawn and then the street towards the mannequins.

He was sure they saw him coming, but the expressions on their faces never changed. When he raised the ax, he heard them scream, though—a hollow, muffled sound from inside their heads or chests, expressed as a matter of convention rather than a reaction to fear.

He brought down the ax first on the protrusion that served as Naomi's collar bone. The mannequin dropped to the ground. Peter felt the shuddering of its hate thrumming inside it, through the handle and up his arm. He yanked the ax free and took a swing at Helen, catching it just under the cheekbone. That same waver sang up his arm, spurring him on.

Their bodies weren't hard, like he'd expected mannequin bodies to be, but rather soft, like flesh, and the blade sank easily in without chipping their exteriors. On the snowy ground, the blood splatter turned dark brown right away. On his warm weather clothes, also worn out of convention rather than any real need, it turned black.

Peter hit Naomi again just to the left of its cleavage. He heaved the ax up, and brought it down on Helen's belly once, again, again, and once more, but couldn't bear to look at what was being shattered inside. He focused on the acrylic glare of Helen's patient, hateful eyes until the sense of awareness that he refused to consider life faded away.

Naomi from Swimwear lay on its back, its long legs pumping slowly out in front of it. Its hand clutched a damaged breast, and red that was already turning brown spilled from between the painted tips of its long fingers. He brought the ax down once more, through the seam between wrist and hand, and the awareness in its eyes dissipated, too.

As he dismembered the mannequins, the numbness gave way to that anxiety that had followed him from his bed each morning to remind him.

Remind him of what? The anxiety gnawed at the edges of a memory he couldn't quite grasp. Just snippets of a life—ashes, laughter—and of a dream of losing everything.

And then, as he stood in his yard alone, shin-deep in blood-splattered fake snow and mannequin body parts, he remembered.

He remembered a social circle that built fictional constructs and lied to each other that everything would be okay. A lover that pretended her life with him made her happy until she could no longer lie about being pregnant. An everyday routine that grew more empty and devoid of meaning. True crime books about people that smiled and worked and played and made love and dissociated completely from their heinous parts in a noisy, noxious, glaring world that itself turned because of fake smiles and sweet, empty words and screens and masks and perfect views of places that don't exist.

He remembered burning it all down as he watched from the cold outside—the books, the paintings, the fake shells of human beings that walked and talked and acted like people but weren't. But it had all caught up to him again.

The fake snow around him became ash, and as quickly returned to fake snow, and the memories started to slip away from him again. It was no use. The fakeness of the world would always catch up to him. It was what kept things going.

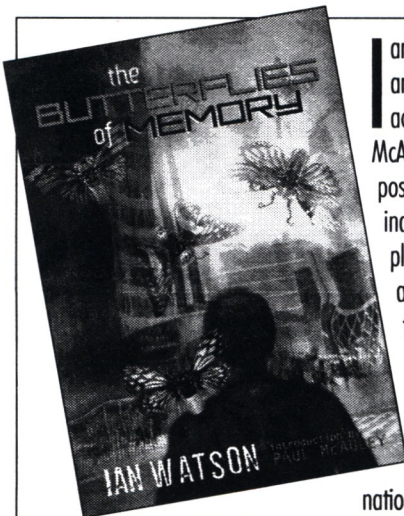
Peter didn't realize he was crying until the tears caught the corner of his mouth. They didn't taste salty, as real

tears should have. They were crocodile tears. And he started to laugh, because he couldn't remember why he was crying.

*Sheila's right. The laughing is worse,* he thought, and then couldn't remember any Sheila, or what the laughing meant.

There were no sirens, but he noticed police cars down the street, and mannequins with toy guns posed and ready to fire.

He looked down at his hands, holding the ax with its dull blade, and noticed seams running around his wrists.



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."



Darren Speegle came up with the idea for “Cobalt Blue” after a friend gave him a brochure for a charter yacht cruise around the Ionian Islands. “I’m rather a visual person,” says Darren, perhaps a little wistfully, “and these pictures of paradise sang to me (in the ‘I covet your adventure’ sort of way).” Darren’s short fiction has appeared in such venues as *Fantasy*, *The Third Alternative*, *Crimewave*, *Brutarian Quarterly*, and *Cemetery Dance*. He is the author of two short story collections, *Gothic Wine* and *A Dirge for the Temporal*.

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# Cobalt Blue

## Darren Speegle

A knock at the cabin door followed by Katevatis’s suspicious accent roused us well before the standard wake-up hour of ten. Michelle groaned, rolled over, upset the not quite empty bottle of ouzo on the shelf beside the bed. As it spilled its last drops on her breast, the smell of aniseed and mint seemed to come directly off her tongue.

“What the—Jesus God, my head hurts.”

“You are awake then?” said Katevatis through the door.

“No more *ouzo*, Skipper,” Michelle smacked dryly.

“Mrs. Duncan, I did warn you of the dangers of consuming such an excessive amount.”

“Oh, bite me,” she said.

His only response to that was to knock on the door of the cabin next to ours. A muffled “Go away” bled through the wall, followed by a higher pitched “Don’t mind ‘enrick. You’re my ‘ero, Skip.”

Nine days into our two-week Ionian

Islands cruise, the five of us had become so familiar. The yacht might as well have *belonged* to the two couples who had chartered it, the schedule being almost completely at our leisure. There had been only one pre-decided anchorage, and that was our current one. The charter outfit hadn’t had an available skipper during the period Michelle and I asked for. Fortunately, a European couple had requested the same time frame, and the son of the owners—in his sixties but fit as they come—had volunteered to pilot us as long as we let him have one day for a prior engagement. When he explained that this simply meant no sailing for the day, that we would be anchored in a quiet cove in the heart of Odysseus’s kingdom where we could swim, snorkel, or hang out on the *Partenope*’s flush teak deck and drink and sunbathe and listen to music, we had no complaints. Of course he hadn’t told us we would have to be up by eight-thirty.

I slipped on my shorts, Michelle her two-piece. After visiting the head we

stumbled up on deck, where Katevatis stood at the bow. He looked the part of the salt with his carved features and unkempt silvery hair as he watched several boats approach from the north, as if drawn by magnetism. We were at one of the more secluded islands between Cephalonia and Astokos on the mainland. Clearly some event was to take place today, but it appeared we would be separated from the activities by the spur of high rock that formed the far wall of our little cove

“So what’s up?” Michelle asked the skipper, shielding her eyes from the glare on the water.

“I will be leaving shortly,” he said with that odd phonetic blend of Greek and . . . ? “I thought it best to wake you. Pirates are sometimes seen in these parts.”

“Ha!” Michelle said, positioning herself beneath the on-deck shower. “You got that from a movie.” She pulled the chain and cried out as the cold freshwater seared her skin. I didn’t cringe as her nipples pronounced themselves. When you share a cruise on a 40’ yacht with strangers, you learn to forget decorum.

As she shut the shower off, running her fingers through her short dark hair, I could not resist telling my wife of six fleeting years that *she* looked like a movie.

Katevatis picked up a pack resting near his feet. “Enjoy yourselves, lovebirds. I am off to see my friends. Let Henrick and Joan know I’ll be back sometime tonight, probably very late.”

“So you won’t tell us what this is about?” Michelle said.

“Yeah, what is all the bleedin’ secrecy?” said Joan, emerging from below decks.

He smiled, looking along his nose at the ladies. “As I have told you already, it is about reunions.”

And with that, he shouldered his pack and jumped into the blue water.

**Y**es, he had told us. Last night, as we drifted into the cove beneath a cobalt blue summer sky that glimmered like the ouzo and *Mavrodaphne* wine in our eyes, our skipper had fielded the question with admirable flair. It wasn’t the first made-for-tourists story he had shared with us, but it was one reserved especially for that night.

“In the summer of 1941, on an evening very much like this one, a boat carrying twenty-seven Jewish children, ranging in age from three to fourteen, landed on a secluded Ionian island. Germany had invaded the Balkans a few months before and the entire region had fallen under Nazi reign. The island was to be a temporary refuge for the children, who had been rescued from a holding facility for the orphaned and dispossessed in Yugoslavia. The captain of the vessel, in order to tend to further arrangements, was obliged to leave the children for what he thought would be only a few days, but he never returned. Living off packaged supplies and the hope that the vessel would eventually



return, the children somehow managed to survive on an uninhabited island for three months before they were discovered by fishermen and absorbed into the local community. . . .”

Yes, Katevatis had told us. And with his peculiar accent, supported by the backdrop of the mysterious cove, he had almost convinced us. If it hadn't been for his inability to contain his somewhat out of character laughter, we might have remained in his spell indefinitely.

The cove was beautiful. Last night it had been a feast for the subtler senses. This morning the experience was more direct, the island's greenery vivid and luxuriant against a clear blue sky. While the olive groves and cypresses so abundant in the little fishing villages we had visited were absent, the diversity of the rugged mound of rock was in full array. Yellow wildflowers spread in broad brush strokes among stark granite outcrops. Palms mingled with squat spiny plants breaking out in blossoms, and the air had a fragrance that blended land and sea. As to the sea itself, its clarity was such that the fish said to be too shy for the hook were as exposed as the dolphins that occasionally swam in to say hello. Indeed, all that was lacking in the picture were the sirens—*misunderstood* sirens, according to one of Katevatis's tellings—lazing on the fabled rock.

