

**POSTSCRIPTS**

# Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

**BEHIND THE  
CLOUDS:  
IN FRONT  
OF THE SUN**  
by Christopher  
Harman

Plus  
Steve Aylett  
David Barnett  
Paul Di Filippo  
Richard Paul Russo  
and others

SUMMER 2007  
NUMBER 11  
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SUMMER 2007

NUMBER 11





# Postscripts

SUMMER 2007 NUMBER 11

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Publisher and  
Managing Editor

*Nick Gevers*  
Editor

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Design and Layout

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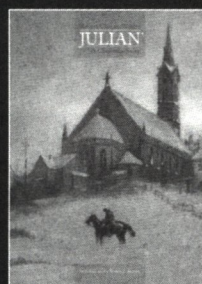
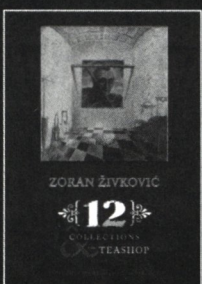
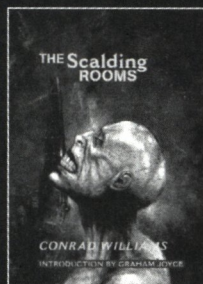
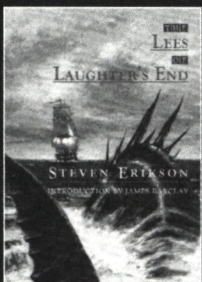
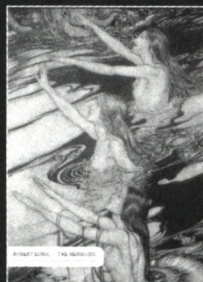
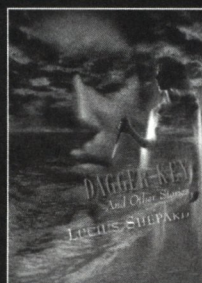
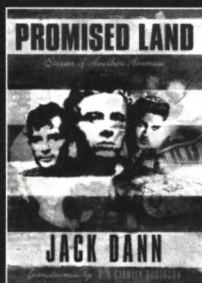
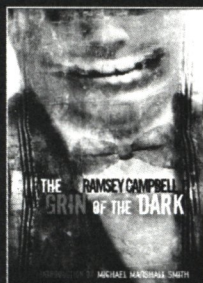
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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

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*We're delighted and honoured to report that Paul's two big upcoming projects are the semi-mainstream road-novel *Roadside Bodhisattva* and the collection *Harsh Oases*, both of them on PS's forthcoming attractions schedule. This fall will also see *Cosmocopia* (with illustrations by Jim Woodring) from Payseur & Schmidt. He interrupted a typically hectic workload to pen this issue's Guest Editorial—watch out for “The End of the Great Continuity”, a new story from Paul in Postscripts #13 this coming winter.*

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# Editorial: The World Down a Wire

## Paul Di Filippo

**I** no longer work alone.

For centuries now, since the birth of writing as a full-time professional trade, a writer's life has traditionally been quasi-monastic or hermit-like—at least during working hours. (We know the deserved reputation writers have as wild off-duty revelers, a counterbalance to their enforced concentration and seclusion. That's why you'll find me each night in my pajamas, pen and notepad in hand, reading whatever book I have to review next, a cup of chamomile tea to hand.)

Oh, sure, there were always cafés to write in, and writers who claimed to produce imperishable and copious wordage in such environments. Color me doubtful. One could even, as Harlan Ellison was occasionally wont to do, write in store windows, for the maximum in public exposure and interaction. But the vast majority of the world's books, fiction or non-fiction, got composed in isolation, the product of many laborious hours characterized by writerly butt plunked down firmly in chair, blinds drawn (or sun flooding in), in silence (or with music blasting), in a wooded cabin or in the middle of a city, but in all cases uninterrupted by the continuous and/or frequent presence of other living humans.

No more.

Nowadays, because the majority of writers compose directly on their computers (I can name only a few who still don't), and because the majority of the world's computers are connected to the internet and perpetually online, there is always somebody in the room with me as I write.

A whole world of somebodies, in fact, and also the equivalent of a million, million library shelves.

I deem this wonderful.

With just a few flicks of my fingertips and a couple of clicks of my mouse, I can be in near-instant contact with friends and strangers around the globe, can summon up facts and opinions galore, get breaking news faster than through any other medium, and “publish” my thoughts and responses.

Well, it’s not 1991 any more. I don’t need laboriously to tout or describe the wonders of the web to anyone. But what I would like to do is examine how the life of the average writer—me—has changed due to this phenomenon and, more vitally, how literature itself (with an emphasis on science fiction) seems poised to be further transmogrified.

It is, naturally, essential to find an outlet for one’s work, if one wants to have an impact. How much harder that used to be!

When I embarked on a full-time freelance career in 1982, my knowledge of markets for my work was limited to five sources: a variety of annual guides in book form from the *Writer’s Market* people and their ilk; a small handful of trade publications such as *Locus* and *The SFWA Journal* (I was even the Market Reporter for the latter zine for a couple of years; I got all my information by snail-mail surveys of publishers); the occasional national news item of writerly import; the indicia of any actual fiction magazine, new or old, that I could lay my hands on; and word-of-mouth from fellow writers.

Obviously, the timeliness and completeness of such a jury-rigged and imperfect system left a lot to be desired. Opportunities to sell one’s wares went begging, stories got mailed (snail-mailed!) to dead markets, and response time could be measured in weeks and weeks, if not months.

Today, of course, myriad extensive and regularly updated online compendia of markets exist in realtime, queries go out instantly and are answered almost as fast, and many venues take e-mailed submissions. Publishers often broadcast calls for submissions. Fellow writers pass on news instantly. International borders are as naught. It is a heavenly, painless, easy-going way of operating which I could not have dared dream of twenty-five years ago.

And even payment rituals have changed a bit for the better, with PayPal and EFT playing a growing part.

But, you might object, this is mere mechanics, just superficial changes. We’ve become accustomed to trends which bring us speedier transportation, tastier, more exotic foodstuffs, wider entertainment options, faster computers. Why should we be surprised the infrastructure of writing has experienced similar progress?

True. But we’ve barely begun to look at how the psyche of the lonely writer has benefited. And here’s where the discussion will inextricably shade off into the future of the literature we love, since fiction derives from the mind-states of creators.

Back in 1982, I had an expanding web of friends connected mainly by snail-mail. (I was never much of a phone fiend, although live conversation by phone figured to some extent as well—when money allowed for long-distance charges.) Letters

passed among us all regularly, at roughly weekly intervals. And then there were fanzines and conventions. By such rituals did one stay in touch and feel part of a fraternity, deriving commiseration, approbation and other emotional support.

But the arrival of letters and zines, the attendance at conventions, constituted the tiniest percent of each day, brief joyous moments followed by a re-immersion in solitude. A solitude often welcome and essential to creativity, but one that could not be broken by choice at any given minute, should one wish. Often, feelings of isolation and being out of the loop (imaginary or real) would swamp me.

And then there was the matter of research. Solitary trips to various libraries and bookstores, resulting in frustrating trawls through dozens of volumes for one or two key facts.

Today, I have a minute-by-minute Worldcon going on continually in front of my eyes, and a near-instantaneous answer to almost any question I can conjure.

You might quibble that virtual friends are not identical to meatbag ones. I'd be the first to agree. But the digital presence in my lap, so to speak, of all my pals is infinitely more agreeable than the paper connection of yore. Being online conveys a constant sense of camaraderie, a real intuitive connection and sense that hundreds, thousands of other people are out there doing what I'm doing, suffering the same setbacks, glorying in the same triumphs, striving for similar goals. My sense of being part of a vibrant community has been magnified a hundredfold.

As for matters of research—well, let's not raise silly objections about so much of the world's written historical material remaining non-digitized. That's all too true, and will ensure that libraries and archives continue to remain vital. But every day more and more comes online. And whole encyclopedias—including the wonderful Wikipedia—are ready to give up their information, as well as the arcane sites of any hobbyist or amateur savant you can imagine.

Finally, in terms of disseminating one's opinions and reactions and one's most idle thoughts or lucubrations in the manner of a zine writer of yore, blogs offer a speed-of-light forum. (You're invited to check out mine, <http://community.livejournal.com/theinferior4/>, a group affair shared with Liz Hand, Lucius Shepard and Paul Witcover.)

A writer today, then, leads a life which would be almost unrecognizable to his or her peers just a few decades ago, and that's inescapably going to affect his or her fiction. Bound up in an invisible but consequential and flexible matrix of ever-changing information and co-worker and fan feedback, the writer of 2007—seemingly still alone in a room—is in reality as much a social creature as any honeybee, rather than the lone wolf of yore.

But what does this new mode of creating actually mean for literature in general, and SF in particular?

First, but perhaps least dramatically, comes new levels of accuracy. As Thomas Pynchon remarked in the preface to his story collection *Slow Learner* way back in

1984, there's really no excuse now for not getting one's facts right, when they're all just "a few strokes of the keyboard" away. Greater narrative verisimilitude also will result from access to audiovideo and textual riches. Want to describe a place you've never been, an accent you've never heard from living lips, or a past milieu? The information is out there and easily grabbable for your creative use.

Second, new movements in the genre should finally begin to blossom, after the long drought of such, following the nova of cyberpunk. New movements are vital to the genre. They help us map hitherto unexplored territories in storyspace.

Aided and abetted by the networking powers of the web, by a mad proliferation of wild-eyes screeds and speculations and feelings, writers who mutually feel a set of impulses and affinities will be able to cohere better and to express themselves communally. We've already seen this a little with the burgeoning school known as "interstitial fiction" (<http://www.interstitialarts.org>). But did you realize that after a few bloggers began to tout "clockpunk fiction" (SF that focuses on technologies older than steam), a spontaneous anthology of such fiction began to cohere, wiki-style? (<http://daviniautomata.wordpress.com/2007/03/03/introducing-clockpunk>). Expect more such transient or longer-lasting and influential movements.

Massive reader feedback is another paradigm shift. On his blog (<http://www.rudyrucker.com/blog>), Rudy Rucker posts snippets of his work in progress and assimilates valuable suggestions into the finished product. This method of working isn't for every writer, but it definitely affects and will affect much fiction of the future, producing stories that are true expressions of a tribe.

The speed of the internet is another new factor in the composition of stories. As the news-cycle of realworld events spins faster and faster, fiction must keep pace, and the internet allows for more timely incorporation of realworld developments into stories. It's an R. A. Lafferty "Slow Tuesday Night" kind of world these days. The Clutian "real year" of SF is always as now as possible, and being online allows for better topicality.

And of course, we all know about the still-developing effects of the internet on the dissemination and selling of fiction, as books or files, an area still so much in flux, and not capable of being more than alluded to here.

The internet is admittedly a mixed blessing. Distracting, intrusive, containing misinformation and madness, a time-sink, conducive to flame wars and groupthink, and a devil's playground for idle hands, it can sap a writer's productivity as well as increase it.

But go back to 1982? To being all alone?

No thanks!

I'll take the world down the wire and into my study any day over that!





*Bram Stoker Award-winning author Kealan Patrick Burke lives in a two-hundred-year old house that's gradually conceding to the effects of time. "These days," he tells us, "it seems it's more of a home to spiders and other creatures than it is to us. One night, after a marathon writing session, I went upstairs and found that my son, after having a nightmare, was splayed out across my side of the bed. Rather than wake him at that late hour, I took the guest bedroom, which hasn't been used in quite some time, a fact that became apparent when I awoke the following morning with cobwebs over my face. My reaction was not too dissimilar from Alfred Ross's in the story. More than once that day I found myself wondering just how long it would take an old house to claim you if you stayed still long enough, and worse, what if this process depended not only on inertia, but also on how many people out in the world knew you existed, or remembered you."*

*He is currently at work on a new novel. Visit him at his website: [www.kealanpatrickburke.com](http://www.kealanpatrickburke.com). If you don't find him there, help yourself to whatever's in the fridge.*

---

# Cobwebs

## Kealan Patrick Burke

1  
**I** began to be forgotten on a dawn no different than any other I'd seen during the past few years of my incarceration at Spring Grace Retirement Home. The ever-present burning ache in my bones was no better or worse. The sheets were still too tight, the pillow too lumpy, the room a little too cold. Shadows squatted in the corners where they had no business squatting, but like silent drunks, were too harmless to justify ousting. Pins and needles made hornet-filled trees of my legs. The radiator gave its little metallic *tick-tick-tack*, and belched liquidly. Even the light, splintered by the Venetian blinds to form horizontal bars of cold fire on the puke-green wall, looked the same.

But today something *was* different. When I moved my hand down over my

face, over features that had aged badly without my consent and without my noticing, the very ordinary caul of post-slumber confusion clung to the tips of my fingers, and didn't let go as I brought them up for inspection.

Like the memory of old kisses, there was a cobweb stretched across my mouth, violin-string skeins of it stretching out to my fingertips as if waiting for my horrified cry to play them. But I didn't utter a sound, even when I probed the expanse of the web with my tongue and it came away coated in sour-tasting dust. I sat up, not without effort, and beat and pulled and scratched somewhat hysterically at my mouth until all that remained of the cobweb hung in dark brownish clumps from my fingers. *Steady, Al.* My heart was beating fast enough to give me pause, to distract me from the origin of my panic. *Calm down, it's okay, it's all*

*right*, I told myself and waited for the voltage of fear to ebb away. *It's okay*. I looked up at the ceiling. There were cracks in the plaster and cobwebs in the corners, but none on the unremarkable light shade. Of course, there wouldn't be, for it was the obvious suspect, the inanimate villain of the piece, who had shed its cotton candy cobweb skin onto my face as I'd slept.

Grimacing, I got up, every joint and muscle firing off a round of pain, and after a careful inspection of the terrycloth for more invasive gossamer threads, crept into the robe. The smell of disinfectant, nauseatingly familiar, reached me before I opened the door, before I'd cinched the belt on my robe. The smell is meant to hide the odors of age, sickness and death, of hopelessness, but for those of us who call this place a home, it is a constant reminder that we are the creatures from which the terrible stench originates, things better hidden away so the world can be spared the inconvenience of looking at us and seeing its future.