The day was a prize again after a pot of strong coffee and a dish which Joan had been willing to cook for one reason and one only—so that when she served

it she could announce it as *avga matia me bacon ke lookaniko*. (This had been a joke since our first breakfast on the yacht, when the special Greek meal Katevatis prepared on the gas stove turned out to be fried eggs with bacon and sausage; if there had been any local *flavor* to it, it was because the eggs had been cooked in olive oil.) As the four of us did what we did, mostly lying around on deck, nourishing our tans, we couldn't help but watch the boats trail in. I counted a total of seven sailboats, of varying sizes and types, and three motorboats. The distance was too great to get any feel for the occupants of the vessels, which added to the drama, particularly in Joan's eyes.

She was inner-city London to her husband's Rotterdam. As Henrick had noted during introductions, this made for a slightly disjointed (“after all, the British consider all the Dutch to be pot-smoking pornographers”) but nonetheless heavenly match.

“What we've got 'ere,” she said in her personal brogue, “is some sort of smuggling operation. I'll wager on it.”

“Don't be silly,” said Henrick. “All they know here is fishing and tourism. Wouldn't you say, Warren?”

“I would think so, yes,” I said.

“Then what could 'e be up to? I say it's smelly.”

“Oh, Joan,” said her husband.

“I mean it, I'm no friend of secrecy.”

“I don't think he was trying to be secretive, Joan. It's not our business. We intruded on his plans, if you'll recall.”

“Yeah, but that's just the sort of bull-

shit they shovel to gain an edge. For all we know Katevatis Yacht Charters is a bleedin' front. Who'd suspect a charter skipper to be moving dope, or God knows what else, 'eh? Reunions my ass."

"Mr. and Mrs. Katevatis are in their eighties."

"Part of the whole sly disguise."

"Isn't it possible that Skip just has a big Greek family?" Michelle suggested, winking at Henrick.

"Uh-uh," said Joan. "He mentioned his prior engagement right there in front of 'is parents. Wouldn't 'e've said 'We 'ave a prior engagement.'? Besides, Skip's about as Greek as I am Russian."

Henrick said, "I thought the skipper was your hero, Joan."

"He bloody well is. Just thinking out loud, that's all."

I'd learned to smile neutrally when she went on her rambles. You suppressed the laughs because it was impossible to tell when she was joking. A glance at her husband was no help, as he appeared to be as baffled by her as everyone else. Truth told, Katevatis seemed to get her best. Maybe it was a Soho accent he hid under there.

Michelle said, "This much about Skip. The man leaves us with his yacht, all the liquor we could want, scuba diving gear we don't know how to use but might be sorely tempted to try around five drinks from now . . . He *is* a hero. I wish I could have that kind of naïve trust in my fellow man. Jesus, he watched Joan introduce us to flaming shots a couple days ago. We could burn up the boat by the time he gets back."

"Speaking of which," said Joan, checking her husband's watch. "It's just about eleven o'clock. Anybody for a Greek Bloody Mary?"

"Sure," grimaced Michelle. "But easy on the peppers."

And so it began again. We consumed tomato juice and huge delicious olives beneath a hot but not unpleasant Mediterranean sun, while the strip of sea on which the boats made their approach gradually cleared—from our interest, anyway. We skipped lunch in favor of a takeout salad from last night's restaurant, pinching our noses as we devoured the anchovies and feta cheese. When the opportunity presented itself, namely when we were taking a dip or when Henrick and Joan were below decks in the saloon fiddling with the music, Michelle flirted with me like she hadn't done since our honeymoon in Bermuda. By the time mid-afternoon rolled around we were so hot for each other we couldn't tell the sun on our skin from desire. It was Michelle who suggested it. I went along for the . . . experience.

"Can we join you?" Henrick asked when he realized our intention to go ashore.

We didn't have to answer. Joan, with an elbow in his ribs, had her own intentions.

"Enjoy yourselves then," said Michelle, saluting them with the bottle of *Mavrodaphne* she had grabbed from the icebox. And, before there could be any more discussion, motioned me and started down the ladder.



We climbed in our bare feet through prickly foliage and random patches of sun-heated rock, searching for someplace that wasn't visible to Zeus and whomever else might have an eye on the island. *Elpida* was the island's name. Hope, in English. The sounds that reached our ears from Katevatis's reunion were sufficiently faint to add promise to our hope for privacy.

We found a high spot so we could keep a lookout for any visitors. Below us, both our own cove and the harbor in which Katevatis's friends had left their boats were visible. The sun was especially warm on the untanned parts of our bodies as we teased each other out of our swimsuits, tossing them off to the side where the unopened wine bottle lay. We fell into it like beasts, the foreplay having been going on literally for hours. When Michelle grew loud, I put my hand over her mouth, which seemed to turn her on all the more as she ground against me, forgetting the hard surface we were on. When we let go, we let go profusely, faces buried in each other's bodies to muffle the cries.

She relaxed on top of me. I clutched her ass, not wanting to remove myself from her, feeling the moisture dry in the sun. We lay there like that for a few minutes and then, as I thought I could still hear the faint sounds from another part of the island, drifted out.

I woke without any tangible memory of my dream, but affected by it nonetheless. I was surprised to find that

several hours had passed. Twilight had not quite arrived, but the day was dying beautifully. I saw the neck of the wine bottle protruding from under our bathing suits and reached over to claim it and my pocketknife corkscrew. The corkscrew produced unpleasant noises, waking Michelle.

She lifted her head, getting her bearings. "I had the strangest dream," she said. Then, leaning towards the interior of the island: "Do you hear that?"

"Mm?" I pulled the cork, and a sweet aroma rose in the air.

She accepted the offered bottle, indulging, then passed it back as she continued to listen. "It sounds like singing. Just like in my dream."

The hairs on my arms rose. "Really?"

"I must have heard the sounds in my sleep."

"Michelle . . ."

She was wide awake now, eyes intense as she motioned for the wine again. "We have to have a look, don't we?" She swallowed twice before passing the bottle back.

Since the cruise began we had explored Odysseus's home of Ithaca, visited sites relating to Ali Pasha, the Normans, the Venetians . . . this should have been a "look" we could easily have done without . . .

"Yeah," I replied, conducting my own probe of the bottle's depths.

As the weeping Daphne rippled through our bodies, a voice reached our ears from a new direction. We looked down into the cove and could just make out Joan's figure on the

*Partenope's* bow as she called our names a second time.

"They're worried about us," I said, unnecessarily.

Michelle rose, looking like Aphrodite as she waved and called, "We'll be back soon!" But the words no doubt dissolved before arriving, for Michelle was more concerned about the volume of her voice than her nakedness.

Fueled by Daphne's own grape red tears, we abandoned the open rock for the wild lushness of *Elpida's* interiors. It wasn't long, as we moved through silken leaves and colors fading towards dusk, that Michelle seemed to forget my own presence in favor of the strange melodies that reached us through the vegetation. I followed her and she followed the music, which might have been produced by the fronds themselves as they unfurled before us, caressing us through the shadows of the coming dusk. The music spilt through the greenery to light our ignorant way, the dancing reflections of its notes growing brighter as the volume and threads of its otherworldly chorus increased. Then we were suddenly out of the foliage, delivered upon the naked rock above the valley where the reunion took place.

Music: borne on foreign tongues and rising up out of the hollow like vapor, a seeming invitation to lounge among the ethereal choir that collected there; their luminous faces, along with those of the company whose hair they stroked protectively, gazing out upon the sea, as if they expected at any moment to see the bow of a lost sailing vessel appear out of the darkening blue.

Music: which seemed to carry *Katevatis's* words upon its sublime bosom as I salvaged the presence of mind, through the wonder, the enchantment, to pull Michelle down beside me out of view.

*Living off packaged supplies and the hope that the vessel would eventually return, the children somehow managed to survive on an uninhabited island for three months before they were discovered by fishermen and absorbed into the local community . . .*

"Oh my God, Warren . . ." Michelle uttered. But it was lost in the updraft as we rested our backs against the rock, letting the songs of dreams wash over us and watching the sky deepen to an exquisite cobalt blue.

After what seemed hours—though who could know in such delicate clutches—we exchanged a look that said we had eavesdropped long enough upon others' reunions, and forsook the open rock for the foliage. ☒



Some years ago Vaughan Stanger watched a documentary that featured interviews with several former soldiers, all of them centenarians, who had served on the Western Front during the First World War. As usual, his brain went into “What if?” mode . . . with, as you’ll see, delightfully perplexing results. “To the best of my knowledge,” he adds, “only one British soldier who fought in the trenches survives to this day.” Needless to say (but we will do, anyway), Vaughan wishes to point out that he has nothing but admiration for Harry Patch and his comrades. As, indeed, do we all.

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# The Peace Criminal

## Vaughan Stanger

Philip Healy permitted himself a wry smile as he listened to the rain beat against the wind-screen of his BMW. For the first time in several months he had parked the vehicle himself, reversing into the tight space without the benefit of warning beeps from the radar. He liked to think that this insurance-unfriendly whim was a reaction to the air of conformity that clung to the neighbourhood. Protected by high walls and security cameras, each foursquare redbrick building evoked the essence of suburbia.

But suburbia was where the action was, more often than not, its genteel anonymity providing the perfect cover for the maverick characters that Philip sought. Here, in leafy Stanmore, he hoped to record the raw material for another edition of *Myths and Mysteries of the Twentieth Century*, a show that had become something of a fixture in Carlton Television’s late-night schedules.