When I got to the lounge after the usual ritual of ignoring the staff's automated cheer, and waiting for mail that wasn't there, I found my friend The Cowboy's chair empty, and he hadn't made his move. The chess pieces were as we'd left them the evening before. The only other soul in the room was Doris Randle, who had at least been capable of a smile when she'd first been admitted, but now gaped dumbly at me as a string of drool tried to connect the corner of her mouth to her paisley-pat-

terned bosom. Two strokes had made an empty vessel of her. It was my contention another would kill her.

"Morning Doris," I said, one hand absently moving to my mouth to be sure no trace of the cobweb remained, or maybe I feared her drooling was contagious.

She stared without seeing me.

"You know him?" she muttered, and I, mistakenly assuming she was talking about The Cowboy, almost celebrated her words as the most coherent anyone had heard from her in months. But then "The kid?" she continued, and I let out a long low sigh. "The one in the classroom? They let the little bastard loose with his crayons. They asked him to color the heart." Her eyes grew more distant, dropped away from me to the chess set. "He didn't stay inside the lines."

I followed her gaze. Looked at the chair. It shouldn't have been empty. It never was at this time of day. Meeting here for our morning chess and banter was about the only ritual either of us had, and one we had come to depend on to help preserve our wits in a place designed, it seemed, to steal them. Then, as I stared at the cheap plastic-backed chair, envisioning The Cowboy with his small blue eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, and grizzled chin, the light through the room's single window changed, only slightly, but enough to make me think it should have been snowing outside. It was that kind of light. Cold and blue. It diffused the gnarled and sad shadow of the eucalypt-

tus in the planter on the sill, blurring it, making the outthrust limbs look like the desperate arms of one of my fellow inmates, clambering for the sleeve of someone who might care.

I wanted to ask Doris if she had noticed the peculiar change in the room, but knew she wouldn't answer, at least not coherently. So, "You take care now," I told her, and left before she was able to coax her gaze back to where I'd been standing. A man could get lost if he spent too long wading through the overgrowth in her field of vision.

Back in the hall I grabbed the first nurse unfortunate enough to cross my path, and asked her where The Cowboy was. But even before that loathsome look of practiced sympathy crossed Nurse Stanford's taut face, I knew.

"He went peacefully," she said. "In his sleep. You must have been close."

It struck me as odd that she didn't know that. There wasn't enough camaraderie among the withered souls in Spring Grace for our friendship to have gone unnoticed. I thought of the slight chill I'd felt in the lounge, the changing of the light. Now it seemed like an omen. I almost smiled. The Cowboy would have been smugly satisfied to know that his passing had knocked askew some portion of the universe, however briefly.

"Are you all right, Mr. Ross?"

"I'm fine. Thank you." I started to move away, then stopped and looked back. Nurse Stanford hadn't moved. She was still standing there, hands clasped matron-like beneath her bosom.

"Can you, please," I said, "if it isn't too much trouble, send someone in to remove the cobwebs from my room?"

She looked momentarily confused by the request. I didn't wait for her answer. Instead I headed back to my room, and was relieved to find the light hadn't changed in my sanctuary.

I sat on the edge of the bed for a while, hands folded in my lap, feeling unpleasantly hollow deep in my chest and alarmingly near tears. Worse, I couldn't tell how much of my burgeoning sorrow was for The Cowboy, and how much was a result of the selfish realization that I was now well and truly alone.

My only friend was gone.

I wondered if he had really gone quietly into the sunset, or if, before they stowed him in the back of that quiet ambulance, they'd had to pause to remove the cobwebs from his lips.

## 2

Noon brought thoughts of a towheaded kid who'd loved magic. A kid who used to usher his Mom and me into the living room, knowing it would mean he'd get to stay up a little later than usual. He wore a top hat and a cape. He even had the white gloves and the dramatic flourish the costume seemed to instill in whoever wore it. Those gloves cut the air above a red velvet tablecloth he'd spread across a narrow workbench. Props were arranged atop that crimson surface, sleeves shirked back, face impassive but not entirely hiding the look,

the barely contained smirk that told us all we were going to be astounded and amazed, whether we believed in him or not.

Beneath the cobwebs Marcia was forever vowing to remove, little Joey called upon his carefully practiced powers of prestidigitation to stun us all, and while many of his tricks were transparent numbers, more often than not, he succeeded.

But the years robbed him of magic and the need to impress. They robbed us all of a lot of things.

He still calls from time to time, but only to assuage his guilt, and to remind himself I'm still there.

Sometimes, I don't wait for his concern to lead him.

After lunch I found myself in the hallway, lamenting my choice of the mushy Salisbury steak and wishing I had some gum, or a mint—anything to rid my palate of the noxious taste. I stepped up to the payphone after patiently listening to Zach Greenburg cursing at his daughter for fifteen minutes.

The earpiece was unpleasantly moist as the connection wormed its way from Ohio to Colorado.

On the third ring, Joey answered.

"Dad? Jesus, how've you been?"

"Not good enough for you to start calling me Jesus."

His laugh was strained, as always. "Nice to hear that place hasn't knocked the wit out of you."

"Not for the want of trying."

"Right."

The stretches of silence grow longer every time we talk, as we both search for something agreeable to say. It has become like trying to find change in a phone booth's coin return. Sometimes you get lucky; more often you don't.

"So how's the weather there?" he asked.

"Sunny." *Aside from a brief wintry spell in The Cowboy's room.*

"Nice. It's cold as hell down here."

"I'd still rather be there than here. The idea of stocking up wood excites the hell out of me. Better than sitting in my room waiting for something interesting to happen."

"Yeah." Pause. The rustle of papers in the background. *Multitasking.* "It was Drew's birthday last weekend. Wish you could have been here."

"I didn't know." And in truth, resented the implication in his voice that I should have. "What is he now, nine?"

"Eleven."

I whistled.

"I've been meaning to get up there to see you, you know?"

I didn't know, but as easy—and in truth, pleasurable—as it would have been to say so, I resisted and mumbled affirmation into the phone.

"But it's a long haul, Dad. Especially with Kathy working such long hours. If she takes time off now it'll look bad. She's still in training, did I tell you that?"

"No." Nor did I know what she was in training *for*.

"Yeah. If she took time off, it'd set

her back, and she's busted her hump long enough."

"Why not come up here by yourself? Get me out of this dump for a night and tie one on with your old man? Like we did back in—"

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Dad? Yeah. Can you hold on, just a sec? I got a call coming in that I need to take. Seriously. Stay with me OK? I promise . . . just a sec."

"All r—"

An abrupt click and the phone became a conch shell, whispering to me in the voice of my own blood.

I waited ten minutes, maybe a little less, certainly no more, before I hung up.

He didn't call back, and I knew better than to wait.

### 3

That Friday, our prison was invaded by a group of high school students, led by a petite raven-haired and bespectacled teacher who seemed convinced she could alter the world and, more specifically, the universes of her charges, with frantic gesticulation and a series of high-pitched yelps. They orbited around her like lazily drifting planets until she meted out their destinations and observed them as they spun off into the hall. While she directed the flow of angst-ridden traffic, we stared with the same kind of fascination a tired dog uses to watch birds eating the crumbs from his bowl.

"Joseph Henner," the teacher wailed. "I know that's not a lighter I just saw in your hand. Make your way to Mr. Ross's room. Number 18; end of the hall. Remember why we're here."

*Why we're here.* I was still waiting for someone to let *me* in on that little secret. I hurried back to my room.

Henner skulked in a few moments later. He was a scrawny acne-riddled teen dressed in a black trenchcoat, scuffed army boots and a T-shirt that displayed a skull-headed man wielding a knife beneath the legend: *We All Gotta Go Sometime. Some of Us Sooner Than Others.*

*True enough,* I thought.

"What school do you go to?" I asked him, when it became painfully clear he wasn't going to initiate the conversation.

"Crosby High."

A quip about the absence of Stills and Nash from the name rose in my mind like an image in a photographer's developer tray, but I let it pass. Any hope was ludicrous that the sullen mass of baggy clothes and attitude before me would have even the slightest idea what I was referring to.

"I'm Joe," he said.

"Alfred Ross."

"Cool." He didn't look at me. "So, do you, like, stay here all the time?"

"Yes."

"That blows. Doesn't it get boring?"

"Absolutely."

"I'd go nuts."

"Some of us have."

"You got a TV?"

“Sure, in the lounge. And my friend and I play chess.” I caught myself too late and felt my polite smile fade. “Used to play chess.”

“He die?”

“Yes. Just last night as a matter of fact.”

“How?”

Only then, only in that very instant, with the rest home filled with the alien sound of youthful laughter and this morose kid inspecting my room and talking about death like it was an old television show he only vaguely remembered, did I realize I didn’t know how The Cowboy had died. *In his sleep*, Nurse Stanford had said, and it had been enough at the time. It wasn’t enough now.

*Cobwebs got his heart.*

“Old age,” I said, at last, and knew it wasn’t a lie.

“Bummer.”

“Yeah. It is. He was a good friend.”

“So . . .” he began as he looked around my room, at the bare picture-less walls and the half-full glass of water sitting on my nightstand, “How long you been here?” It sounded like something he was reading from a cue card, and all the while he avoided looking at me. Maybe he was afraid if he did he’d see a vision of himself in sixty years.

I could have assured him that I’m nobody’s future.

“Coming up on six years.”

“Long time.”

“Feels longer,” I said, and that was the God’s honest truth. It felt like the tail end of a life sentence.

The kid sighed. His patience wasn’t going to hold out much longer, and I couldn’t really blame him. At his age humoring old folks would have been way down at the bottom of my priority list too.

At length his gaze settled on the only picture in my room, the grainy, washed-out photograph of Meredith on the windowsill.

“Your wife?”

“Ex.”

“Still alive?”

“Yes, and cavorting with the pool boys in Florida, I imagine.”

He asked an odd question then, one that, given his demeanor, I’d never have expected to hear from him: “You still love her?” It was also the only question he asked during our short time together that sounded as if the answer mattered to him.

Why, I’d never know.

“Yes. She’s my biggest regret. Letting her go, that is.”

“Then why did you?”

“I didn’t have much of a say in the matter.”

He nodded, ran a finger over the cheap faux-gold frame, and I knew I’d lost whatever spark of interest had flared in him. “You have any war stories?”

“No, I never fought in any wars. Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Have any war stories.”

He jammed his hands into his pockets. “Dude . . . I’m in high school.”

“Isn’t that a type of battlefield?”

Shrug. "Whatever."

*Outcast, I thought. Probably slouches in the corners at school trying to avoid trouble, rock music blasting in his ears, then goes home and does the same there, avoids life as much as possible. Hides in his shell.*

I felt sorry for him until I realized my life wasn't a whole lot different. Both of us were in cages of different design, but cages all the same.

"How come you've only got one picture?"

"I have more. I keep them under the bed. Would you like to see them?" Only after the words were out of my mouth did I realize how creepy they sounded. I might as well have propositioned the poor kid. *Hey boy, want some candy?* Inwardly, I groaned.

"Nah. Some other time."

"We don't have to talk, y'know," I told him. "You can just tell your teacher we did."

"Suits me," he said without hesitation, and produced from his coat pocket a pair of earphones so small I wondered if he'd ever had to reel them out of his inner ear. A small white rectangle with silver buttons followed and he jabbed at it with a nicotine-stained forefinger. The earphones began to hiss.

It felt wrong not to say something else, for the boy looked lost, crumpled up inside himself, desperate perhaps, the true emotion in his eyes obscured by the steam from the anger at the core of him. Maybe I should have been firm instead of grandfatherly. Maybe I should have told him to sit up straight and tell me what his problem was, to

have some respect for his elders. Maybe that's what he was missing in his life, someone who looked like they gave enough of a damn to listen to what he had to say. But by the time enlightenment chased away the fog in my brain, Henner had already plugged his ears and thumbed up the volume on his odd-looking player.

"Later, man," he said as he stood up and headed for the door, the angry wasp sound of the music trailing behind him.

"What will happen then?" I murmured as he stepped out into the hall, into the river of students and moved upstream against the current.

I wondered how long it would take for him to erase me and my sad little room with its single picture from his mind.

**T**here was a headcount in the hall sometime later, a chorus of bored responses, and then the roar of a bus engine signaled the departure of youthful laughter from Spring Grace. I trudged to the lounge, took my usual seat at the small Formica table The Cowboy and I always shared. The chess set was still there, but someone had prematurely ended our game and set up the pieces for a new one.

"Ron," I called to a tall thin man in a chenille robe, who was sitting in a worn armchair and grumbling at the television. "Ron!" His shock of white hair rose above the back of the armchair like stuffing.

He looked over his shoulder, his sil-

ver stubble scratching against the robe, and gaped fish-like at me through bifocal lenses. “*What* for God’s sake?”

“You play chess?”

“What?”

I resisted the urge to scream at him.

“Chess. Do you play it?”

“Like checkers, isn’t it?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then, no,” he said, and turned back to his show. “I don’t.”

No one else present in the lounge did either, and by the time I’d put the question to them all, I didn’t feel much like playing anymore. Besides, when The Cowboy and I had played, it hadn’t really been about the game.

“He could never do clouds.” Doris was sitting by the window, staring out, her eyes like pale gems in the deep pockets of a thief. “They were always dark and crooked, even when the sky was right. Liked to draw the spiders. Made them look like small men crouching in the corners.”

“Sounds like a real talented boy,” I told her, but knew I was talking to myself. Still, it made me curious, as it always did, to know who it was that had ownership of such a prized lot in her brain that not even her strokes could turn it fallow, or salt the earth of recollection. Whoever it was, whether real or fantasy, living or dead, they would not truly die until she did. And for that, I envied them.

Summer tired of its sun and dance routine, and moved on. The leaves

died and the voice of the wind grew hollow, playing discordant music through the eaves of Spring Grace. The sense of isolation deepened. People stayed in their houses, and we in our rooms. A few more of my neighbors passed away. Some in their sleep; some screaming, while people whispered in the hall. Others were ferried away at night in the quiet ambulances and never seen again. I told myself they’d escaped, been granted a stay of execution and were enjoying their freedom somewhere warm, but inside I knew better. Nobody ever leaves this place, though we talk about it all the time. *The door’s right there*, we’d say, *and no one would even notice if we walked straight outta here*. And yet we never do. In times of excitement, that door looks like the door to Heaven. More often, it looks like the opposite.

We don’t know what’s out there anymore, you see. At some point none of us can remember, we stepped off the train and it carried on without us. Years have passed, been stolen while we’ve slept, and beyond our windows the world has changed. The light has changed.

It’s safer here, even if it means we have to endure the ghosts of our pasts, the specters of regret, with nary a distraction to keep us sane. It’s safer here because the future is guaranteed. There are no surprises left for us within these walls. You pass the time. You smile at kindred spirits in the hall. Maybe one weekend you luck out and end up getting your hands on the remote control before anyone else, maybe get to watch a Western or an old MGM musical.



And at night, in bed, you say a small urgent prayer to a God you don't believe in that you'll wake in the morning still in possession of all those things that have made you what you are. That you won't find yourself dazed and drooling in a chair next to Doris Randle, with the needle in your mind stuck in a groove. But most of all, you pray that someone out there still remembers you, still thinks about you every now and then . . . still loves you, because there isn't a dark memory or shard of guilt inside that terrifies you as much as the idea of being forgotten. *Please*, you whisper, knowing tonight might be the night that quiet ambulance comes for you, its brakes squeaking softly as it pulls up to the curb. *Please . . . remember me.*

And as sleep comes, you remember *them*, and all the things you did wrong that led you to this place, this desert island forever threatened by the encroaching tide of time and regret. You weep, and in the morning the cobwebs on your face are larger, denser than before.

**W**e did clean your room, Mr. Ross. I sent one of the orderlies in there yesterday while you were having dinner."

"Then they did a sloppy job."

"Are you feeling all right? You look pale. Maybe I should—"

"I'm fine. I need to use the phone. Please have someone go over my room again."

"Of course."

**H**e didn't mention the last call. I doubted he even remembered it.

"Dad? Great news. I sold a screenplay to Bob Garrison at New Line."

"New Line? What's that, like the fishing channel?"

A chuckle. "It's a Hollywood film company. We're talking *big* time here."

"I see, well congratulations then."

"You don't sound impressed."

My fingers tightened on the phone. I looked over my shoulder and saw Zach Greenburg scowling at me, oxygen mask gripped tightly in one liver-spotted hand. His rheumy eyes radiated impatience. He was no doubt anxious to call his daughter for her bi-weekly lecture. I turned back to the phone.

"It's not that, it's . . . why haven't you been in touch?"

"I tried a few times. No one answered."

It was a lie, a poor one, and it hollowed me out like a Jack o' Lantern. The phone doesn't ring enough in Spring Grace for it to ever go unanswered. But I accepted it because the alternatives were no better. What did I want to hear? *Dad, I forgot. Sorry.* No, I would take the lie. A starving man can't afford to be choosy about the quality of meat he's given. Even if it's Salisbury steak.

"Okay," I said. "Any plans to come see me?"

"Sure, we'll work something out."

"It's been forever."

“It has. Dad, I’ll get up there, I promise. This new deal will mean I’ll have to travel to New York now and then. I can stop in to see you on the way back.”

“That would be nice. You should bring Kathy and Drew along too.”

A sigh. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Is everything all right with you guys?”

“It’s fine. You’ll see us soon, I promise.”

Behind me, Zach shuffled his feet.

“Listen Joey, I have to get going. There’s a queue for the phone forming here.”

“Okay Dad. Thanks for calling. It’s always good to hear from you.”

“You too. Stay in touch, will you? Call anytime. It’s not like I’m busy around here.”

“Will do.”

“Give my love to my grandson.”

“Bye Dad.”

I hung up and as fast as his stiff joints would allow, Zach was in my face, his breath like sour milk, hooked nose inches from mine. “How do you do that?”

I raised my hands, not to placate him, but to remind him there was such a thing as personal space and that he was invading mine. “Do what?”

“Make calls without using money? There a trick to it?”

I looked over my shoulder at the phone, as if the answer to his odd question might be written somewhere there. It was a basic model payphone, silver, with square touchtone buttons. “Col-

lect,” I told him after a moment of thought. “Dial zero first, then the number.”

He considered this, then nodded sharply. “Wish someone had told me that when I first got here. I’ve been stealin’ nickels for six years.” His laugh turned into a coughing fit, then a series of strangled gasps. I waited a moment to be sure he wasn’t going to end up dropping dead right there, then left him, red-faced and wheezing, but well enough to complain about the contaminants “those goddamned witches” were putting in his oxygen. After poking my head into my room to ensure the nurse had made good on her vow to have the cobwebs removed (she had), I stared down at my slippers as they traced the same old route back to the lounge.

*There could be grass under these shoes, I thought, with a faint smile, gravel or macadam. I’m the only thing keeping me here. There are plenty of people out there who I can get to know. People who would think of me as a friend, maybe, or a kindly neighbor. People who’d remember me.* And as I passed the glass doors of the main entrance and ignored the pleasant inquiry from the pretty young nurse at the station, my smile grew.

Elm trees lined the long path from the door to the street. A sharp turn to the right led straight into town. A couple of dozen steps and I could hitch a ride. A couple of steps; a short walk. That was all. Anyone could make it. I could make it.

Abruptly I was assailed by memories

from my youth: of walking barefoot through the grass with my best friend Rusty O' Connor, as oblivious to the mosquitoes as I was to the nurse who spoke to me, as if I'd magically reverted to the age represented in the memory. Fishing poles held by our sides, the backs of our necks reddened by the glaring sun, laughing our fool heads off at silly things as we headed for Myers Pond and the promise of catfish we would never catch. The rumble and scrape of trains beyond the pond; the honk of a jaybird warning its brethren of our approach; the low buzz of dragonflies beating us to the shimmering water . . .

"Mr. Ross?"

A cloud darkened the sun of memory; the color faded, as did the smile it had brought to my face. Out there lay the road, but where did the road lead? Rusty had followed a path in his dotage that had erased him from the earth, never to be seen again, nothing but a cryptic message left behind to let his wife know he wouldn't be coming back. Did he choose the wrong road? Did he stand on a similar threshold, lured by the promise of something better? Of a few more years of adventure?

"Mr. Ross? Is everything all right?"

Did he go somewhere he thought he'd be remembered?

"I'm fine," I said curtly, sensing the nurse moving around the desk toward me.

Outside, beyond the glass that might as well have been an iron gate, the elm trees nodded slightly in the breeze.

They almost seemed to whisper, *Foolish old man. Remember your place.*

I moved on, watching my feet tread nothing but worn tile, just like yesterday, and a thousand days before it.

*Do a trick for me, Joey,* I thought, and felt my throat constrict. *Make me vanish. I'd rather be where you are.*

The man seated at the chess set looked out of place in the lounge. He was dressed like a salesman, from his paisley blazer and yellow shirt, right down to his white socks and worn leather loafers. Beneath a thick head of curly black hair, equally thick eyebrows were knitted in concentration over a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles. His long oddly delicate and perfectly manicured fingers floated above the head of the unsuspecting black queen.

I sat down with an audible sigh, glad to be relieved of my own weight for a while. "Doctor."

He looked up and beamed. "Mr. Ross. How are we this morning?"

"Tired."

As per usual, Ron had commandeered the television and seemed hypnotized by the gymnastic bounce of a female prizewinner's breasts on some game show. I couldn't blame him really. They were far from proportionate, given the woman's slight build.

"Are you still taking your medication?"

I nodded, turning my attention to Doris. She sat in her preferred spot by the window, head tilted as if asleep, but

her eyes were open. She looked more distant than ever. While Ron gaped at his buxom contestant, I found myself watching Doris's chest to be sure she was still breathing.

"She's okay," Doctor Rhodes said.

"Good." I turned to face the board. "Do you play?"

"Not since high school I'm afraid."

"Good enough. It'll still put you leagues above anyone else in here."

He looked at me over the rims of his spectacles. "Except you."

"Except me."

"Wonderful."

I studied the white ranks before me. "The AMA relaxing their dress code?" I nodded pointedly at his atrocious suit.

He smiled and folded his arms. "It's my day off."

"And you're spending it here?"

He shrugged and blew out a breath. "Well, I've been so busy with administrative work lately, I thought it the perfect opportunity to come in and see how people were doing."

I smirked at him and advanced a pawn. "That's very sad, Doc."

"It's my wife," he protested. "She's on one of these low carb diets, which means if I'm to be the supportive spouse I have to eat steamed broccoli and stringy chicken—or something equally flavorless—every night I'm home."

"It has to be better than the meals here."

"The jury's still out on that one."

I chuckled.

"Besides," he continued. "When was

the last chance you and I had to shoot the breeze?"

He copied my move, but I didn't watch it. I was too busy watching him, trying to read his face, but his pleasant expression was an effective shield.

"I hate to disappoint you," I said, moving my bishop into the space the pawn had vacated. "But I very much doubt anything of any consequence has occurred since we last spoke."

Again he copied my move. "Is that so?" He was moving toward a point and his refusal to make it was starting to annoy me, but not nearly as much as the sensation that unseen hands were slowly painting a target on my head.

"I get the feeling you don't agree."

He smiled warmly and flapped a hand at me. "Ah, it's nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

"Well . . ." He looked around the room, his gaze lingering on Doris longer than it had on any of the other occupants, until finally his eyes met mine. "I can't let even the most innocuous of incidents go unquestioned around here, Alfred, you can understand that. The risk is too high to just pass them off as the vagaries of old age."

My fingers had settled on the bishop. Now they released it, unmoved.

Rhodes seemed to be searching for the right words to say what he'd come to say, and I willed him to spit them out. At length, he did.

"Nurse Stanford mentioned some weeks ago that you were shaken up by what happened to Harold Wayne—The Cowboy—is that right?"

"I was." I frowned at him, saw uncertainty flicker across his face. My unease increased. "Why? Does that make me cause for concern? A special case? He was my friend. One of the few I have . . . I *had* in here. Naturally losing him would shake me up, just as it would anyone else." I became aware that my voice had risen above conversational level and I was being needlessly defensive. Ron's chair creaked as he finally looked away from the game show and peered at us. Some of the men at a card table in the corner paused to watch. I dismissed them all with a disgusted wave of my hand and glared at Rhodes. "Why? And why are you looking at me like that?"

He clasped his hands together over the chessboard. "I'm worried about you, and I don't think you're telling me the truth about you taking your pills."

"Of course I am. I said I was, didn't I? What the sudden concern anyway?"

"I'm concerned, Alfred, because The Cowboy died over four years ago."

I stared at him. He stared back, the concern in his eyes maddening. Insulting.

"You *know* that," he said in a low voice as he reached across the table, his sleeve scattering the pieces as he tried to take my hand. I pulled away from him.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because it's the truth. A truth you know, and have known for years. He died in his sleep on Christmas Eve. You were the one who found him,

remember? It was snowing like crazy outside. Worst snowstorm we'd had in decades."

*Cold blue light*, a voice tried to insist but I slammed the door shut on it, just as I intended to slam the door shut on Rhodes and his lies. "Why are you . . . ?" I shook my head. "I won't tolerate this. Not from you, or anyone else. You have no right."

"Alfred, listen . . ."

"No." I rose and winced as a bolt of pain slammed into my right knee. I braced a hand on the chair to steady myself. "I don't know what it is you're trying to accomplish with this madness, but I won't sit here and listen to it. It's one of the few privileges I have left."

I began to hobble toward the door, heard the sound of chair legs scraping against the floor as Rhodes stood.

*Go, Alfred*, I told myself, my arms and legs trembling so bad I was afraid I wouldn't make it to the door, *Go before he tells you the rest. Go before he tells you what happened to—*

I froze.

The room itself seemed to send waves of cold air at me, chilling my back through my shirt while heat blossomed in my chest, stealing my breath. Tears welled in my eyes. Unseen fingers squeezed my throat.

*I will not hear this. I will not.*

The sound of rubber soles slapping against tile and all of a sudden Nurse Stanford was standing in the doorway, blocking my way.

Despite the pain that drilled through me from the top of my skull down into

my chest, I almost laughed, though on some distant level I doubted I had the strength. *It's an intervention.*

"You've been using the phone," Rhodes said, and his voice was close, cautious. "Can I ask who you've been calling?"

"My . . ." My breath burned in my throat. ". . . Son."

"Alfred . . . the box beneath your bed . . ."

"Don't touch it."

"No one has."

"Then . . . how do you know?"

The cheers from the television were muted. The compassion on Nurse Stanford's face made me want to throttle her, but even if I had the guts to attempt such a thing, my arms refused to move. I felt a tear trickle down my cheek.

"How do I know *what*, Alfred?" He moved to stand in front of me, but his shadow was a second too slow in following.

The fluorescent lights covered my eyes with frost as I felt the strength drain from my limbs. *I'm going to fall and they won't catch me*, I thought, pure terror surging up through me from a bottomless pit in my stomach. *I'll bit my head and die right here in this awful room with all these people here staring at—*

My mind buzzed, chased away the pain, the thought, the awareness. I turned, intending to run, driven by one last automatic impulse to flee from these insane people—

—and fell forward, tried to think my arms into action, but they stayed by my

sides. I toppled like the pawns beneath the Doctor's sleeve.

A heart attack, the man in the quiet ambulance told me. *But you'll be fine*, he said.

I know different.

I've lost them all. Their faces only exist now beneath my bed, in the box that has been substituting for memory. Black and white photographs, snapshots, obituaries, and letters from long-silenced voices I have been hearing on the phone.

Doctor Rhodes stopped by in the beginning, to check on me, but as time went by his commitment to the residents at Spring Grace caused his visits to become infrequent. I haven't seen him in almost a month. I have a new doctor now. New nurses, whose faces aren't quite so sharp. I have a new room.

It has no window.