Philip leaned over the passenger seat

and peered at the house he had parked opposite. According to the sign on the wrought-iron gate, Wimbourne Grange was a private nursing home owned by the Belhaven Trust. For sixty years the building had provided a safe haven for the elderly and the infirm. Now, after years of isolation, one of its residents wanted to tell his story. A junior member of the nursing staff had instigated the contact, attaching half-a-dozen pages scanned from his memoirs to her message. Those pages had made for interesting reading.

A teasing email sent to his researcher, Ruth Levin, had elicited the usual swift response. Philip’s cryptic invitations were part of the ritual of working together on *Myths and Mysteries*, as were Ruth’s replies, which invariably quoted some passage from one of the more obscure books from the Old Testament.

The rap of knuckles against the driver’s window interrupted his thoughts. Ruth was standing beside the car, shel-

tering her slender frame beneath a bottle-green umbrella and waving a cigarette with her free hand. The windblown look suited her, he thought, though he knew better than to say so.

Ruth stepped back as he opened the car door.

“So we two meet again,” she said with a conspiratorial wink.

The kiss on each cheek was also part of the ritual.

Having concluded her greeting, Ruth made a dash across the road. Philip trudged after her, burdened by equipment cases. By the time he had caught up with her again, she was unbuttoning her leather coat in the shelter of the porch.

“Is it safe to let me into the secret yet?” she asked.

Philip deposited the cases on either side of the porch. “We’re here to interview Arthur Renwick,” he said between breaths. “Formerly *Lance Corporal* Arthur Renwick of The Brigade of Guards.”

“And who might he be? Some hero of Dunkirk?”

Her cynicism was understandable given the glut of wartime documentaries foisted on television audiences in recent years. Under normal circumstances, Philip would not have felt obliged to contribute another example to that genre, but Arthur’s memoirs had hinted at something out of the ordinary.

“Oh, *much* earlier than Dunkirk,” he replied.

“First World War, then?”

“That’s right.”

Now Ruth was frowning. “But didn’t the last-surviving British veteran die a couple of years ago? I’m sure I recall watching a short item about him on *The News at Ten*.”

Philip shrugged. “Well, it seems their reporter got his facts wrong.”

“I take it that Arthur Renwick wasn’t interviewed for the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice?”

“According to his nurse, Arthur has spent most of his life in institutions of one sort or another. If any journalists did trace his whereabouts in 1998, I suppose they must have concluded that he didn’t fit the bill.”

“But you disagree, evidently.”

“Let’s just say that I think Arthur will prove a *most* interesting subject.”

The glass-panelled door clicked open just as Ruth was reaching for the doorbell.

**T**here was a depressing ambience to Wimbourne Grange’s common room, thought Philip; an ambience that comfortable furnishings, Monet prints and bright décor could not quite dispel. He attempted to shrug off the feeling, aware that this was not time to let intimations of mortality get in the way of professionalism.

In the hour that it had taken Philip to rig the lights and microphones, set up the digicams and configure the system for remote control, Ruth had downloaded a detailed history from the regimental website and prepared a set



of questions that she would put to Arthur. Philip was happy with this arrangement, since her dual role helped him keep production costs low.

Now all was ready.

Philip glanced at his monitor, which presented three views of Arthur Renwick. It didn't matter whether he inspected the head-on shot provided by the central digicam, or the oblique aspect from the right, or even the close-up profile from the left; each gave the same visual impression. The man sitting in the armchair resembled a skeleton that someone had coated with a thick layer of wax. The ill-fitting suit and regimental tie only added to the ghoulish effect.

"How much longer must I wait?" Arthur whined.

Though the years had withered Arthur's body, they had lent his voice a shrill, insistent edge.

Philip glanced at Ruth, who was sitting on a padded footstool situated to the left of the central digicam. On receiving her thumbs-up sign, he said, "We're ready for you now, Arthur."

A single tap of Philip's stylus against palmtop screen started the recording.

Ruth smiled at the veteran. "Arthur, according to your service records you were conscripted in August 1917. What were your feelings on that fateful day?"

To Philip's surprise, Arthur refused to answer the question. Instead, he scowled at Ruth as though she were his mortal enemy. Ruth frowned but pressed on regardless.

"Arthur, what were your first impressions of trench warfare when you were posted to the Western Front in January 1918?"

Arthur cleared his throat and leaned forwards slightly. He looked as if he were about to spit at Ruth. She turned towards Philip and shrugged.

"Your turn, I think."

Philip glanced at the remaining questions on her crib-sheet, looking for something that might stimulate a response from Arthur. All of them seemed valid, so he picked the next one on the list.

"In April 1918 the 4th Guards Brigade saw action near Hazebrouck during the Battle of The Lys." He paused for a moment, hoping that the details would jog the old soldier's memory. "What do you remember of that engagement?"

Arthur acceded to Philip with a curt little nod, as if acknowledging a fellow soldier.

"The Hun pushed us back ten miles in three days, despite everything we could throw at them. Then, on the 11th of April, Field Marshal Haig ordered us to fight to the last man . . ." Arthur's words emerged in bursts, as if from a machine gun. "So we slogged it out hand-to-hand, up to our waists in mud and water, while gas shells landed all around us. Whenever the Hun captured a trench, we fixed bayonets and charged right back at 'em. Two days and nights we held out in that hell!"

"Did your unit lose many men?"

Arthur trembled with anger. "My

best mate was trapped on the barbed wire just thirty yards from my trench. Might as well have been thirty miles." Tears were welling in his eyes. "Bill took two days to die; two whole days!"

"It must have been a dreadful experience for you."

"Not as bad as for Bill! Mind you, I almost copped it myself." He rubbed the back of his head before continuing. "The medics told me I was lucky to survive. Didn't stop 'em sending me back to the front-line after they'd patched me up, though. Just in time to join the big retreat."

Philip felt a sudden release of tension. Those excerpts taken from Arthur's memoirs had mentioned defeat on the Western Front. But scribbled notes were not a firm enough basis on which to build a documentary. Verbal testimony, however, was quite another matter. He zoomed the central image to frame the old man's eyes. Ruth chose that moment to break her silence.

"But Arthur, it is a matter of historical record that the British Army halted the German advance in April 1918. The Battle of The Lys marked the high tide of the German advance in Flanders."

Arthur shook his head but said nothing.

Philip panned the right-hand digi-cam so that it framed Ruth's face. "We'll handle this as an insert," he told her. "When you're ready, please recount the subsequent events on the Western Front."

Ruth cleared her throat and addressed the camera.

"On the 27th of May, the German army launched an offensive against the French forces on the Marne. They came close to breaking through, but the American Second and Third divisions bolstered the French line at Chateau-Thierry at the critical moment. The German advance was halted sixty miles short of Paris."

Arthur was spluttering with indignation. "What American divisions? There were no Americans on the Western Front!"

Philip glanced at Ruth. The researcher was gazing at the old man as if hypnotised.

"If that were true," she said, "then the French Army would have been in very serious trouble."

Arthur's expression was scornful. "The *poilu* just caved in. Too spineless to defend their beloved Paris."

"So the French sued for peace?"

"Of course they did! And while they were grovelling to the Kaiser, what was left of the British Army was making a dash for the Channel Ports. Those of us who made it threw our equipment into the sea and embarked for Blighty in any boat that would carry us."

Just like Dunkirk in 1940, thought Philip.

"Ours was not a heroic homecoming," Arthur said with a sorrowful shake of his head. Then he slumped against the cushions of his armchair, which seemed to swallow him up like so much mud.



“Thanks for the lift,” said Ruth, as she engaged her seat belt.

“No problem,” Philip replied. “I passed the station on the way here.” And could have picked up Ruth, he realised belatedly.

Philip eased the car into the light traffic. The collision avoidance radar was clicking every second or so. Easy driving for once. He glanced at Ruth.

“So, what did you make of Arthur Renwick?”

“Well, he is remarkably lucid for his age, but hopelessly deluded.” She paused for a moment, as if rerunning part of the interview in her mind. “Don’t you find it ironic that the last survivor of the Western Front should turn out to be such an unreliable witness?”

Philip grinned at her. “That’s what makes him such an interesting subject! But if we’re going to get the most out of our oddball veteran, I think you’d better do a bit more research.”

Taking the hint, Ruth pulled a palm-top from her coat pocket and activated the wireless link to the car’s head-up display. A red warning light started flashing on the dashboard, accompanied by an insistent beeping sound. Philip keyed in the over-ride code that Ruth had given him several months earlier.

“I knew you’d find that useful,” she remarked.

“Well, you can pay the fine if I get stopped by a policeman.”

The grunt he received was non-committal, an indication that her

attention was now elsewhere. Five minutes passed before he felt able to ask the inevitable question.

“Found anything yet?”

Even as he spoke, several text windows flashed up on the windscreen. Ruth scrolled through them, while Philip attempted to focus on the road ahead.

“Well,” she said at last, “according to this Home Office record, Arthur is a convicted criminal. In May 1926, he was found guilty of assaulting a jeweller while attempting to rob his premises. He was given a five-year jail sentence.”

That an ex-soldier had turned to crime was scarcely unheard-of, mused Philip. *Myths and Mysteries* was going to need something spicier than that.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

“His victim was a Mr. Ira Silverman of Bethnal Green. A Jew, needless to say.” She uttered those words as if the crime had been perpetrated against all Jews, everywhere.