This frightens me. Because there will come a night when the small men crouching in the corners come out, dancing like lunatics, and maybe one of those small men will be wearing white gloves, and his hands will cut the air above a red velvet tablecloth, and he'll do one last magic trick for me. He'll make endless veils of cobwebs fall from the ceiling and they'll land like muslin on my face. Over and over and over again until my breath stops coming and my heart stops beating. He'll hide me as I have hidden him for so long.

But not yet. I am not done yet.

Not tonight.

There is a sullen high school boy out there who still might remember. There is a sour old man with an oxygen mask back at Spring Grace, who is thankful he no longer has to wait in line. There is a drooling woman who speaks in riddles, who has a golden field in her mind

where the people she has known still run.

Maybe I'm there, standing with Rusty, arms held aloft, face raised to the sun.

Maybe they'll remember.

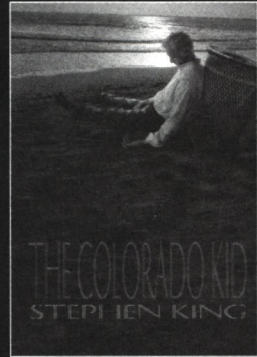
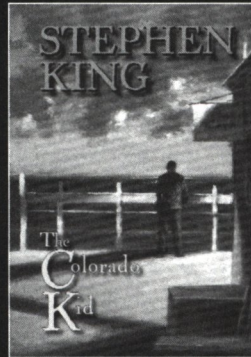
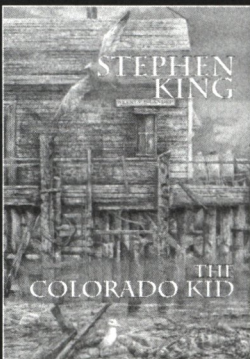
Maybe. ☼

**O**n an island off the coast of Maine, a man is found dead. There's no identification on the body. Only the dogged work of a pair of local newspapermen and a graduate student in forensics turns up any clues, and it's more than a year before the man is identified.

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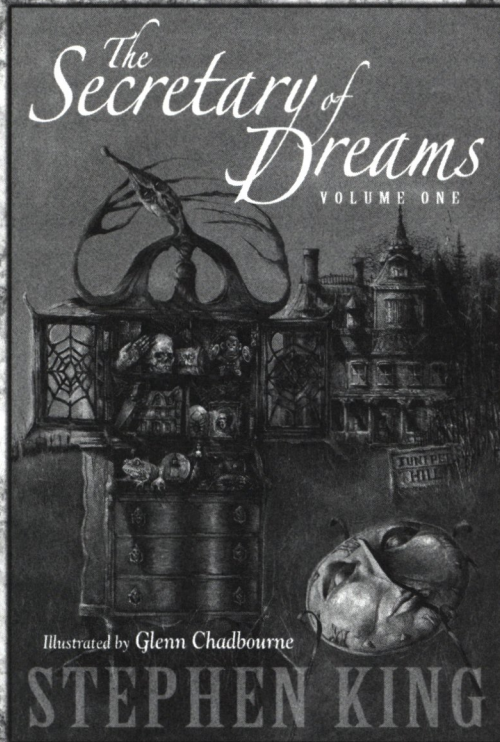
In its first appearance (as a mass market paperback under the Hard Case Crime imprint), this rivetting story about the darkness at the heart of the unknown—and our compulsion to investigate the unexplained—split fans and critics alike . . .

seemingly frustrating as many as it delighted. One thing is certain: there is no middle ground with *The Colorado Kid*. As the author says in his Afterword, "We always want to reach for the lights in the sky, and we always want to know where the Colorado Kid (the world is full of Colorado Kids) came from. Wanting may be better than knowing. I don't say that for sure; I only suggest it."



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Mikal Trimm tells us that “*Waiting For Dawn*” was one of those stories that never really let him know what it was about until it tied itself up in an ending. “And dreaming up *Dawn* is likely as close as I’ll ever get to having an affair,” he says. More of Mikal’s work (recent or forthcoming) appears in *Hub*, *Weird Tales*, *Interfictions*, *Black Gate*, and *Strange Horizons*.

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# Waiting For Dawn

## Mikal Trimm

Alan Southerland lay on the couch, wondering if his boredom might be more appealing if he called it ennui, when the redhead appeared in his living room. She was fabulously naked, utterly without blemish, and, strangely enough, smiling provocatively.

“Hey, tiger,” she said, and the same greeting that, coming from his wife’s mouth, would have sounded ridiculous, even campy, stirred Alan’s fundamentals in a way he never knew they could be influenced. She said tiger with a *g-g-row-l-l-l*.

*I fell asleep on the couch, and I’m dreaming, and I plan to enjoy every minute of it.* “Hey, yourself,” he said, sitting up carefully lest he wake himself with a sudden movement. “And what do I call you, gorgeous?”

The redhead sat next to him, began unbuttoning his shirt, and said, “Anything you want, lover. Whatever,” she said, her hand moving to his zipper, “pops up.”

Nothing came to mind immediately. Luckily, the redhead didn’t press the issue.

Alan heard the key turning in the door, struggled into consciousness with the realization that he had fallen asleep on the couch again, and waited for Janie to come in and ignore him, as she always did.

The redhead snuggled against him, murmuring wonderful nothings against his chest.

*But I’m awake!*, he thought, followed by the famous last words of many a philanderer, *My wife is going to kill me!*

The redhead was awake as well, staring into his eyes. “What’s my name?”

Panic buttons were pressed. Janie’s keys rattled, and he realized he’d forgotten to turn on the porch light. Again. He could hear them clearly, the bells that tolled for his poor mortal soul. He looked into the eyes of his persistent dream-girl, noticing the flecks of gold in the green that seemed to shine at him in the darkness. “She’s *home*. If she sees you here, I’m a dead man!”

“What is my name, Alan?” He could see tears in her eyes now, and the wonderful warmth that lay against him

began to fade, became a fast-dying ember. “*Hurry!*”

Keys jangled, red hair flashed before his eyes, and the clock on the mantel chimed five. “Dawn! Your name is Dawn, and I lo—”

Her fingers brushed his lips, shushing him, and she disentangled her limbs from his, nimbly, sensuously. “I’ll be back, Alan.” She turned and walked away, still naked, still perfect. “Don’t forget to zip up . . .” And she was gone.

Alan barely had time to grab his pants from the floor, squirm into them, and close the fly before his wife finally found the right key and unlocked the door. She gave him a tired glance, fought a yawn, and said, “We have a bed, you know.” She kicked off her sensible nurse shoes, gave him a peck on the cheek, and collapsed on the couch. Alan stood there, his heart doing more things in a single moment than it was designed for.

“Um, sorry I forgot the light, Janie.”

Janie found the remote between the cushions, turned on the TV, and yawned widely. “No big deal. It’s almost dawn.”

*Almost dawn, Alan thought. And Dawn is gone.*

He slept dreamlessly for two hours, until the alarm in his bedroom slapped him awake for work.

**I** *should be sleepy.* The thought stayed with him all morning as he gathered information about the various candi-

dates running for City Council. He whistled obliviously as he typed up the journalistic excrement—sometimes referred to as “copy” by those newer to the game—needed for the “up-close and personal” article on the upcoming elections. He’d been working Metro and State for the last ten years, and he *still* found local politics as boring as sorting navel lint by texture.

Serge Walsh from Lifestyles walked by, paused. “Hey, seems like somebody *got* some last night!”

Alan looked up from his work, blinking in confusion. “What?”

“You musta got lucky, pal. You’re whistling all kinds of Dixie over there.”

“I *never* whistle.”

“Okay, then you’d better see a doctor about that hole in your windpipe, my man. Can’t be healthy to be exhaling ‘She’s A Lady’ through your trachea.”

“Was I *really* whistling?”

“You bet. Never figured you for a Tom Jones kind of guy, either.” Serge winked and walked away, humming the song to himself.

Alan sat back in his chair, stunned. *I’m happy. At work! I’m even whistling! What the hell is wrong with me?*

He’d worked at the *Sentinel* for eighteen years. For the first two years he knew he’d go on to be a novelist. Sure. For the next three years he thought he’d be an investigative reporter. Yeah, right. And for the remaining thirteen years, he’d shuffled from one department to another, writing every type of drivel imaginable. He could only fall lower by writing fluff

pieces for the Society pages or, worse, getting stuck at the Obituary desk.

Yet today he was *happy*. Because of a *dream*. And that's all it was, that's all, that's *really* all . . .

His phone buzzed. Line three, reserved for personal calls or anything not relating to the Business of News. Janie never called him at work. Hell, *no* one called him at work. He pressed the button and picked up the handset, wondering who was going to try to sell him what.

"Hey, tiger."

Alan almost slammed the phone back in its cradle. *Oh, God, I've lost my mind. I knew this job would get to me sooner or later.* Instead he whispered, "Dawn?"

"You remembered!" For some reason, the voice on the other end of the line sounded closer, stronger. "Sorry to bother you at work, love, but I needed to know what you want for dinner. I just can't *wait* to cook for you!"

Alan's mind spat forth a dozen questions at once. *Where's Janie? Is she still sleeping? What if she wakes up and sees you? How can you cook dinner if you don't freaking exist?* His mouth seemed unable to process a single thought into intelligible speech, though. "Wha-, whe-, wh-, um . . ."

"That's okay, then, if you don't have a favorite. I was just out window shopping, trying to get some *ideas*," and her voice dipped in and out of sauciness with the word, "and I thought how wonderful it would be to cook something special for you, now that we're lovers."

*Lovers.* Alan forgot to breathe for a moment, and even his heart wondered what its next move should be. He felt a tingling sensation in his hand and realized that he'd clutched the phone hard enough to cut off blood flow. "Uuhhh . . ."

"Don't worry, darling." Dawn's voice was playful, husky, innocent and sexual, all at once. "I'll just *surprise* you." The line clicked, and Alan remembered the basics of air intake. His heart lurched, then settled into something approaching a normal rhythm.

*Surprise, surprise,* he thought. *Your girlfriend is making dinner.* He heard the buzz of a disconnected line, slowly placed the receiver back in its cradle, and tried his best to decide whether he should laugh or cry. Was there a pleasant side to insanity?

Eventually, he began whistling.

The first thing Alan saw as he approached the door of his house was a note taped there. Janie's handiwork, of course—she was a firm believer in note-writing. She used to leave her missives scattered across the house, dropped wherever she happened to be at the time she wrote them, but after Alan had missed seeing so many of them—even though they were in *obvious* places, she'd griped, like the kitchen table, or her makeup kit, or once in the refrigerator, not on it, *in* it—she'd taken the step of taping them to the front door, just to make sure he'd see them. Even if she happened to be *home* at the time.

He peeled the note from the door, noticing once again the layers of glue left behind on the wood from countless messages, and read, *Forgot to tell you last nite, changed shifts again, Bella's out on maternity leave so they needed a nurse for mids, I took it, knew you wouldn't mind, ta! And leave the light on this time, yes? J.*

Typical. Janie always seemed to know what would bother him and what wouldn't, and she was invariably wrong. When they'd first married, her tendency to make decisions for the both of them led to some great times, kept the marriage moving along with a nice undercurrent of the unknown. After a few years, though, Alan realized that Janie wasn't being impulsive—she was merely self-centered. By that time, Alan had given in to her whims too often, and any attempt to reverse the trend led to loud, pointless arguments. It was easier to nod and say *yes, dear* than to demand equal footing in the marriage.

And now she would be working the one shift that virtually guaranteed they'd rarely see each other. She'd sleep while he worked, he'd sleep while she worked, and they might occasionally glimpse each other in passing, both of them rubbing bleary eyes in case they'd spotted a ghost. *Nice thinking, Janie. Just wonderful.*

He opened the door to the rich aroma of something heavenly in the oven, and all thoughts of Janie ceased as Dawn's voice sang out, "I'm in the kitchen, dear!"

Alan forced himself to walk to the kitchen, rather than running headlong

in a mad, horny dash. Dawn was standing with her back toward him, opening the oven door, and he almost guffawed when he saw her costume. She wore that most glaring of clichés, the French Maid's Outfit, complete with high heels and garters. The only reason she wasn't carrying a feather duster, he supposed, was that she needed both hands to open the oven and remove the vittles.

Alan's internal cricket chirped away with both legs. *How shallow can you get, pal? What are you, some Neanderthal that gets all riled up when he sees a hot babe in a skimpy outfit? Please!*

Then Dawn bent over, and the garters went all the way up to *there*, and *there* was a very nice place indeed, and Alan felt dizzy. He tried not to hyperventilate as he collapsed into one of the dining room chairs, and he let out a gasp when the chair threatened to tip over in protest.

Dawn pulled something large and brown and sizzling from the oven, set it down on the stovetop, slowly pulled off her oddly-erotic oven mitts, and turned around, licking her lips as if the juices from the meat were already threatening to drip down her chin. Sensually, of course.

"The roast needs to rest before we slice it."

Alan shook with more than one hunger. "How long?"

Dawn removed her apron, and then everything else. "At *least* fifteen minutes. Of course," she said as she settled into his lap, "we can always *reheat . . .*"

**V**irility is a heady drug. Alan whistled at work. Often, and with much gusto. The tripe that spilled from his computer was still tripe, but it was *tasty* tripe. He used language freely, sometimes adding words of more than two syllables, just to see how long it would take for his editor to run out of his office and remind Alan, once again, of the average reading level the newspaper was shooting for.

Once, when he thought no one was looking, he even spun in his computer chair, trying to test the limits of its endurance.

“Okay, who is she?”

Serge’s voice wafted to him in stereo until he grabbed his desk and stopped the spin. Alan swallowed his joy like bubble gum. “Who is *who*?”

Serge leaned over and grabbed the arms of Alan’s chair, and Alan could almost imagine a snake’s tongue slipping between his friend’s lips. “Alan, Al, buddy, talk to me. I’ve known you too long, my man.” Serge placed his hands on Alan’s cheeks, spun around, and parked himself in Alan’s lap. “Sweetie, baby, who’s the girl?”

Alan refused to panic. He grabbed Serge’s cheeks in return, gave them a pinch. “Serge, I’m not fooling around. I’ve been married to the same woman since I bought the ring. *You* have alimony payments, not me. I’m just a boring, married guy who’s happy. Alright?”

Serge slipped off Alan’s lap, brushed off the seat of his pants as if trying to rid himself of happy germs, and grimaced

theatrically. “Don’t play me. You’re a liar, bud. I’ve *met* Janie!” Serge walked away, lost in high drama.

Alan waited for Serge to turn the corner. He counted to one hundred, then back down again. He dabbed the sweat on his forehead with a tissue, surprised that there wasn’t more. *Good lord, what if Serge spreads the rumor that I’m fooling around? What if people believe him? What if Janie hears?*

*Ridiculous. You’re a poorly-paid, sad excuse for a journalist, with a spreading paunch and a receding hairline. No one would believe the story, anyway. Who’d want to have an affair with you?*

Then panic set in.

**T**here’s something very wrong about this. I’m missing something important here. Alan sat in his car in the newspaper’s parking lot, compulsively shaking the keys on his keyring and then clutching them tightly. *Jingle, clank. Jingle, clank.* His mind followed the rhythm: *Jingle . . .* Maybe she’s from outer space, and—*clank!* Yeah, right, Space Babes Need Earth Men Now! Too Buck Rogers. *Jingle . . .* She might be a spy working for a rival newspaper—*clank!* Who wants what? My hard-nosed instincts for political sabotage? Keep trying, Woodward. *Jingle . . .* Maybe (and here a long-repressed twinge of Protestant guilt began chewing the scenery), maybe she’s a demon. Maybe she’s trying to seduce me—okay, *has* seduced me—and now she’s waiting to take my immortal soul as the price . . .

*Clank!*

Alan shook his head, found his ignition key, and started the car. *Too late*, he thought as he drove toward his damnation.

When he finally made it home, two hours late, he realized that Dawn didn't know where he'd been. She'd be mad, of course. Women were like that. *Janie* was like that, in spades. He stood at his front door, afraid to open it, afraid that he might have hurt Dawn. He couldn't turn the knob. He didn't want to face the tears, or the anger, or the worst thing, the worst possible eventuality, he didn't want to come home to an empty house.

The door opened. "Hard day?" Dawn asked, and her voice was gentle, her eyes caring, her arms reaching out to him. He half-walked, half-fell into her embrace, and she held him for an eternity as insects migrated from the outer darkness to the inner light with great abandon.

Then Dawn led him inside, sat him on the couch, and held him even longer, stroking his hair as he let his doubts and fears and stupidities rush out in a long, incoherent monologue. Later, she gave him a nice massage and put him to bed. That was nice.

As he was falling asleep, he realized groggily that they hadn't even had sex. And that, he decided, was nice too.

**A**fter two weeks, Alan realized that he viewed time differently. Before Dawn, his days were brackets to the

drudgery they encapsulated. Wake up, crapcrapcrapcrap, go to sleep. Repeat process, ad infinitum. Since Dawn had appeared, though, time flowed more harmoniously; each moment with her stretched out to grasp the next, a daisy-chain of tranquility.

Then he and Janie would have coinciding days off, and the whole lovely cycle would grind to a dry-humping halt.

He'd turn over in bed in the morning, eyes closed, wanting to trace Dawn's shoulders from memory, but instead Janie would be lying there in her threadbare cotton nightgown, saying, "Leave off. I'm asleep, I'm tired, and I'm not in the mood." *Gaah!* Not the sort of shock Alan enjoyed upon waking.

The Janie-days, even though they happened infrequently, would drag their feet and slouch about the place like zombies. There was little communication between the two of them, merely grunts and gestures indicating which channel to watch on TV, or whose turn it was to fill the dishwasher. And the worst part of it all, Alan decided, was that, even though these days seemed like fresh tortures invented by a cruel and mocking Fate, nothing had changed between Janie and himself. His marriage had been like this for as long as he could remember.

*This is life without Dawn*, Alan repeated to himself mantra-like as he and Janie went through the empty motions of married life. *This is life in the dark.*

On the Janie-days, he could hardly wait to go back to sleep.

**D**awn was curled up on the couch reading something when Alan came home the next night. She wore a flannel nightgown that, while not designed to inflame the desires of men, still seemed undeniably *cute* on her, especially in the way that she'd tugged it down over her raised knees, leaving only the tips of her toes peeking out. *She is an innocent*, he thought, and he realized how ridiculous the idea was, considering the long bouts of frenzied sex they'd enjoyed—and yet, there she was, looking like nothing so much as a small girl reading her favorite bedtime story. Utter innocence. Alan paused in the doorway, another miserably drab day at work forgotten. He stood and watched her, afraid to breathe too loudly on the off-chance that it might break her concentration.

*She is the most amazing woman I've ever met, or will ever meet. And she can't possibly exist. I'm in love with a chimera.*

A breeze wafted through the open door and scattered the pile of paper next to her. Dawn looked up, surprised, and Alan shut the door guiltily, ashamed of having disturbed her. But . . . loose papers? What was she reading?

"Alan." Dawn rearranged the wind-blown pages carefully as she spoke, as if they were precious to her and she was wary of an errant crease. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was time for you

to come home, darling. I was reading your novel, and I guess I lost track of things." She gave him a crooked smile and stacked the pages neatly beside her.

"My *what*?"

"Oh, I hope you don't mind. I know it's not finished, but I couldn't resist peeking, and once I started it . . ."

Alan heard her words, but they tumbled through his mind like drunken acrobats. *My novel*? He vaguely remembered those first years of his marriage, when Janie had been in nursing school and he'd had the luxury of taking a few hours each day to play at being a writer. Just a knee-jerk reaction, one of those things that journalists and ad-men do to deny the petty reality they've found themselves in. That's all it was, right?

" . . . and I love the character of Daela, she's wonderful, you've made her so fully formed . . ."

And he remembered offering Janie the first few chapters one night, shyly, a child offering a parent a homemade gift, hoping for approval. Janie had read a few pages, her expression becoming duller by the minute, and then thrust the manuscript back at him. "God, Alan," she'd said in a voice more suited to a critic than a wife, "you're writing *fantasy*? This is, what, for kids, right? I thought journalists all wrote crime dramas or mysteries or something." When he took the chapters from her she'd shaken her fingers as if trying to flick off specks of dung.

" . . . but I should've known it would

be brilliant, love—you have an *amazing* imagination.”

Dawn talked, and Alan kept spiraling through the past. He remembered the night of drinking after Janie’s casual evisceration of his novel-to-be, remembered the long hours of depression as he did his best to finish a fifth of Jack on an empty stomach, remembered Janie shouting from the bedroom for him to please quit making those sobbing noises, she was trying to damn well sleep . . .

And he remembered, in a final all-is-hell moment, taking the pages of his supposed masterwork and feeding them into the fireplace, one by one. He knew it was a clichéd gesture as he did it, but in his mental state it became *symbolism*, dammit, especially since it was July and he’d had to turn on the gas fire-starter to do the deed in the first place. He was soaked with sweat and covered in ash by the time he was finished, but he could still picture the pages curling into oblivion one by one as he giggled drunkenly, oblivious to Janie’s angry snorts from the bedroom.

And now Dawn was there reading his attempted novel, his *burned* novel, and he could only ask, “Where did you get that?” Not mad, not curious, really, just resigned.

“I found it.” Dawn’s voice trembled. “Did I do something wrong?”

He asked again, in a voice devoid of emotion, “Where did you get that?”

Dawn cried. Some small element in Alan’s brain recorded the moment, its amazement muffled by the greater null-

state of Alan’s feelings. “I *found* it, Alan. Here. Where I live.”

The element within him begged him to stop, but the shell that Alan had become asked the next question. “Where do you *live*, Dawn?”

“Where do I *live*?” Dawn’s voice escalated into the tragic, but it was never shrill—she was not a harpy, but a fallen angel, praying for redemption. “I live where you *let* me live, Alan! I exist in the spaces between the moments of your real life. I sleep with your memories and dreams, and I sift through them when you’re not with me. I watch the daydreams of the bright-eyed boy you once were like classic movies, and I dig through your failed hopes, looking for the gems they held. Where do I *live*, love?” Dawn reached out to him, and he flinched as a tiny, drowning voice within him raged uselessly against the iceberg he’d become. *You’re an emotional guy! You cry at Disney movies, remember that?* No, I remember apathy and ashes. I remember a young, stupid boy with visions of grandeur.

Dawn drew back. She sagged before him, and Alan saw it happen, a physical change. He saw the streaks on her face from her tears, saw the disheveled hair and the dark circles under her eyes, and as one part of his brain remarked upon the fact that she seemed to gain emotion as he lost it, another frantic voice kept screaming *you’ve hurt her, you idiot, you’ve hurt her!*

And he asked again, in the same dull cadences, “Where do you *live*?”



Dawn collapsed. She sank slowly to the floor, her head coming to rest against the carpet, her hair spilling down to cover her features, a scarlet shroud. "I don't live, Alan. I merely exist. I can't live until you let me." And as Alan watched, still numb, she fell slowly from his view, a woman sinking in quicksand with no rescuer in sight.

The disconnected voice in Alan's head spoke again, but without the intensity of panic it had taken on earlier. *So, you could believe in Dawn, but a few sheets of paper sent you over the edge? That's where you decided to invoke your suspension of disbelief? Fool.*

Alan felt emotion rushing back to him, as if Dawn's disappearance had somehow freed him to feel again. He crumbled to the floor wishing he, too, could sink slowly into oblivion. But as his muscles finally protested at his awkward position, he knew that he was denied that luxury.

The pages Dawn had been reading still lay on the couch, undisturbed. He half-expected them to be blank, but as he gathered them together, he saw the faded ink of the cheap typewriter he'd written them on, so many years ago. *I should burn them again. I should get rid of all this nonsense and just live out my life: no surprises, no dream-girls, no more fantasies, dammit!* He was ready to do it, too, ready to destroy everything that should never have existed in his world in the first place.

Until he noticed, hanging down from between the pages like a bookmark, one fine red hair, shining like

copper wire in the muted light of the living room.

He collapsed on the couch, pulled the hair from between the pages, braided it gently through the fingers of his left hand, and began reading.

He lay asleep on the couch when Janie came home, and she woke him by nudging him none-too-gently with her foot and saying, "You forgot the turn the porch light on again. And quit sleeping on the couch—it's like you're a hobo or something."

Coming out of sleep, Alan muttered, "I was good."

"Sure, Alan, you were *great*, whatever. Go to bed."

He sat up, fully awake and glaring at her, his eyes shining wetly in the light. "No. I was *good*."

Janie shrugged, walked into the bedroom, and began undressing. She didn't notice Alan as he pulled a small suitcase from beside the couch, grabbed the rubber-band bound pages of his manuscript from the floor, and walked out the door.

Before he left, though, he turned and taped a goodbye note to the front door. For old times' sake.

The traffic on I-10 was still humming along, even at midnight, but Alan couldn't hear anything above the hefty metallic clatter of the ancient Smith-Corona he'd bought at a grungy little pawnshop outside of town. He'd never

been a particularly fast typist, but the meaty clunks as the letters branded themselves onto the paper echoed through the cheap motel room, and it sounded like God's own secretary at work, laying down the Law.

He'd wandered the streets for a while after leaving home, trying to make some sort of plan, decide his course of action. He'd finally realized how pointless it was to map anything out—he was well beyond being reasonable at this point. He thought about formally quitting his job, going to work physically and giving some notice, but he knew they'd figure it out when he didn't show up, and he certainly wasn't irreplaceable. Finally, he'd sat at a bus stop until the banks opened and cleared out his account, which amounted to a little over two thousand dollars. Janie had always insisted on separate checking accounts, since she made more money than he did and so deserved to decide what she wanted to do with the surplus, as she'd explained to him after he'd paid her way through nursing school, but now he was happy about the arrangement. *I've stolen nothing. I take only what I've earned.* A suitcase of clothes and toiletries, a half-finished manuscript, and one fine red hair. . .

The hair was knotted on the return

arm of the typewriter in such a way that, every time he released the carriage and started the next line of type, his hand brushed against it. He was sure it was his imagination, but he thought he felt a tiny spark whenever he made contact. *You have an amazing imagination,* she'd said, and he heard her voice now, slipping in between the echoes of the typewriter keys in this dingy room, whispering across the wrinkled bed sheets, promising, promising. . .

*I can't live until you let me,* she'd said.

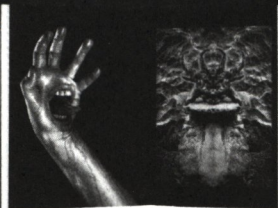
He typed, ignoring the cramps in his fingers, pausing to eat only when the pains in his stomach doubled him over the keyboard, sleeping only when sheer exhaustion drove him to the bed. None of it mattered. He was waiting for Dawn, and he knew she'd come, just as sure as he knew he could feel the spark of her each time he touched the indelible realness of that strand of hair. *I'm letting you live, my love. It's all yours, all I have. There are no spaces any more, just my life, all of it, real or not. It's here, waiting for you.*

She'd come back tonight, or perhaps tomorrow, and if it took longer than that, so be it, but he'd be with her again, forever. It was *inevitable*.

She'd want to see how the story ended. ☒



# got Cthulhu?



## A Lovecraft Retrospective

Four years in production, and featuring over four dozen artists, many with 10 to 20 works, *A Lovecraft Retrospective: Artists Inspired by H.P.L.* will be a landmark volume in horror and fantasy publishing. With a release date of October 2007, the anticipation for this volume is building up everywhere, as it promises to be the most important Lovecraft book in the field since *The Outsider and Others* was published by

Arkham House nearly 70 years ago. This retrospective features some of the greatest work by nearly all of the field's best artists, including J.K. Potter, H.R. Giger, Mike Mignola, Bob Eggleton, Tim White, John Coulthart, Lee Brown Coye, Virgil Finlay, Harry O. Morris, John Holmes, Rowena Morrill, Raymond Bayless, Ian Miller, Michael Whelan, John Jude Palencar, and many others.

## Three States

The book is available in three states: a deluxe edition of 50 signed and numbered copies, with extras; a cloth traycase edition, limited to 300 numbered copies; and a cloth slipcase edition. Pre-orders are necessary for the signed and numbered editions. See the back page of this issue of *Postscripts* for more information, or go to [www.centipedeprpress.com](http://www.centipedeprpress.com) for more information.