The intensity of Ruth’s remark surprised Philip. Aside from the idiosyncratic emails, her religion had never previously impinged upon their working relationship. That she was a Jew had seemed unimportant, a residue of her upbringing rather than a day-to-day reality.

“Well, let’s see what else you can dig up,” he said.

“Okay, but this is going to take me a while. Arms to twist, encryption to break, that sort of thing.”

Moments later, Philip swung the car into the forecourt of Stanmore station

and parked in the first available space. A taxi horn blared out from behind, but he ignored it.

He turned towards Ruth. "How do you feel about recording another session with Arthur?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything!"

"Then I'll pick you up tomorrow at 9 AM," he said.

"I'll be waiting."

A train was just pulling into the station as Ruth stepped out of the car. Philip grinned as he watched her splash through the puddles while wielding her umbrella with typical élan.

Philip sighed with frustration as he reset the digicams for the third time that morning. This recording session was proving even more difficult than its predecessor. So far, despite careful questioning, Arthur had refused to elaborate on his account of events on the Western Front. Aware that time was running out, Philip decided to try a different tack.

"After the Armistice was signed in November 1918, Britain was supposed to become a 'A Land Fit For Heroes'. How did post-war Britain seem to you, Arthur?"

This time Philip got a response. Arthur was quivering with anger as he began speaking.

"There was no bleedin' Armistice! Not that year anyway. Lloyd George vowed to continue the war whatever the cost. But our situation was hope—"  
A bout of coughing interrupted his

account. He spat phlegm into a handkerchief before continuing. "By March, the Turks had driven us out of Palestine. Then we lost control of the Suez Canal, which meant we lost most of our oil supply. . . ."

Philip glanced at Ruth. Her shrug suggested that she was quite prepared to let Arthur make a fool of himself, at least for now. As for the man himself, he seemed only too willing to oblige.

"By September, those few merchant ships the U-boats hadn't sunk yet were tied up in port. Britain was on its knees." He turned towards Ruth, his eyes narrowing as if to focus his anger exclusively on her. "And where were your precious Americans then, eh? Too busy making money to give a damn about us!"

Arthur's diatribe was interrupted by another coughing fit. When it was over, he seemed content to glower at Ruth rather than resume his narrative. Aware of the need to regain momentum, Philip supplied a prompt.

"What happened next?"

Arthur's sniff was disdainful. "Lloyd George sued for peace, of course. The Kaiser made us pay a heavy price in reparations, just like France. Worse still, he forced us to scuttle two-thirds of the Royal Navy. As for the army, what little remained was spread too thin to keep control over the Empire. Ireland was lost within the year. Not long after that, the Troubles got going in India. Soon, even Australia and Canada were cutting their ties. Can't say I blamed them, considering how



many men they'd lost—and for what, eh?”

Keep him on track, Philip reminded himself.

“What effect did the downturn in trade have at home?”

“What do you think?” snapped Arthur. “Things started out bad and got steadily worse. Throughout the Twenties there was precious little work to be had anywhere. Children were starving. So Ramsay MacDonald set up soup kitchens. He thought *that* would fix the problem. Soup kitchens!” Arthur spat out the words with a vehemence that belied his age. “Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin—useless the lot of ’em.”

“This is *ridiculous*,” Ruth interjected. “Conditions in Britain were nothing like that bad after the First World War!”

“Nothing like that bad?” Arthur wagged a forefinger at Ruth. “Easy for a Jew to say, but then you parasites never went hungry.”

Philip glanced at Ruth. Indignation had left her speechless momentarily, whereas Arthur was cackling in triumph.

“I *thought* so!” He tapped the side of his nose. “Always could sniff out a Jew!”

Although Philip regretted the hurt caused to Ruth, he sensed that Arthur's anti-Semitism was precisely the hook the documentary required. Now he had to make the most of that opportunity. Fortunately, the brief extract from Arthur's memoirs had given him a clue.

“If the situation were really as bad as you claim,” he said, “I would have expected a major public figure to come forward and challenge the government of the day.”

“Cometh the hour, cometh the man. And that man was Mosley.” Arthur uttered the name with awe.

“Mosley?” Ruth said. “You mean Sir Oswald Mosley?”

“God bless the man!”

“Mosley led a revolution, did he?” Ruth sounded incredulous.

Arthur's face beamed with pride. “Of course he did!” he replied. “Things were already brewing up when I joined the British Movement in November 1932. For three-and-a-bit years I was right in the thick of it. Every weekend, we held a parade in some town or other. Usually got to crack a few skulls afterwards: mostly Commies, but sometimes we got lucky and found ourselves a few Jew-boys to play with.” His laughter ended with a snort.

Forty years later, it would have been the Blacks or the Asians, Philip realised.

“Go on,” he prompted.

“Then on the 3rd of July 1936, Baldwin cut the bread ration by a third. Now *that* lit the blue touch-paper! Two days later we marched on Parliament. Mosley was at the front, waving this enormous Union Jack. Sounded like the whole country was cheering us on when we stormed the House of Commons and threw out that bunch of Jew-lovers. Should have shot the lot of ’em if you ask me, but Mosley

said 'no'. So we slung 'em in the Tower instead."

Arthur grumbled to himself briefly before resuming.

"Anyhow, Mosley set up a provisional government in London. We commandeered what little fuel we could find, organised food handouts, put everyone to work." He turned to face Ruth, his expression scornful. "Best of all, we rounded up the Jews and put 'em behind barbed wire."

Philip glanced at Ruth again. Although her face was pale, her gaze remained fixed on Arthur's face. Philip, too, found it difficult to look away from the old man.

"Please continue," he murmured.

Arthur's drawn-out sigh signalled a shift from elation to despair.

"We really thought we'd got it made," he said. "But we'd reckoned without Winston Churchill. It was our rotten luck that he was off inspecting what was left of the fleet while Mosley was storming Parliament. Winston wasn't having any of it, of course. So he steamed his cruisers down from Scapa Flow, landing Royal Marines at every port. Within a fortnight, the RAF was bombing London. Two months after we kicked Baldwin out, Churchill's Army moved in for the kill.

"The Battle of London lasted for three days. When the end came, I was manning a barricade in Cable Street, throwing fire-bombs at armoured cars." Tears glistened as Arthur recalled the scene. "Mosley realised the situation was hopeless and ordered us to

surrender. I heard later that he shot himself."

Ruth leaned closer. "And you, Arthur," she said. "What happened to you?"

Arthur shook his head but said nothing.

"Tell us what happened," she insisted.

"Leave me alone," Arthur muttered. "Just leave me alone!"

"You must tell us!" she insisted.

Observing Arthur's anguished expression, Philip realised that they had pushed him too far. "Let it rest, Ruth," he said. "He's had enough."

He gestured towards Nurse Williams, who was standing just behind the central digicam. She grasped Ruth's forearm and escorted her from the room.

**N**urse Williams ushered Ruth and Philip into the reception area. The fidgeting movements of her hands betrayed her anxiety.

"I realise now that it was wrong of me to pass on Arthur's request," she said.

Ruth made herself comfortable on the sofa. "But you did pass it on," she said, keeping her tone business-like. "So here we are."

"It's just that Arthur is much weaker than last time."

Her comment was enough to give Philip second thoughts. Ruth, however, seemed willing to take the risk.

"Arthur has made it absolutely clear



that he wishes to complete the recording of his testimony," she said.

Nurse Williams acquiesced with a sigh.

"If you would both wait here, I will make the necessary preparations," she said.

Philip sat down next to Ruth. "How do you feel?"

Her grimace made a reply unnecessary, but she answered anyway. "I can't quite believe I'm going to put myself through this again," she said. "But we do have a documentary to finish, don't we?"

"In any other circumstances, I'd agree wholeheartedly. But right now I'm wondering whether we oughtn't to let Arthur take his story to the grave."

Ruth's expression was adamant. "We can't let that happen, Philip! This man is our last direct link with one of the defining periods of twentieth century history. We owe it to posterity to record his testimony."

"Even if that testimony is a ludicrous tirade of anti-Semitism mixed up with fictitious history?"

"Yes, even then."

Philip knew better than to argue the point further.

"Anyway," Ruth said, "there is something else you should know about Arthur."

She flipped open her palmtop and projected an image onto the opposite wall. Philip peered at the page of cramped text and wondered what he was supposed to glean from a newspaper dated August 16th, 1936.

"Read the article at the bottom of the page."

Philip skipped through the piece. It told of the death, in a house fire, of Mr. Ira Silverman and his wife and daughter. Murder was suspected.

"It can't be a coincidence," he said.

Ruth inspected her palmtop. "No charge was ever filed against Arthur."

"But that's ridiculous! He must have been the prime suspect given what happened ten years earlier."

"Arthur was questioned by the police, but it seems he had a solid alibi. He claimed he was attending a meeting of the British Union of Fascists at the time of the murder."

"Don't tell me the police actually believed him!"

"Several witnesses came forward, including a couple of 'pillar of the community' types."

"No more reliable than Arthur if you ask me!"

Ruth shrugged. "Who can say? Perhaps Arthur was telling the truth in 1936. Perhaps he is now."

Her change of attitude baffled Philip.

"Look, Ruth. I realise you find Arthur fascinating. So do I! But ultimately, he is just a bitter, evil old man who's concocted this bizarre fantasy world so he can blot out his feelings of guilt."

"Possibly," she said, folding her arms. "But I do want to know more about that world, real or imagined."

Philip glanced at the single video image and sighed. The recording set-up was inadequate, but the cramped bedroom permitted nothing better.

Arthur wore the expression of someone who had been confined to bed for several days and did not expect to leave it again. Beneath the layers of blankets, his chest rose and fell like a North Atlantic swell. Philip suspected that the motion might stop at any moment.

Taking her cue from his thumbs-up sign, Ruth leaned forward and delivered the first question.

"Arthur, what happened to you after the Battle of London?"

He glared at her for a moment, before turning his head to address Philip instead. "Churchill declared an amnesty, but that was a laugh. I was arrested, same as everyone who supported Mosley. I spent a month in solitary, then I was brought before a judge at the Old Bailey."

Ruth ignored the snub. "What were you charged with?"

Finally, Arthur deigned to acknowledge his interrogator. "If you must know, I was accused of murdering three Jews at the Hyde Park work-camp."

"Did you kill them, Arthur?"

"Wasn't about to disobey Mosley, was I?" A tiny shake of the head accompanied the reply. "He told us to 'Put 'em to work not put 'em in a coffin.'"

Philip felt that he could not let the old man's tale go unchallenged.

"Arthur, I believe you *did* kill three Jews in August 1936, but that you com-

mitted the crime here, in this world, when you set fire to Ira Silverman's home in Bethnal Green."

Arthur attempted to raise his head off the pillows, but the effort proved too much for him. "I never killed no Jews," he said. "But when the judge sentenced me . . . I bleedin' well wished I had!" His outburst ended in a fit of coughing. When it was over, Nurse Williams reached forward to wipe blood-flecked spittle from his mouth. Tears were trickling down Arthur's cheeks as he resumed his account. "The guards came for me at dawn . . . pinned me to the wall . . . tied my hands behind my back . . . an' dragged me to the gallows."

"Arthur, none of this really happened!"

"When the hangman . . . placed that noose . . . over my head . . . that was real enough . . . far too bleedin' real!"

Philip shook his head. "I don't believe a word of it," he muttered. "Not a single word."

Ruth hissed at him to be quiet. "Let him speak!"

"When the trapdoor dropped . . . I was choking . . . couldn't breathe . . . Then something snapped." Arthur gasped for breath before resuming. "When I woke up . . . I was lying in a hospital bed . . . Took a while to figure out . . . what kind of hospital . . . Even longer to figure out . . . what kind of world."

Philip knew then that he had heard enough lies.

"Arthur, it's obvious to me that



you've created this fantasy because in the *real* world you did murder three Jews, but couldn't cope with your feelings of guilt."

Arthur rocked his head from side to side. "Do you really think . . . I would dream up . . . my own execution . . . so I could spend seventy years . . . in this bleedin' purgatory?"

The forcefulness of Arthur's denial silenced Philip. Arthur grunted, then turned his baleful gaze on Ruth.

"Mind you . . . this world . . . did have one thing . . . going for it."

"And what was that?"

The old man tried to spit at her, but the phlegm stuck to his lips.

"The Nazi Party!"

Trembling, Ruth turned away from her tormentor.

Philip zoomed the digicam so that it framed Arthur's face. A split-second later, the look of triumph turned to terror. His head jerked up off the pillow as if tugged by an invisible rope. Then a series of violent spasms racked his body. Nurse Williams attempted to administer an injection, but before she could restrain either flailing arm Arthur gave a long, drawn-out gasp. His blood-darkened face relaxed into a death mask. The stench of urine and faeces filled the air.

Nurse Williams reached forward and pulled the blankets over his head.

**N**ow that the brief downpour had ceased, the wooden bench glistened in the sunlight as if covered in

tiny lenses. Philip wiped the slats dry with a tissue before sitting down. He closed his eyes, content to let the minutes drift by on the breeze while he waited for Ruth to arrive.

"Arthur Edward Renwick. Born 15th August 1899, died 5th April 2008." Ruth's voice was quavering as she read the inscription on the memorial plaque. "Hardly does justice to a double life, does it?"

Philip opened his eyes. "I wasn't sure you'd come here. I realise it must be difficult for you."

"I'm okay—really."

Puffy skin around reddened eyes belied Ruth's words, so he took her arm and led her away. They walked along the gravel path in silence, pausing from time to time to inspect the rosebushes. After several minutes, they came upon another bench, shaded by an oak tree. Ruth sat down and lit a cigarette. Finally she asked the question he had been expecting all along.

"So, did you ever finish that *Myths and Mysteries*?"

"No, I abandoned it."

Ruth said nothing.

"I was working at home," he continued, "editing sequences from that final session. Seeing Arthur's death throes again made me realise that I was sick of exploiting him for the sake of solving a mystery."

Ruth frowned at him. "Do you really expect me to believe that *Counterfactuals* won't be exploiting Arthur?"

Philip blushed. That Ruth had learned about his prospective new

series for the BBC was hardly surprising, since nothing remained secret for long in the television industry. Even so, he felt ashamed that he had not told her himself.

"I suppose you got the idea from Arthur's testimony!"

"Look Ruth, I know how you must feel."

"No Philip, you do *not* know how I feel." She steepled her fingers beneath her chin before continuing. "For a Jew to meet a man who sincerely believed that he had lived in a world where the Nazis never came to power in Germany. . . How could you possibly know how that felt?"

A world that was no less riddled with hatred, but not nearly as efficient at genocide.

"Ruth, it wasn't the real world," he said.

Her expression was withering. "Two of my great-grandparents died in Belsen. So don't lecture me about the 'real world'!"

"I'm so sorry," he murmured.

"Isn't everyone?"

Philip felt compelled to justify himself even though he knew that he might make things worse.

"Ruth, you have every right to ask yourself if we live in the best of all possible worlds. But so does everyone, including me."

"Said with the glibness of someone who is making a television series on the subject!"

Her put-down stung him into silence.

"I'd better go," she said eventually.

"Please don't, Ruth. At least, not until I've told you what else I've learnt about Arthur."

Her nod, though reluctant, came as a relief to him.

"Two weeks after Arthur's death, Nurse Williams contacted me again. She had been going through his personal effects. There were no surviving relatives; so she passed on anything she thought might be of interest, such as his campaign medals. Odd that he never wore them, don't you think? And then I found this." He pulled a folder from his briefcase: inside were two hundred pages crammed with spidery handwriting. "Arthur's memoirs."

She sat down on the bench and riffled through the sheaf of paper. "I suppose it's all just a pack of lies."

"There's no way to tell for certain, Ruth. But Arthur's written testimony does go into a lot more detail than his oral account." He paused for a moment, unsure whether Ruth would want to hear what he had to say. Fortunately, his preamble had piqued her interest.

"So, what *did* you find?"

"According to Arthur, the main prosecution witness at his trial was a man named Ira Silverman. He testified that Arthur murdered three Jews at the Hyde Park work camp. For what it's worth, Arthur pleaded 'not guilty'."

"Which proves nothing!"

Philip nodded. "Exactly my point, Ruth. Sometimes the truth can't be revealed, however hard we try."



“That won’t stop me wondering about what might have been!”

Philip reached out and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I wouldn’t want it to, Ruth. Which is why I want you to work with me on *Counter-factuals* . . .”

Ruth rolled her eyes upwards and muttered something in what he took to be Hebrew, before favouring him with

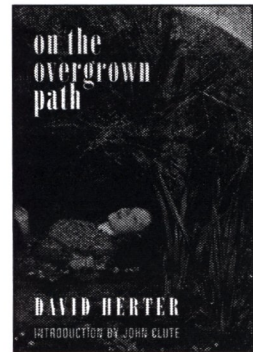
a rueful-looking smile. Philip smiled back, relieved that she had given her consent so readily.

Arm in arm, they walked back along the path that led to Arthur’s memorial. There, Ruth set fire to his memoirs. When the flames had subsided, they scattered the ashes beneath the roses.

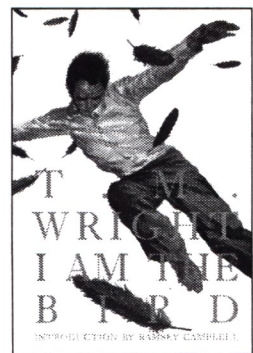


En route from Bratislava to Prague in the deceptive spring of the 1920s, Leoš Janáček, famed opera composer, ethnographer, and amateur psychologist, is stranded in an obscure and enigmatic mountain village, lured from his train by a song of blood. Here, Janáček must become a detective far from home. 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.



*Lavie Tidhar is the author of the novella An Occupation of Angels, a cold war supernatural thriller, and of the forthcoming mini-collection HebrewPunk. He edited the Michael Marshall Smith Bibliography for PS and his new anthology, A Dick & Jane Primer for Adults, is forthcoming from the BFS. He says, "I became fascinated with the history of circuses, clowns and stage magic a few years back, then discovered I make a terrible magician and stopped. I've always loved Sergio Leone's westerns, though. I guess at some point they got confused in my head—which was a lot of fun!"*

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# High Noon in Clown Town

Lavie Tidhar

**T**he gunslinger watched the yellow balloon drift on the wind towards him.

"There is no point shooting," he said to the Kid, who was aiming his silver-handled gun at the approaching object. "Remember what I taught you."

"Oh," the Kid said, and lowered his hand. He sounded disappointed. "Wait, let me see." His hair was long and lanky, reaching down to his shoulders, where dandruff collected in little tidy mounds. "Green is for acid, blue is for shock, yellow is . . . yellow is . . . No don't tell me . . ." he ran through the nursery rhyme again, said, "yellow is poison, and red's even worse!"