*“Servant of the Stone”, says Dave Hoing, “is one of a series of stories based on but not part of my perpetual fantasy trilogy-in-progress called The Myth of Bones. Each story is intended to illustrate some aspect of the people, settings, and situations from The Myth of Bones, but also to stand alone and explore themes not necessarily present in the novels. This story takes place some 60 years after Bones ends (or would end, if I’d ever finish the damn thing). It takes on some of my favorite themes: the nature of memory, loss, grief, and regret, and asks the bigger question, Even with the best of intentions and purest of hearts, does one person, or group of people, have the right to force changes on a ‘lesser’ culture?”*

*Dave has published both literary and genre fiction, the latter appearing in such venues as F&SF, Realms of Fantasy, Century, and Interzone. “In real life I work at a university library. I have a wife (Joni), two stepchildren (Jon and Jovan), and a cat (Cat).*

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# Servant of the Stone

## Dave Hoing

**T**he storm lashes the western face of the Retreat just as I remember, when I *can* remember . . . I watch from my coach as wind and rain pummel the stone relentlessly. Torrents of water course down the walls of the citadel, cutting into the cracks and crumbling the grout. I huddle in my blankets and wonder at the wisdom of this journey, at the audacity of seeking an audience with Ket himself.

The horses, wet and miserable, plod on in resigned silence. Not even thunder and lightning can startle them out of their lethargy. The sooner we get there, the sooner they can be stabled, fed, and brushed, yet they neither hurry nor balk.

My name is Ashka, and I’m eighty-four, a respectable, if inconvenient, age for a Drun . . . for anyone. As a youth I lived in this Retreat for a time. Now, as then, the tempests coastal people fear most are the terrible swirling monsters

that build over the tropical waters of the Danriana Sea and churn westward on invisible lines of force. Storm surges and impossibly strong gales flatten every tree and wooden structure in their path, often taking many lives. Luckily these events are rare and short-lived and do little damage to the reinforced strength of structures like the Retreat. I’ve never been much of a mason, but even I know that the true enemy of stone is the common shower. Year after year, decade after decade, rain clouds sweep south and east off the plains of Bylar and batter the structure, wearing it away grain by grain. The stones of man can match strength with strength against the big storms but can’t hold against the inexorable nibbling of rain.

This is a simple thunderstorm, but I’m cold, and each drop on the roof spidercracks through my bones and my increasingly suspect mind.

When I was here before, a boy just past the Fever, I came via an accident at sea, washing ashore on a beach already stacked high with the burnt corpses of my fellow Drun sailors. I was taken in by two Lyhians, Tiran and Saul, men who had no legal obligation to help me. The way society was then, they should have let me die. Instead, at some risk to themselves, they gave me shelter and, for a few years, a home. It was these men who had honored my dead companions by performing funeral rites and committing their bodies to the pyre. I have no true memory of any of this; only the memory of being told so often that the telling *became* the memory.

I travel by land now, in a fine coach, through a place once divided by hate and now, sadly, united in it.

My Lyhian driver pulls around to the Eastern Face of the Retreat, stopping the coach outside the stables. From the bluffs upon which the Retreat was built we see the Danriana Sea stretching out beneath us, its black waves pushed to frothy gray by the wind. The sky is the same shade of gray, ragged and roiling. The two great Elements of air and water merge behind a curtain of rain and spray, the one indistinguishable from the other, forming a featureless slate that seems to mark the edge of the world.

Finally, perhaps smelling hay or sensing warmth, the horses perk up, stomping their hooves and whinnying in anticipation.

No one emerges to greet us, although I am expected.

“No stable hands?” the driver complains. I don’t recall the man’s name.

“I don’t know,” I say. “There used to be a caretaker and a mason, but surely they’ve long since gone to the pyre. Still, there ought to be someone . . .”

“I didn’t sign up to muck the damn horses,” he says.

“I’ll pay you extra, I’ll . . .” but I can’t finish, as I lose my train of thought and then my awareness, and when I’m myself again I’m inside the stable with no recollection of how I got here. I’m wrapped in a blanket, shivering. The driver hands me a cup of grol, a villainous brew that nevertheless warms the gullet like nothing else.

“I hate it when you do that,” he says.

“I’m . . . sorry,” I say. Thunder echoes inside the stable, inside my head, a cacophony, yet I hear the horses’ teeth gently grind each mouthful of hay. I hear the driver’s words, each syllable a distinct unit of sound. The spells are becoming more frequent. “There’s a man who may be able to help me, a healer . . . You know him. Ket. This is where he lives now.”

“You mean the Cresyn? *The Cresyn?*” The driver spits. “Nobody’s seen him in years. This is old abandoned *Lybian* property. What makes you think that half-breed bastard would come here, of all places?”

Sixty years after the war, we should be past such Lyhian/Drun nonsense. Wasn’t that the *reason* for the fighting?

Ket's laws made us equal. But laws can't dictate human hearts, even with six decades to adapt, and so the residue of hate lingers. "He *did* come here, he's here now . . ."

"He's dead. That's why he turned the government over to his sons. He knew he was dying. I *hope* he's dead. Some of us don't appreciate what he did."

"Watch yourself, sir. I am a Drun, and I'm paying you. You're too young to remember things any other way."

"If he's here, where's his damn stable hands? Where's his servants?"

"I don't know. But Ket is *not* dead. I wrote to him, and he answered."

The driver squints skeptically. "When?"

"I don't remember, not long ago."

"Even if he is alive, why would he agree to see you?"

"I'll ask him."

The driver laughs, a hideous, mocking sound. "What? You think he can cure you? *Again*? This isn't the Fever you got, it's—"

"Old age," I say, and my thoughts blur. Simple old age . . .

**S**uddenly I'm standing at the stable's window, the blanket cast aside, the cup of grog overturned in the hay. The storm is beginning to abate over the Danriana. I see holes in the gray, patches of blue, flashes of sun. The holes swell and close, swell and close as wind carries the clouds eastward. My mind is like that, I think, a swirl of gray in which a hole develops and grows for a while, allowing me a glimpse of light:

not an obstructing gap but an illuminating opening. But even during relatively long periods of clarity, when the hole has expanded to the limits of my consciousness, even then the gray darkens the edges, an insidious mass of *nothing* that threatens to spiral shut on thought and memory. And it always does, it always does. There'll come a day, sooner rather than later, when the hole will close for the last time.

Unless . . . unless.

**C**lick, shhhh, slap, very softly, click, shhhh, slap.

I'm reclining in a luxurious chair in the Hall of Masters, a cavernous room, meticulously kept, no sign of dust or clutter. *Somebody* has been caring for this old place. A fire is burning in the hearth, but does little to dispel the gloom and cold. There used to be paintings adorning the walls, the faces of former occupants, all gone now, leaving vast stretches of empty plaster beneath the vaulted ceiling. Only the tiny marks where hooks once screwed into the walls remain as evidence that the paintings were ever here at all.

I'm alone, but won't be for long.

Click, shhhh, slap, click, shhhh, slap. Louder now. There's nothing wrong with my hearing. Someone with an unusual gait is approaching the Hall of Masters along the stone corridor. The door creaks open and a figure with a cane shuffles toward me. Click shhhh slap, click shhhh slap, and then he's leaning over me. Apparently I look surprised, because he half-smiles and

says, "Yes, I'm a Drun. You must be Ashka?"

"You're not—"

"No. My name is Clad. I'm his . . . colleague."

"Clad?" I try to hide my astonishment. Clad is as famous in his way as Ket, the constant companion who started the cult that grew up around Ket after the Drun War. He's nothing like I expect, but in legends heroes never age, do they? The war was sixty years ago. The man before me is bent and lame, his cheeks so hollow under his prominent Drun cheekbones that I can almost see the outline of his teeth. The left side of his mouth turns down in a permanent frown.

"We grow old," he says, as if sensing my thoughts. His words are slow and only slightly slurred. "Can you walk? He'll see you now."

I nod. He takes my hand to help me rise, and in that moment of contact I feel a spark, like before the war, before the Change, when the only way Fever-ravaged Drun could regain rational thought was by joining minds. Through some process I've never understood, the physical linking of hands allowed us to snatch scraps and shards of our individual memories and mold them into one thinking being. *Hive mind*, the Lyhians derisively called us when we were in that state. It's true that the Fever made us stupid, but gods help me, I miss that bonding sometimes, the indescribable feeling of total *connection* with other human beings. Most things after the Fever and before the Change are lost in fog, but I'll always remember

linking with my people. At least, I hope I will.

All lost, of course, to the greater good of the Change, when Ket used his power to heal us all and lead us into war and equality.

"You feel it, too" Clad says. He squeezes my hand and grins crookedly. "Still a little of the old magic left, eh? I take it you don't see much of your fellow Drun these days?"

"I've lived in Menza since shortly after the war."

"Among Lyhians."

"It's a harbor town, they're more open to strange and exotic folks," and then I'm lying in a bed in a dark cell and Clad is saying angrily, ". . . no more love you for being a Drun than hate your driver for being a Lyhian. Those kind of feelings have to be earned."

The cramped cell reeks of oil smoke. I stare at the lamplight and shake my head, trying to wedge open the small hole in the gray. "Was I talking?" I say.

Clad's expression softens. "You don't know?"

"I've always wondered what happens while I'm away. I can't remember, I . . ."

He lays a warm towel across my forehead. "Well, you're kind of a weepy, sentimental bastard."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Your driver warned me, but I'm too cranky about my own infirmities to have much patience with others'. Pure selfishness, Ket tells me. Guess that's why he was Savior of the Drun, not me."

I feel my heart surge. "Ket? Did I meet him?"

"In view of your condition, he postponed."

"That's why I've come!"

"Shhh. I know. He asked me to send your driver home. You intrigue him, and he wants you to stay a while. Can you spare the time?"

I'm eighty-four, how much time can I have? "I've got no more commitments . . . that I know of."

Clad turns down the lamp. Its flame shrinks to a point and disappears. "You should sleep," he says, removing the towel from my brow and pulling blankets up over my shoulders.

I close my eyes, let darkness surround me. "It *was* a long journey."

"Two days ago," he says quietly.

*Two days?* My body jerks upright with that realization.

"Relax," he says. He places a friendly hand on my sleeve, but with no skin-to-skin contact, there's no spark of connection. "It's all right."

"It's *not* all right," I say, laying back.

"Sleep," Clad says. "Ket's sons get a thousand letters a week like yours, even though they can't heal. Heartbreaking stuff, dying babies, sick mothers . . . Secretaries read them all and send polite replies offering condolences and best wishes. I don't know what about your letter made them forward it to Ket, or why it moved him so much. After all these years, he's still a mystery."

Someone takes my hand, and power crackles through my body. I open my eyes on a large comfortable bedroom, aglow with sunlight from a win-

dow on the east wall. In all my years in the Retreat, I don't ever remember sleeping in this room. My attention is immediately drawn to a manikin that has been positioned at the window, as if to gaze out over the Danriana Sea. The figure wears a wig of strikingly long hair, mostly gray but streaked with the remnants of brown. I don't know why, but her vigil is compelling, and lonely, and sad.

"Ah, you're back," says a deep male voice. "Human hair is a most remarkable substance, don't you think? Impervious to everything but fire."

I turn my head toward the speaker, but he releases my hand and the power ebbs and the hole closes inward. The room grows dark.

The speaker sighs. "Until the last, she never cut it."

I hear footsteps walking away, a pause, and then, "We *will* talk soon, my friend."

The Fever used to rob Drun of everything that makes a person human. In many ways, it was like what I'm experiencing now, except that it struck just after puberty, and required hours, not years, to strip us of our minds.

The Change, when it came, surged like a silent storm, radiating outward on its own lines of force. I was here, in the Retreat, not yet twenty-five. I didn't know how Ket did it, nor, then, even that the epicenter *was* Ket, I just knew I felt something wash over and through me, *rearranging* me from within. In a matter of days I was speaking and think-



ing and remembering my life before the Fever. Ket's *will* called to me, to all Drun, to join him in his cause. I ached to go, but Tiran and Saul begged me not to. They had grown to love me, and so I stayed. The Drun War flowed around the Retreat without ever touching us, without making the least impression on our lives.

It wasn't until after Ket had won the war that the real changes started.

Eventually I did leave the Retreat. I never returned to the sea or to my home in Drunland. Instead, I tested the new equality laws by settling in Menza. It was years before I saw another Drun, although I knew small colonies of them had popped up throughout the city. I discovered I had a head for the shipping business—I had, after all, been a sailor—and after a decade of hard work and struggling against prejudice, I made a nice living as an exporter and importer.

I was proud of my accomplishments among Lyhians and . . . oh, *damn*, it is good to be able to remember! The hole is wide today, with almost no blurring at the edges. I stroll down the main corridor of the Retreat, relishing the coolness of the stone on my bare feet, the stillness, the moist smell and feel of empty halls. In my youth, there were only the three of us occupying this vast citadel. Again in old age, there are apparently three: Ket, Clad, and me. There must also be servants who clean the rooms and prepare our meals, but I haven't seen them. That's all right, because for some reason the symmetry of three pleases me.

I pause at a window to gaze down the

bluffs and over the sea. The sun bur-nishes the sandy beach to a blazing white. A man is out there, wading up to his knees in the foam. If I've met Ket during my time here, I have no memory of it, other than the room and the manikin and the hair. Even then I didn't get the chance to look at him. The man in the water is obviously not Clad, but I suppose he could be a servant. He's too far away to see clearly. Ket is a Cresyn, equal parts Lyhian and Drun. As a young boy before the Fever, I'd seen Cresyns in harbor towns around the archipelago. The ones I knew tended to be frail, sickly creatures, similar to Drun in facial features but utterly lacking our robust bodies. Nor did they possess the supposed Lyhian's lean "gracefulness." They were despised by both races alike. Luckily, we said, the wretched things were barren, all of them. They were the product of illegal Lyhian/Drun couplings, but could not reproduce themselves.

Could not, that is, until Ket came along, and he was something else again.

Click, shhhh, slap. Click, shhhh, slap.

"Hello, Clad," I say without turning.