"Mustard gas," the gunslinger said patiently. He pushed his heels into his mount's sides and began to move in a westerly direction, giving the approaching balloon a wide berth. The Kid followed. "And red is bubonic plague. Looks like we got ourselves a clown settlement nearby."

"You think it's where he was

headed?" the Kid asked. The gunslinger shrugged. In the spot where they stood just a moment before the yellow balloon exploded with a soft whoosh; the gunslinger pushed cloth over his mouth, just in case. "We'll find out soon enough," he said.

**T**hey encountered several more drifting balloons as they approached the perimeter of the town but avoided them without difficulty. The area they rode through had once been farmland, and the gunslinger guessed it had also been prosperous, though clearly that was no longer the case. In an abandoned farm they saw two corpses hanging from a tree; skeletal feet were still jammed into long, canoe-like shoes and a shock of red hair stuck out like weird antennas from the skulls.

"Whitefaces," the gunslinger said. "Now that's interesting." He stopped his horse and climbed down. "I'd say they were left here as a message."



"Who for?" the Kid asked, sounding a little nervous. It was by the ruined farmhouse, and he jumped when the gunslinger suddenly pulled out his gun and two shots echoed, one chasing the other.

The two skeletal Whitefaces fell on the ground with a thud. "Maybe for us," the gunslinger said. "Maybe to warn off other clowns."

"You *do* think it was him," the Kid said, recovering.

The gunslinger shrugged again. "If it is then he's running with a pack of Auguste braves. Possibly some Hobo clowns too, judging by the soot left on the clothes here. Come on, help me bury them."

They dug two shallow graves, the Kid complaining all the while, the gunslinger working in silence. They took shelter in the abandoned farmhouse that night and the Kid took first shift while the gunslinger covered his face with his wide-brimmed hat and fell asleep in what had been the ballooney. They were not interrupted.

**T**hey had met further east, in a small trading town on the bank of the Grimaldi river that was so small it didn't even have a name. It was a one-clown-town.

But it had a bank, and the Kid tried to rob it. The gunslinger was passing through when they set to hang the Kid from the beams of the old clown min-

istry and on a whim he shot the rope and helped the Kid out of town. He recognised something in the Kid's face: a shadow cast there by the man he set out to hunt a long time before. When he was young. And as the Kid clutched at his throat and coughed something fell from his clothing into the sand, and when the gunslinger picked it up he knew that his decision was right.

It was a thumb-tip, pure silver and ornately patterned, and where the fingernail would have been a word was etched into the metal. *Vernaculus*, it said: an old word meaning both clown, and slave.

**T**hey left the ruined farm as the sun rose. The Kid huddled on his mount wrapped in the horse's blanket. He was, the gunslinger noticed, beginning to smell. They rode through more of the unending dead lands. Ruined buildings dotted fields where nothing grew. The Kid nearly fell into a custard-trap dug deep into the earth but his horse smelled the acidic fumes in time and skirted it with a neigh of distress.

"I'm going to find him," the Kid said then, "and I'm going to kill him."

The gunslinger didn't answer. He was watching the Kid's hands. They moved in a practised, absent-minded pattern: the old disappearing handkerchief routine. As much as he looked he couldn't see the silver thumb-tip. He

remembered those same practised movements from another time, a different place.

Towards evening that day, as the sun began to make its westward journey to oblivion, the gunslinger and the Kid saw the town. Tall wooden walls hid the inside of the settlement, but high in the air they could see the distant shapes of flying clowns, jumping in crazy parabolas from giant trapezes hidden behind the walls. The clowns flew and the noise they made was obscene, a cacophony of giggles and shouts and snatches of inane punch-lines that appeared and disappeared with the movement of their pale bodies in the air.

The gunslinger had pulled his rifle from behind his back and made the horse go slow, and the Kid had his pistols out and his face wore an expression of hatred that gave the gunslinger pause.

He could sense unseen eyes watching them as they approached the gates. When they came close enough he saw that a group of Hobo braves stood guard outside the town walls, holding colourful balloons, armed with poisonous custard pies ready for throwing.

Their leader, a giant Hobo clown with face rubbed inky with dirt and soot, grinned as they came near. He held a blue balloon towards the gunslinger as if daring him to take it.

The gunslinger smiled, not taking his eyes off the Hobo, and took the string of the balloon in his hand. The Hobo's grin melted when he saw that

the gunslinger wasn't electrocuted, but he only noticed the thin glove when the gunslinger, with a quick touch of his heels to his horse, rode forward and touched the blue balloon to the clown's head.

The giant Hobo brave screamed and fell to the ground.

"Stop!" The Kid shouted as the other braves surged forward, ready to attack them. A lone custard pie arched through the air and exploded a few feet away from him, raising acidic bubbles in the earth. The Kid raised his hand high: in it he was holding the silver thumb-tip.

**T**hey rode into town and the gunslinger's fingers tightened reflexively around the rifle. Beside him he felt rather than saw the Kid's hoary breathing and his concentration, a mixture of emotions the gunslinger recognised without separating them into their elements. Hate, anger, homesickness . . . and a strange longing that was evident in his eyes from the moment he had first seen him, dangling on the end of a rope.

They rode through Clown Town's main thoroughfare; it was a wide, dusty boulevard lined with clown shops and bars. Ahead was the clock tower and beside it an imposing building that was the Ministry of Clowns. Whitefaces, Hobos and Augustes watched them from the porches of run-down saloons, balloonerics and red-nose-makers shops. Somewhere a piano played a



ring tune and was silenced with a gunshot.

It was high noon in Clown Town.

Shit, the gunslinger thought. It was *always* high noon in Clown Town.

Under the clock tower a figure stood motionless, watching them. When the Kid saw it he raised his guns in the air, a crazed look on his face, and the gunslinger had to knock one of the guns from his hand before the Kid saw reason. The gun remained on the ground, looking like it would melt. A Whiteface brat ran behind them and snatched it up, and ran back into the shadows.

Under the clock tower the man in black waited.

**I**n this town of clowns he was unique. He wore a long black gown, a narrow robe that fell to his feet. It was inscribed with arcane symbols woven in gold, and shone in the light. He wore a top hat, also black, and his face was unpainted and brown and lined from the sun. He also wore a gun belt, with black twin pistols straddling his hips.

On his left shoulder sat a dark-furred rabbit. Both rabbit and man were missing an eye.

The gunslinger reined in his horse a few feet away from the man in black, and felt the Kid do the same beside him. He kept his eyes focused on the man, who looked up at him without smiling.

"You've become careless," the gunslinger said. He looked at his quarry

and felt nothing but fatigue. "You left a trail even a clown could follow."

"And a clown has," the man in black said and spat on the ground. "Do you still want the same thing? Do you still want me to 'pay'? You were always an idiot."

"But not a clown," the gunslinger said. He turned and saw the Kid had slipped off his horse. Something small and metallic fell on the ground before the man in black, next to the circle of his spit that was steaming in the sand.

"Who's the kid?" the man in black said. He turned his eyes on the younger man who stood before him. "Are you a thief? Have you come to return my property? That is very... commendable."

"Do you remember a town called Bozoburg?" the Kid said. "A small town on the Fratellini plains. I doubt you even remember. There was girl who worked there once, in a bar. Her name was Ethel." His right hand was very still on the butt of his pistol. "She was my mother, and you killed her."

The man in black stared at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowing as he examined the Kid. And then he began to laugh.

The gunslinger watched it happen and was powerless to stop what he knew would happen. The Kid's hand went to his gun and quicker than thought the gun erupted from its holster. A shot rang in the air.

The Kid lay on the ground, blood soaking the shirt by his right shoulder.

The man in black stood above him, his slick black gun pointing at the Kid's head. "Little Ethel," he said. "And you must be little Ethel's brat. She was a fine woman in her day, your mother. But I never killed her." He looked down at the Kid and put his foot on his chest, pushing him to the ground and eliciting a scream of pain. "Might kill you, though."

"Stop it," the gunslinger said, and he too slid off from his horse.

"Why?"

"Because you recognise him, don't you," the gunslinger said. "I don't know who his mother was, but I only have to take one look at him to see who the father is."

"So what is this?" the man in black said, and for the first time he sounded angry. "A family reunion? You've been chasing me halfway around the world to bring me—this? You should have done your uncle's duty and kept him away." He waved at the Kid. A coin materialised in his hand and he angrily made it disappear again.

"I can't kill you," the gunslinger said. "And I can't let you go. I thought . . ."

"You thought he might do the job for you? You were always weak."

"And you were always a bully."

"Look," the man in black said, and he sat down suddenly on the sand beside the Kid and took off his hat. The

rabbit jumped from his shoulder and disappeared inside it. "Look," he said again, and the gunslinger found his own tiredness echoed, unexpectedly, in his brother's voice. "I'm not the one chasing you. I didn't ask for this. All I did was run away from the circus."

The gunslinger, too, sat down in the sand. The Kid lay between them, moaning quietly.

Behind them, clowns began emerging into the sun. Whitefaces and Hobos and Augustes, they formed a silent audience, rows and rows of long, red floppy feet that converged on the three men.

"I always hated the circus," the gunslinger said. He took hold of the Kid and lifted him in his arms. "You shouldn't have run away."

"Did I?" The man in black said. "It was so long ago. Do you think I was successful?" He sighed as he put the top hat on his head and stood up, helping the gunslinger with the Kid's body.

"You can never run away from home," the gunslinger said.

The clowns watched, silent and intent, as the two men, supporting their charge, began walking away into the lowering sun; and balloons in all the colours of the rainbow drifted up into the skies as in a silent lament.





Mikal Trimm tells us that “A Paean To Stranded Sailors . . .” came about from tussling with the disparities of the promises of science fiction’s pulp roots when compared to the realities of the world which eventually appeared. We have that very same problem every day! Mikal has recent or forthcoming stories in Polyphony, Weird Tales, Black Gate and Interfictions, plus another upcoming tale in Postscripts.

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# A Paean to Stranded Sailors and Ships Becalmed at Sea

Mikal Trimm

They shred, they shred,  
and they shred . . .  
December, 1958:

Caleb Barker, nine years old and feeling it, wiped the glue and tissue from his hands. He stood reluctantly, cursed silently, and brushed himself off. Toothpicks spilled from his lap, some broken, some too sodden for use. The framework of his model collapsed upon itself, devolving into sticks and twine and paste.

Outside his window, the night sky brightened momentarily, and he ran to the sill and looked out. A trail of fire and smoke marked the sky and dimmed the stars, an exclamation point in the heavens. *We’re here*, it said. *Man will conquer the cosmos!*

From his little bedroom in Lompoc, California, Caleb watched the first test missile from Vandenberg Air Force Base as it mocked the heavens with its

light. He thought about trying to stay up and wait for his dad to come home, but there was no point, really—Dad wasn’t allowed to talk about his work, even to his family.

Tired, and angry about everything and nothing at the same time, he went back to his desk and cleared up the mess left from his latest attempt to recreate the *Graf Zeppelin*.

Ah, the skies! The thrill of the limitless, the magic of the unadulterated heavens, the whisper-speak of clouds as they pass by your feet, jealous, oh so jealous of your position above them!

In a timeless moment:

The Ship drifted through the cloud-swirl, rose and laughed at the puny stars, banked, dipped, and peeked through the flimsy curtains raised by Mother Earth to cover her unabashed nakedness. Its skin gathered ice in the heights and dropped melting shards of

heaven-sweat as it sank toward Her embrace.

Perpetual motion engines whispered to the winds as the quantum atoms that made up its hull mimicked the artistry of sun and sky and ground and glimmer—invisible, always invisible. It was a ship of the air, one that could never have existed or had *always* existed, depending on the mood of its Captain. Now it flashed with lightning charges of form and color, a silent storm, a chiaroscuro of function.

*Find the enemy*, and the Captain wept at his own impotence. *Find the Hun, the Red Menace, the Yellow Peril*.

The airship dipped and rose, gave itself carnally to the nearest updrafts and downdrafts, and drifted through the skies, unmoored.

#### New tools, old ideas June, 1962:

Caleb noticed a trembling in his hand, set down the exacto knife, and slumped against his chair. The sun was burying itself into the depths of the Eglin Reservation, and Caleb imagined for a moment the hiss it would make as it found its tomb in the near-stagnant lakes and the loose wet sand of Valparaiso, Florida.

The Base itself lay to the south of Caleb's home—a modest ranch house crouching in the hinterlands between Valparaiso and Niceville—but the Reservation seemed to exist everywhere, surrounding the lots the house had been built on years before. Caleb's

dad called the Reservation “an investment in the future”, but right now it was just thousands of acres of prime hunting and fishing ground for the locals, who didn't seem to notice the “Restricted Area” signs that were posted on its borders. Since the Air Force never complained much about the poaching, the locals shrugged off the explosions that occasionally echoed from the various missile- and bomb-ranges.

Caleb stood and paced his room, restoring circulation in his legs, and shook his arms to loosen up his muscles. He moved through an armada of airships: blimps, dirigibles, hot-air balloons, zeppelins, each form distinctly different from the next. His walls were papered with sketches, his shelves crowded with models, some completed, some merely clumsy frameworks awaiting inspiration. His original *Graf Zeppelin* was there, clumsily-built and fragile, entombed in a glass display case to prevent further deterioration. A cloth-and chicken-wire *Hindenberg* hung from his ceiling, unaware of its tragic destiny. Other airships, both historical and fanciful, sailed the limited skies of his bedroom or sat in dock, patiently awaiting launch.

Caleb thought about the word *obsession*. His dad said he was obsessed, and Caleb understood the concern, he knew the meaning of the word. He almost agreed, in fact. At school, they were drilled on the finer arts of surviving a nuclear blast, made to huddle under their desks when the Civil



Defense horn wailed. President Kennedy wanted to put a man on the moon, just to beat the Communists. Caleb had heard his dad whispering to his mom about Cuba, his voice tight and unsteady, when they thought he wasn't paying attention. The world was harvesting missiles, it seemed, and every boy he went to school with wanted to be an astronaut. Caleb thought of missiles, and cramped spaces, and he hated the very idea. Give him a vast ship of the air instead, and the endless skies . . .

His nervous energy finally spent, Caleb stopped at his last completed model, knelt down and inspected it for the hundredth time tonight, then shook his head. It was his recreation of something he'd seen in a movie. His parents had taken him to the drive-in a few months ago, and one of the movies in the double-feature had been a Vincent Price film called *Master Of The World*. His dad was a Jules Verne addict, and the movie hadn't made it to the rinky-dink theatres in the area when it was released the year before. Caleb didn't care for the movie all that much, but the airship, the *Albatross*, moored itself in his imagination. He'd studied it relentlessly during the movie, ignoring the thin plot to focus on design: that fantastical profile, the archaic bridge, the unfathomable superstructure.

He'd sketched it from memory for two weeks before starting the modeling process—more than forty drawings, representing every angle he could

imagine, including some that hadn't been used in the movie—and then built it up piece by piece, using all the modeler's tricks he'd learned in the last few years. Popsicle sticks, twine, toothpicks, metal shavings, glass beads, and paraffin wax all came into play, filling the model out with the visual weight of their textures. Once he was finally finished, he'd stepped back, eyed it critically, and shook his head sadly, much as he was doing now. Technically, it was perfect—more impressive than the miniature used in the actual movie, probably. But Caleb knew instinctively that it was flawed, lumbering, useless.

It just wasn't *right*.

He walked back to his newest creation. There were no sketches for this one—he was working solely from a gut-level feeling, an innate sense that seemed to come from some unexplored place within him. It was going to be huge, he knew that much, bigger than anything he'd attempted before. He found it hard to visualize, even now, but his hands knew the shape of it, and his mind whispered the secrets of its design as he worked. *Here, the engines that never falter and here, see? here is the brain of the beast, the electronic mind that is almost human, and look, look! at the flesh of this strange creature, see how it blends with its surroundings, bending the air around itself to hide from the world!* Caleb closed his eyes, envisioning sciences that didn't exist, twisting physics to obey his whims, and he knew that it was good.

Then he sat down, his hands steady

once again, and continued cutting the tiny squares of glass that would eventually serve as the ship's skin.

**S**peak to me, O gods of the wind, bless me with the guidance of your sacred tongues!

In a moment where Time has stopped:

The Ship trembled in muted fury, hovering one moment, thrusting forward in anticipation the next, searching, ever searching for conquest, triumph, glory. It flexed muscles of braided nanofilament, its cold-fusion heart bleeding power uselessly.

The Captain begged for instructions. He piloted his craft over rocky shorelines, silent cornfields, mountainous redoubts, crying out for a Commander. There were many Commanders once, and he could still find traces of their passing as he scoured the country endlessly, but they were silent now, retired from their positions, dead. He broadcast his misery over every wavelength; all channels were silent. He slowly crumbled under the hiss of lost communication.

*Take us down!*, he demanded finally, addressing the Ship in the most intimate way. *Bury us below the waves, let the weight of the water crush us finally; our time is over!*

The Ship ignored him, impossibly.

*Then burn us here, in the womb of air! Turn your devices against themselves and destroy us in a final blaze! Let us be remembered, even as we die!*

Again the Ship failed to do his bidding. Instead, it responded, its voice a trickle of honey in his mind. *Not yet. We have a future. There will be a Commander.*

The Ship led its Captain into the Control Center, sat him down, and connected itself to him, whispering *sleep, sleep*. As the Captain settled into his Chair, grudgingly, the ship spoke to him of triumphs, the stuff of their legendary early days.

The Captain retired to a medley of old memories, smiling in his sleep as the plans of nefarious, scheming arch-enemies were unraveled by his brilliant mind, their armies crushed by the unmitigated power of his impossibly possible Ship.

#### Old tools, new ideas March, 1965:

**C**aleb and his father, guests of NASA, stood on an observation platform at Cape Kennedy and watched the launch of *Gemini 3*. His father's eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and Caleb tried to muster the proper amount of enthusiasm for the first manned Gemini flight. It wasn't easy. To him, the spaceship resembled nothing so much as a huge bullet, designed to puncture the sky with its violent assault. To his father, it resembled . . . what? A fiery chariot? A thunderbolt sent by the gods of Earth to crack the very heavens? An "investment in the future"? All of these things and others as well, Caleb assumed.