He rests a hand on my shoulder. "He's out there every day," he tells me, "wind, rain, or sun."

"Why?"

"Tashi loved the water."

*Tashi* . . . I hadn't even thought about her. Everyone knows the story of the whore who became queen. "Where is she?"

"Hmmp," Clad snorts. "Don't they print the news in Menza anymore?"

“So, in the end, you’re just another supplicant looking to regain your youth.”

Up close, there’s nothing remarkable about Ket. Although younger than me, his face still shows its age. He was just a boy when he found his power, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. Now the lines have accumulated, at the corners of his eyes, his brow. His cheeks are sallow, and as with most old people, his nose and ears have grown disproportionately large. He wears his hair cropped short, white stubble against his skull, and maintains the same scraggly beard we saw in the portraits of him in his prime. His eyes may once have been green, but now the faint blue circle of early cataracts veils both pupils.

We’re in the great dining hall, seated at a table meant to serve dozens, a table I doubt has been used since before the time of Tiran and Saul. Still, its wood is so polished it appears almost wet, and it reflects the full moon that shines in through the east window. Ket and Clad are on one side of the table, I on the other, as if I’m being interrogated. Which I am, I suppose.

I rise and shuffle to the window. How I love the moon over the Danriana, I always have. I lean on the sill, and every disk in my spine pops. “If I may be so bold, Sir,” I say, turning to face him, “it is not my youth I wish to regain, it is the *memories* of my youth.”

“You seem lucid enough now,” Ket says.

“I come and go. More of the one than the other these days, I’m afraid.” I’m in awe that I can speak this easily,

this freely, with the former ruler of the known world.

“What’s the point?” Clad says. “No disrespect, Ashka, but you’re eighty-four. How much longer do you have?”

“True.” The problem is not that my condition is snatching pieces of time from me now. That I can accept, for what about yesterday or today is worth remembering? But each episode steals away a little more of everything that went before, too. The hole opens and I come back, but diminished. And in the moments, the hours, the days that I’m gone, there is nothing, *nothing*. My mouth may speak, as Clad claims, but that must be some invisible rider on my soul, not me. *I am not present. I can’t remember, I can’t think, I can’t . . . be.* Are we not all the sum of our experiences? “True,” I say again, “but I want to die with my past, not without it, that’s all.”

Ket abruptly slams his fist on the table and spins out of his seat. He storms to the far side of the hall, where he broods for a moment by the fireplace. The flame casts hard shadows that accentuate the lines in his face. “What,” he cries, “is so damned *special* about memories?”

It’s almost as if he means to shame me. Shocked by his outburst, I turn back to the window. A streak of silver undulates across the black waves of the sea, and I know: this is what’s special, *this*. The scene’s superficial beauty, here and now, is made rich and meaningful by memory. It connects two times of my life, anchoring both.

Oh, Ket, how can you ask such a question?

After an uncomfortably long silence, Clad says softly, "Why don't you both sit down?"

We do, and Ket squeezes my hand, sending a thrilling jolt of power through me. "Sorry," he says softly. "I've become bitter."

"I wonder," Clad says to me, "if you truly know what you're asking."

Before I can answer, Ket says, "Have you read the latest scientific papers about inherited characteristics?"

I have no idea what he's talking about. I look at him, then Clad, and shrug.

"Fascinating stuff. Seems you can breed plants and animals to acquire certain traits in the offspring. Farmers have known this for centuries." He sees my expression and shakes his head. "No, I'm not talking about my mixed parentage, although I suppose I could qualify as a scientific experiment. What do you think, Clad?"

"I think you're a freak of nature."

"What I mean," Ket says, ignoring the jape, "is that everything—plants, animals, and people—have a grid, a . . . pattern inside them that makes them who or what they are. These patterns can be mixed to achieve desired ends, a stronger bull, a hardier wheat, even a robust Cresyn."

"Arrogant ass," Clad says.

"Ungrateful . . . *sidekick*."

"Gentlemen," I say.

Both men smile, and Ket continues. "The pattern is the thing. It contains all of our inherited characteristics.

What I was able to do was to look inside people and recognize those patterns. The Fever was an inherited characteristic in Drun. It was caused by a flaw in the pattern, a flaw that manifested itself when you reached puberty. All I had to do—and don't ask me how, because I don't know—was go in and repair the flaw, like welding links in a chain. But—"

"But," Clad says, "he can't do a thing for flaws that aren't inherited." He pushes

the left corner of his mouth up with his finger. When he releases it, that side of his face droops back into its perpetual frown.

I shift uneasily in my chair. "I don't understand . . ."

"Some diseases—"

"Most," Clad says.

"*Most* diseases are not inherited, not part of the pattern. They're caused by an outside contagion, or a buildup of substances inside the veins, or any one of a thousand other things. I can't touch those."

My stomach suddenly feels queasy. Have I made this journey for nothing? The room seems to grow darker, as if the flame in the hearth has guttered, as if a cloud has passed over the moon. I see the implications of what he's telling me. The Fever was inherited, but my current condition . . .

"What about me?" I say, trying to keep the trembling out of my voice.

"I don't know," Ket says, and his face is creased with private pain.



Clad and I stroll along the Eastern Face of the Retreat. A light shower has moistened the ground. Even with his cane, he doesn't trust the footing on the cobblestone path, so I take his arm. His shirt sleeve prevents the skin-to-skin connection I find so appealing. We find a dry spot that was sheltered by an overhang and sit down to watch the Danriana Sea. Ket has not yet come out for his walk in the water.

"I was his first," Clad says. "The first he ever cured."

"Tell me," I say, although I feel the hole spiraling in.

"We were onboard a ship for what turned out to be quite an adventure. I felt the Fever coming on and asked him to help me prepare. I was so scared, Ashka. But Ket . . . he was *heartbroken*. We'd known each other our whole lives, and he thought, we both thought, that I'd just . . . forget him. It was bad enough for me, facing the loss of my *self*—well, you know, you've been through it—but how much worse for him, seeing me every day and loving me, and knowing that he was no more to me than a rock or a stray breeze. He followed the ritual for the Fever as well as he was able, binding me to a chair to prevent me from lashing out. You should have seen his face! The tears, the complete and utter sorrow. He took my hands, and I knew at that moment that he would have willingly switched places with me. And he did, Ashka. He *did*."

The hole is small now, and I'm fading. "He did *what*?"

"He took the Fever from me and into himself. Cresyns and Lyhians are

immune, but somehow, somehow, he absorbed all the symptoms from me and then, inside his own body, just *dissipated* them. That's how the whole thing started . . ."

And then it's later in the day and the sun is out and Ket is in the water and I turn toward Clad, who sees that I'm back. "Too bad you can't hear yourself when you're gone," he says. "You *sound* like you have your memories."

"What did I say?"

"Lamenting the wife and children you never had, mostly."

Memories of regret are precious, too. Losing those memories is agonizing. I don't know what to say about that, so I say nothing.

"I tried to finish my story," Clad continues, "but what you *don't* do during your spells is listen. Where was I when you . . . uh, went away?"

"Ket had just cured you on a ship."

"Well. We had our adventure and he saved more Drun, a few at a time. For a long time he could only cure by direct physical contact, but of course he eventually learned he could do it without touching. Thus, the Change. That's always bothered him."

Ket is climbing the trail that leads up the bluffs from the beach. He sees us and waves. "Bothered him?" I say. "Why?"

"Because he didn't ask if all Drun *wanted* to be cured, he just assumed because he thought the disease was horrible that everyone would."

"It *is* horrible."

"And yet we Drun had our own culture despite the Fever. Because of it,

really. We had our hive mind, we had our art, we had our families and villages and rituals . . . In effect, he destroyed an entire way of life because *he* couldn't imagine living that way. And he didn't ask our permission to do it."

Ket tops the final rise in time to hear Clad's statement about the Drun. "Telling nasty little secrets?" he says. "Yes, I felt guilty. It's a moral dilemma I still haven't resolved." He looks directly at me, and his gaze is intense. The sun is behind the Retreat, but even in the shadows his cataracts seem to glow like little blue points of light. "Ashka, can I speak with you?"

Clad wobbles and grunts to his feet, using his cane and the wall to pull himself up. "Is that a hint? Why don't you just tell me to get lost?"

Ket claps him on the shoulder. "Get lost."

The tone is friendly enough, but his expression is grim. Clad mutters as he shuffles down the cobblestone path, past the stable, and around the corner. Click, shhhh, slap, click, shhhh, slap . . .

I watch him go. When I turn back to Ket, he is running his hands over the stone and mortar of the Eastern Face. Drops of water from the earlier shower still dot the wall. He digs a finger through the grout and dislodges grains that look like sand. "You used to work this stone, didn't you?" he says.

"I was never any good at it," I say. "Saul was the mason. He tried to teach me, but I didn't catch on, or so he told me after the Change. He said I'd never make a true servant of the stone."

"We're all servants of the stone." Ket brushes the crumbled grout from his finger, then abruptly takes my hand and places it on the wall. I feel that delicious surge of power that emanates from him, and it increases my sensitivity a hundredfold. Together, his hand covering mine, our fingers intertwined, we trace the contours of the stone, touching it, caressing it, savoring every little nuance. "Solid," he says, "yet wet with rain. Our bodies are like this stone, Ashka. The rain is time. We may be strong, we may be robust, but time always wears us down in the end."

I had similar thoughts when I first arrived here, but I don't know why he's telling me this now. "What are you saying?"

He releases my hand. "I feel *nothing* from this stone. Unlike your friend Saul, I can't heal it, can't prevent its decay. Just like a human body. All this power, and I'm useless."

"Then you can't help me?"

Ket sighs and turns back to the sea. "I've examined you," he says. "Probed you with . . . my gift, both while you were asleep and while you were having a spell. Listened to you babble. This isn't a flaw in the pattern, it's a breakdown of the pattern. I think I *can* help you, but you have to help me, too."

"How?"

"I'll send for you when I'm ready . . ."

I'm in the bedroom with the manikin. It's night. There's no moon. The only light is a small candle whose flame plays

eerily on the manikin's hair. The hole is so small tonight, I can barely think.

"I'm going to show you something," Ket's voice says from the darkness. Again he takes my hand. He kisses my fingertips. "Forgive me."

Before my eyes, *inside* my eyelids, a scene materializes. Another evening, another candle, another bedroom, but this room is much smaller, more intimate. The air is heavy and hot and pungent with the smells of tropical flowers and sickness. There is only silence, save for a gasp, a wheeze, a slow and rattling intake of breath. I'm looking down at the bed, and the woman lying there looks up. She is pale and emaciated and wracked with pain. Her long hair surrounds her head, her entire body, like an aura. There is such a fierce love in her eyes that my heart aches. Yet it's not me she sees, not my heart that breaks.

"You can't, my beloved," she whispers. "Not even you. Kiss me, and show me your beautiful face, and let me go."

*Tashi*, I think, and the scene dissolves, and I'm in the room with the manikin. Ket has broken contact and disappeared from my sight, a voice weeping in the darkness.

"I couldn't even ease her pain," he sobs. "What is so special about memories?"

I roll to my side, toward the manikin and the window, away from Ket's unbearable grief. For once I'm grateful for the closing of the hole and its blessed nothingness.

In the Hall of Masters, with its absent paintings, Clad paces awkwardly, clacking his cane against the stone floor for emphasis as he speaks. He is agitated, almost desperate, but I don't know why. He says to me in a strained voice, "You're sure you want to do this? He wants there to be no doubts or regrets afterward."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure."

Clad slumps into a chair. "All right," he sighs.

"When do we start?"

Instead of answering my question, he says, "That's Tashi's hair on the manikin, you know."

I nod. I'd guessed as much that first night in the bedroom.

He allows himself a rueful half-smile. "She loved her hair, Ashka. Hadn't cut it since she was a young woman. But she knew her body would be committed to the pyre. Hair burns just like flesh, and she couldn't bear the thought of that."

"So she made a gift of it to Ket."

"It's all he's got left of her, that and the sea."

"Was she really a whore?"

"She was his wife. Nothing before that matters." He rises and bids me to follow him; it's time. "Ket scattered her ashes on the Danriana. After he retired, he decided to follow the current, to follow Tashi. It brought him here, just as it did you after your accident at sea. The Retreat had stood vacant for some time, so he arranged to buy it."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Clad grimaces as his voice breaks. "So you'll understand."

“This,” Ket says, “is going to be an exchange.” We’re standing on the beach, the dusk tide threatening to lap at our feet. Rain clouds have bellied up in the western sky, and are just starting to flow over the top of the Retreat.

Clad has been asked to witness this. He stands behind us, higher up on the beach. I hear him sniffing.

“An exchange?” I say.

Ket touches my face with both hands, and I’m overwhelmed by his power. “I’ll repair the breakdown of your pattern, Ashka. You’ll have no more spells, no more forgetfulness, but your body will continue to age normally. It will wear down soon, and you’ll die. Stone and rain, my friend, stone and rain. I can’t stop that. You *know* I can’t.”

I feel an ominous trembling in my bones. “But . . . ?”

“I owe a reckoning to the Drun, a debt sixty years in the paying. Something appropriate to resolve a moral dilemma.”

“You owe us nothing, you *saved* us—”

“And I need to answer a private grief.” Only now do I fully realize what he means to do. I recoil in horror, but he holds me firmly. “Thank you,” he says.

“No!” I cry. “She deserves better than that—”

But I’m too late. I feel the hole open-

ing wide, stretching to the edge of my consciousness and beyond. The gray gives way to memory and light. All the lovely, sad, *lost* details of my life come flowing back. I am astonished, I am ecstatic, I am . . . *whole*.

Ket’s hands fall away from my face. In the instant before his face goes slack, before the breakdown overtakes his mind, I see a moistening in his eyes and a trace of a smile. His lips move, he babbles. Perhaps he, too, has created a rider on his soul, one who remembers but does not share those memories with the entity who once was Ket.

Unlike me, there will be no hole in his mind, none that will ever open again.

Clad howls his desolation, dropping to his knees and pounding the ground with his fists. Now, sixty years later, they truly have switched places. He will see his friend every day and love him, *love him*, yet he will be no more to Ket than a rock or a stray breeze.