When the missile finally launched in an earth-shaking eruption of smoke, sound, and holy fire, Caleb closed his eyes against the apocalyptic forces. He could hear his father's voice, shouting over the cacophony of the launch, but he could only make out the most frenetic phrases. They added up to one familiar diatribe, the zealous mantra of his father's existence: *We will conquer space! The Moon first, then Mars, Mercury, the moons of Jupiter, who knows? Other solar systems will fall to us, and we might even discover other races, strange life-forms, other planets to conquer and populate!*

Caleb attempted a smile and nodded as his father basked in the glory of this moment in history, but a Cassandra inside him countered the claims, belittled his father's enthusiasm. *What do you think you'll find, if you shoot a cold hard bullet into the heart of the cosmos? Cold hard things. No life, no hidden glories, only rocks and silence. The Universe will answer coldness with coldness, emptiness with emptiness, hard science with dead planets. You've offered calculation and bureaucracy—what do you expect in return?* For the first time today, Caleb cried, and he had no idea why.

The drive home was silent. Caleb's father drove conservatively, finally realizing, Caleb supposed, that his passions would never be his son's. Caleb sat in the backseat by choice, staring out the rear window and wondering where the voice had come from, the one that had ordered all of his vague notions into a form he could readily

grasp. He knew that it was all true, at least in his own mind, but he could never have organized his thoughts in such a fashion. He'd never understood the purpose behind his own obsessions, that the absolute *need* existed somewhere beyond him, waiting for fulfillment.

His father drove straight through—it was verging on dawn when they finally parked in the driveway at home, accompanied by the fading echo of crickets disturbed by the sound of the car's engine. Caleb felt the need to apologize, but he was too tired to form the words. His father unlocked the front door, looked at Caleb for a moment with a combination of perplexity and understanding, and ruffled Caleb's hair, something he hadn't done in years. "You'll find your own mysteries, son. You'll find your own way." He smiled and opened the front door quietly, trying not to wake the rest of the family.

Caleb stood in his room, wanting to sleep, *needing* to sleep, but he felt a nagging sense of disquiet, the vague realization that something remained unfinished in his life. He wandered his room, his head sometimes clipping the dusty models hanging from his ceiling. Eventually, as he always did, he sat before his workbench. His final creation still sat there, unfinished even after nearly three years of work. It bore the marks of a project that would never reach fruition—nearly-complete struc-



tures had been torn off in fits of pique, only to be set aside rather than discarded, and piles of different construction materials hid in the farthest recesses of his desk, heavily misused, twisted, shattered, but still available against some sudden necessity. The model itself was hopeless, a vaguely balloon-like mass of creative offal. It bore the scars of repeated reinvention, a regenerating butterfly whose wings had been plucked again and again.

Caleb slumped in his chair, eyes closed, and he imagined that he could still see the brilliant after-flash of the Titan II engines against his retinas. The lights danced beneath his lids, scattering and coalescing into random patterns, and he heard his father's voice again, delineating the future of space travel. *The moon. Mars, Mercury, Jupiter. Other planets. Other galaxies . . .*

Caleb touched his model, eyes still closed. He felt the length and breadth of what remained intact, noticed the incongruities, and saw its future, slowly at first, but with a growing sense of the inevitable, the *rightness*.

Despite the hour, Caleb began rebuilding. An odd thought passed through his mind, and in his exhaustion he giggled. *I guess this is investing in my future.*

**Oh Captain, my Captain!  
What wonders lie before us!  
In a moment beyond Time:**

**W**ake up! Wake up!

The Captain achieved consciousness in increments, his mind processing the information that the Ship fed him. He noticed the changes in his cabin, the new instrumentation, the viewscreens that had taken the place of his beloved periscopes, the unnatural quiet of the Ship itself. He walked, and his footsteps no longer clattered on his old familiar metal gangways; they whispered across a surface that buoyed him up as he moved, like walking on a sea of quicksilver. Everything was larger, as well—he felt that it would take days to travel through the labyrinth of the Ship's reborn body.

*New, everything is so new, so different,* he thought. The Ship listened, all of its various processes on standby. The Captain stood trembling, taking everything in. The Ship held its breath.

*Grand, and grand, and grand again!* *We have a new Commander!* the Captain cried with delight, and the Ship flipped all switches, pulled out all stops, shook the final kinks out of its new form and *flew!* The Captain felt his stomach lurch as the Ship ascended at a dramatic rate. No rudder, no wait for the engines to bring the nose around, just a rapid gain in elevation. *There go the null-g engines!* The deck beneath him vibrated to a gentle thrum, and he smiled, no, he *beamed* as his Ship escaped Earth's gravitational pull with little more than a shudder and a sigh. Clouds whirred past, then the last stubborn layers of atmosphere, and finally the brilliant darkness of space beck-

oned, the stars applauding his arrival with winks and flares.

The nearest viewscreen flashed on, and the Captain watched as the Ship sprouted great wings. Its upper hull bristled with panels, antennae, and a thousand arms with a thousand purposes. The wings caught the solar winds, and the panels translated raw light into miracles—internal gravity, fresh air, gardens enough to fill a million cornucopias. The Captain breathed deep, heady with the intoxicating air of infinity. He shouted a lusty challenge, his voice reaching into the deepest recesses of his craft: “Ahoy, Commander! And what will be our mission?”

An echo returned, a Voice not born of the Ship, but still a part of it. *Conquer.*

“And how shall we do that, Commander?” and the Captain danced in the corridor, his teeth bright, his hair

wild and leonine, his muscles straining, threatening to burst through his uniform. The Ship danced beneath him, matching his steps, keeping him in balance.

*Treat with the timid Moonmen. Parlay with the proud gods of Mars. Put the dreaded Venusians to heel, and crush the dark empire that Jupiter is spawning. Have mercy on the weak, give no quarter to the despots!*

“Yes, oh yes, that we shall do!” The Captain’s beard thickened, the gray disappearing beneath a vigorous burst of thick, curling red.

*Make the Universe over in Your image! Be brave, be true, be what you once were! Thus say the dreamers, the Commanders! Deliver unto us the future!*

And the stars whirled, and the planets shook in their orbits, and the Captain set the Ship’s controls for a new tomorrow.




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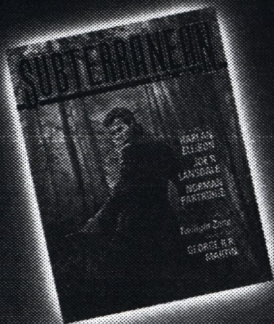
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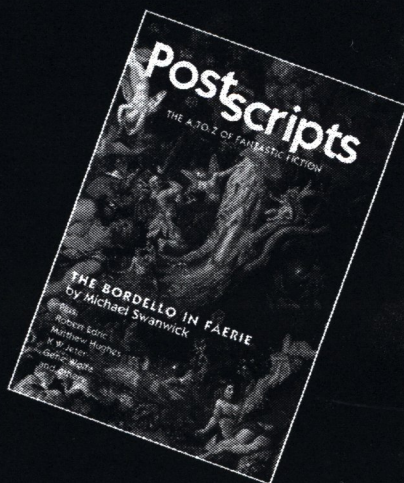
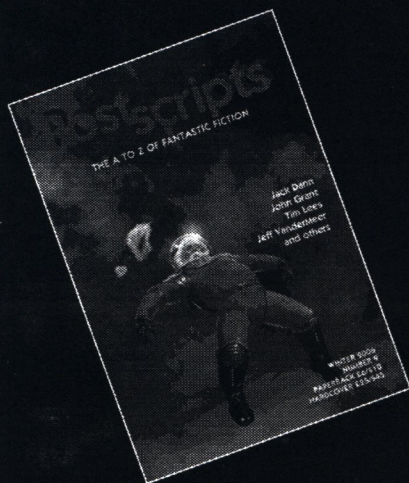
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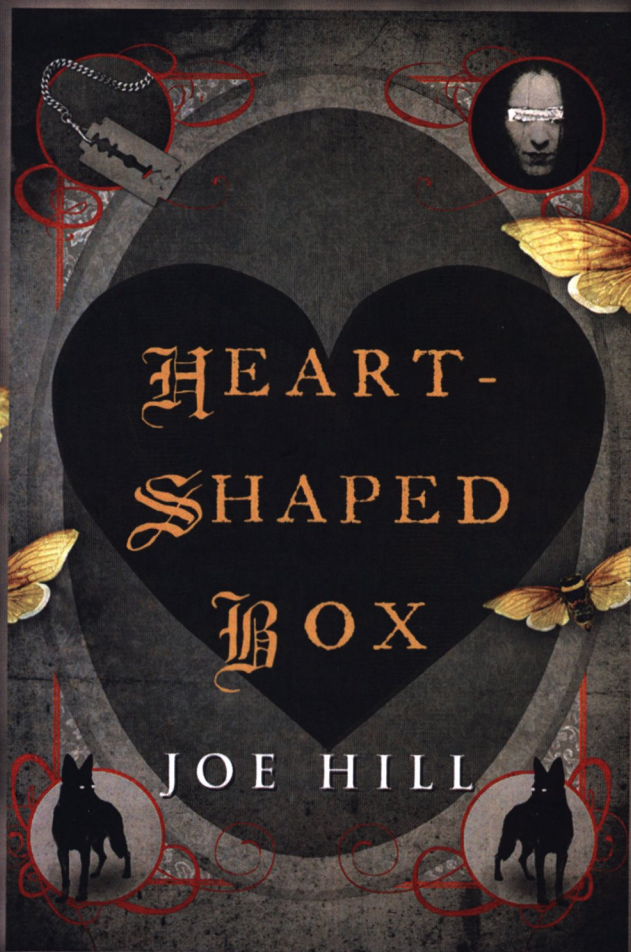
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