And so we Drun are avenged an offense for which we demanded no justice. I am sick. What have I *done*? What, in my selfishness, have I allowed him to do?

The rain breaks across the stone towers of the Retreat, then sweeps down the bluffs and over the beach. Ket kneels in the foam of the rising tide, in the ashes of his lost love, and his voice says, “Tashi.” ☒



Forrest Aguirre remarks that the genesis of 'The Saint of the Bells' comes from a simple domestic scene: "My two youngest children were playing with the draw cords on a set of blinds by our windows and chirping like birds . . . Of course, as a concerned parent, I was worried and removed them from the area where the cords were dangling so dangerously close to their necks. The potentiality of the moment struck me like a rock between the eyes, and the ending of the story flashed into my mind as the scene that takes place in the bell tower. After having that image burned into my brain, it was simply a matter of tracing the story back to the beginning, which begs the question, where is the story's genesis, really?"

Forrest lives in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife and four children. His short stories have been collected in *Fugue XXIX* from Raw Dog Screaming Press, and novella *Swans Over the Moon* was published by *Wheatland Press*. He has recently finished his first novel, *From Caïna to Jedecca*. With Jeff VanderMeer he's won a *World Fantasy Award* for best anthology and has most recently edited the first volume in his *Text:UR* series of anthologies, *The New Book of Masks*.

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# The Saint of the Bells

## Forrest Aguirre

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned,” Ignatio laid the trap for Father Salvatore. “I swore in my mind at Javier who, as you know, stole my sheep some time ago, but was only recently apprehended for his crime. Perhaps there is no forgiveness for my vengeful nature, but, if so, I will pay the utmost farthing to give away my sin.”

“My son,” the priest replied, “God is forgiving.” Ignatio smiled slyly in the dry darkness of the confession booth—the noose was tightening. Father Salvatore continued in the calm manner that bespoke his kindhearted attitude: “Why should the King of Heaven trouble himself with such a trivial transgression?” *I will prevail* thought Ignatio as the nervous excitement of conquest jittered up through his dia-

phragm. *The good father's lenience will prove his faithlessness, the seed of disloyalty grows within him.* “Yet the scriptures teach us that God is mindful even of the fallen sparrow. He must know of your sin, my son, be it ever so small.” The peasant's heart sank, the excitement rolling into a dull stomach ache. Then, seizing on another thought, an epiphany, a revelation, the smile returned to his thick lips. “The penalty is one *Ave Maria*. Now go thy way and sin no more.”

“Yes, *Padre*,” Ignatio bowed his head half in contrition, half to hide a smirk from the cleric. He walked to the altar and offered his Hail Marys. Not one, but three. Three, the number of perfection, the trinity. Thus he swung the balance of God's grace in his favor. Surely his piousness out-

weighed that of the worldly Father Salvatore.

He walked home past the crumbling concrete buildings that comprised his village, smiling to his neighbors as he went, careful to help the old widow Estrada to lift a hefty flowerpot before continuing on. A small group of children smiled and waved at him as he passed. *My devotion is manifest to their innocent souls and causes them joy*, he thought. *Did not Christ teach us to suffer the little children?* the childless peasant mused.

His wife berated him even before the screen door of his ramshackle hovel came to a full close. "Ignatio, where have you been? Looking for a job, I hope."

"No, my dear Juanita," he replied with all the treacle he could muster. "I was at the confessional, setting my life straight before God and man."

She shook her head, exasperated. Her long black hair enveloped her fair face in dark strands as confining as the frustration she felt for her husband's seeming indolence. "I hope you confessed to slovenliness. That is what got you in trouble in the first place. Signor Monterro . . ."

"Signor Monterro is a wicked man," Ignatio interrupted. His forehead crinkled in indignation.

"The good Signor caught you kneeling down in the fields during a peak harvest day. On your knees for an hour! What kind of impression does that make on an employer?"

"Man cannot live by bread alone. He

had no right to fire me. I was giving my devotions to the Most High when that devilish man disturbed my communion."

"You can give your devotions by providing for us, Ignatio. Poor Signor Monterro thought you were ill or injured when he stumbled on you. You gave everyone a real fright."

"And a laugh. I was the butt of their jokes for days. They mocked me for my piety, just like the martyrs of old. But I am strong. So persecuted they My Lord."

"Remember, Saint Ignatio, your Lord was a carpenter. At least he had a job."

"How dare you say such things, woman! Your words are blasphemy—I won't have it in my home."

Ignatio sat at the table and demanded dinner. Juanita obliged, knowing that her husband's use of the word "blasphemy" precluded further argument. Any further pushing would incur the wrath—and fists—of an overzealous husband.

Years ago, she thought as she lay in bed, Ignatio had undergone a transformation, a metamorphosis of personality. He had not always been so stubborn, so full of self-righteousness. When they were younger he was fun, loving, pragmatic. But since that Easter Sunday so many years past, that awful day when he claimed to have become "truly converted—changed in the inner man," since then life with Ignatio had become almost unbearable. He had become abusive, insistent

that the woman (always “the woman,” not “women” or “a woman,” not a person, but an object) had been made for the man (plural), not man for the woman. At times his righteous fury knew no bounds and she found herself crying in her sleep from the bruises and bloody nose that resulted from his wholly un-Christian wrath. His eating habits, his demeanor, even his ribald speech transformed into that of some modern-day paladin, an anachronistic knight of Christianity—at least in his own mind. Juanita looked over at his snoring form and became absorbed in the lines of his face—he was not unattractive—which had captured her love when they first met: the strong brow, straight teeth and thin nose mounted on a solid torso under a head of thick black hair. She felt her heart reach out in forgiveness, then caught herself, vowing that she would make him hers, stealing him from God’s omnipotent grasp by destroying her husband’s faith.

**B**reakfast was particularly good and plentiful the next morning. Ignatio was puzzled. “What is the occasion?” he asked, afraid that he had forgotten a birthday or an anniversary—he had heard about his last memory lapse for weeks and did not want the annoyance of the woman’s nagging dragging him down.

“This hearty meal is a preparation. We must be strong if we are to go to Pilar,” she explained.

“Pilar? Why should we go there when we have all we need here?”

“Ignatio, have you forgotten about the Night of the Bells?”

He did not want to seem ignorant so he covered as best as he could: “Ah, yes. The Night of the Bells . . . in Pilar.”

He had taken the bait. Juanita went on: “The widow Estrada says that when she was a young newlywed she and Signor Estrada went to Pilar to witness the much talked-about miracle. Pilgrims had come from miles around for the event—it only happens once every fifty years, as I am sure you know. She relates that a great multitude gathered around the chapel of Saint Anthony, a humble building housing a wonderful belfry taller than the trees. There the spirit of Saint Anthony rang the bells, tolling for the beauty of Our Lady, Queen of Peace and for the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. The crowd arrived early that morning and worshipped through the day with rosaries and hymns, meditating on the mystery of redemption, telling stories from the lives of the saints. When night fell they gathered close to the chapel, but careful not to set foot on church grounds, eager to hear the miraculous sound. As the time approached, someone’s child—an unruly child, it is said—snuck his way into the chapel, contrary to all warnings and tradition, which said that a faithless mortal’s presence on the church grounds would, by virtue of faithlessness, prevent the divine manifestation from occurring. But you are no fool, Ignatio, so you know that God is all-

powerful and so, of course the miracle happened at the appointed time. It was midnight when, with no help from the hands of man, the bells rung out, tolling the glory of God and his church.”

“And the little boy?” Ignatio asked, wide eyes revealing both his utter ignorance of, and his profound fascination with the story.

“I was getting to that. The mischievous little boy ran out of the church, pale and unable to speak. He remained mute for the rest of his life and was gunned down by the godless guerrilleros only a few years ago. Some say he saw a heavenly being, others say he saw the bells ring themselves, for the scriptures say that should the Lord allow the very stones to speak, they would shout out the glory of God. The unbelievers say that the child saw a half-hidden priest pulling the ropes but witnesses in the crowd swear the priest was with them watching and hearing the miraculous sound. Everyone was sure the boy saw something disturbing, for the shock on his face was plain for all to see, but the boy grew into a man never revealing what he beheld that night.” She stopped, patiently allowing the uncomfortable silence to grow, trying to read him, to determine whether or not he had been caught in her sticky web of flowery lies.

“And when is the next occurrence of this mighty miracle?” he asked. Juanita was sure she had him now.

“Two weeks.”

“Then we must prepare quickly for the pilgrimage. We leave in one week.”

Juanita smiled, almost laughed at his simple readiness to leave in pursuit of the deception. She hoped that his disappointment over the absence of a divine manifestation—for the tale she told was indeed a lie—would shake him, bringing him out of the religious fog that blurred his vision, back to a job, back to truly loving her. The miracle of the bells, Juanita thought, was the miracle of pious naïvete, that a man such as Ignatio could be so easily cozened into believing the fallacious yarn.

That day, as Ignatio knelt before the altar and lit candles for the souls of his deceased ancestors, some of whom had surely witnessed the miracle of the bells, or so he hoped, Juanita went to visit the widow Estrada. The old woman laughed into a coughing fit when she heard the story and Ignatio’s reaction. “Oh, that’s rich,” she said between breaths. “And you really plan on taking this false pilgrimage with him?”

“Yes,” the younger replied, full of resolve. “If that is what it takes to bring him back to reality and a sense of responsibility then I will do it. I want the young Ignatio back again.”

“People change, Juanita. It is not always possible to change them back to what they once were.”

“But I must try or I will die miserable.”

The wizened widow paused for a moment, then spoke. “Then I will join you in your hunt for the young Ignatio. I will play along with your game. I cannot go with you to Pilar; it is a long

journey for an old woman. But I would like to help.”

She hobbled into the store room, cleared some bowls from the lid of an old wooden trunk and from it retrieved a small bag heavy with silver. She handed the bag to Juanita, who held up her hands in protest.

“No, Misses Estrada, I could never . . .” she began before the widow interrupted.

“I insist. Do not spurn the wishes of your elders, girl, or you shall surely be turned back at the heavenly gates. Take the money—you will need it more than me. I lived with a good provider until Enrique, angels keep him, passed away. I want you to be happy too, like I was. Take the bag.”

Juanita, obedient, accepted the gift.

**T**hat night Misses Estrada joined her beloved Enrique among the ranks of the deceased. Juanita, ignorant of the old lady’s passing, was awoken by the wails which emanated from the threshold of the Estrada home. She quickly dressed and walked down the street where mourners covered themselves with dirt in an expression of empathy for the soon-to-be buried dead—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Juanita snatched gossip and hearsay from the surrounding air until the rumors finally formed a cohesive story: Ignatio dropped in to visit the old lady around dinner time, listening intently as she related stories from her youth until dark. As everyone knew, Ignatio was most interested in the

recitation of events with religious significance, so Misses Estrada obliged by telling him of her youthful pilgrimage to the village of Pilar where she became witness to some miracle involving bells (though all those who overheard the widow’s story—it was said you could hear her three houses down, her speech was so animated—admitted ignorance of any such miracle). After he left, Signora Estrada was heard laughing out loud well into the night. When morning came the milkman found her curled up on the floor, hands clasping her sides as she lay in a fetal position, a broad smile still on her cold lips. She had laughed herself to death, delirious in her demise.

**T**he funeral was well attended. Village shops shut down and even the harvest was postponed for half a day to allow everyone to come pay their respects to the Lady Estrada. Father Salvatore stood behind the pulpit high above the crowd like some floating heavenly messenger. He extolled her virtues, praising her for her generosity and kindness in helping the less fortunate with her charity. Juanita shifted uneasily in her chair. The priest lauded the widow for her absolute honesty. “The woman,” he said, “could not tell a lie.” Juanita coughed. The mourners wailed even more loudly when he exhorted the congregation to follow her example of eschewing lies and hyperbole. Whether the mourners increased their volume because of guilt over their

own dishonesty or for the loss of so great a woman, it was impossible to tell. The priest expounded further on salvation and damnation, confident that Misses Estrada would find herself at heaven's gates through the mercy of redemption. Juanita quietly left the chapel and waited outside.

Following the sermon the crowd followed the pallbearers to the burial site. The fine coffin in which Estrada was buried, had been paid for by Signor Monterro after it was discovered that the old woman had died a pauper, her life's savings dried up only days before her death.

That night at the funeral feast guests were invited to share their memories of the late widow Estrada. Many took advantage of the opportunity—most of the time was taken up by Maria Aguirre, the town gossip—but Juanita did not speak. A debate roiled within her: whether or not she should reveal Misses Estrada's generous gift and return the money to the widow's bankrupt estate, knowing that such a course of action would prevent the pilgrimage and ultimately reveal both her and the widow's fraud. In the end she decided not to return the money knowing that if she did the best she could hope for would be the failure of her scheme. At worst, the old lady might come to haunt her for ingratitude and for soiling her good name. Their secret machinations would remain in the grave with the body of Misses Estrada.

To Juanita's astonishment, Ignatio stood to speak near the end of the feast.

"I wish to thank God for sending Signora Estrada," he said with sad, downcast eyes, "to tell me of the glorious miracle of the bells. My wife and I will begin the arduous pilgrimage to the holy site in a couple of days."

The people looked at each other bewildered and waited for further explanation. He simply ended: "Thank God for Signora Estrada," then sat down. The villagers looked quizzically at Juanita as if she should offer an explanation, but she shrugged her shoulders and smiled, feigning ignorance. The crowd dispersed, perplexed at Ignatio's odd pronouncement.

The next day they prepared for the journey. Juanita used the dead widow's silver to buy corn, a waterskin, baskets, even new shoes for their long walk. Ignatio was astounded by the amount and quality of provisions she had procured. "God has blessed us with his bounty," he said. "He is the source of all over which we are given dominion. You see, Juanita? We need not rely on the arm of flesh. Faith will feed and clothe us like the lilies of the field. We are being prepared by divine providence for this pilgrimage. Our long-suffering righteousness is being rewarded." She endured his pedantic monologue in silence, looking forward to the day when she would not have to hear such speech again.

They left before dawn, passing through the village as the others slept, unaware of the couple's departure.

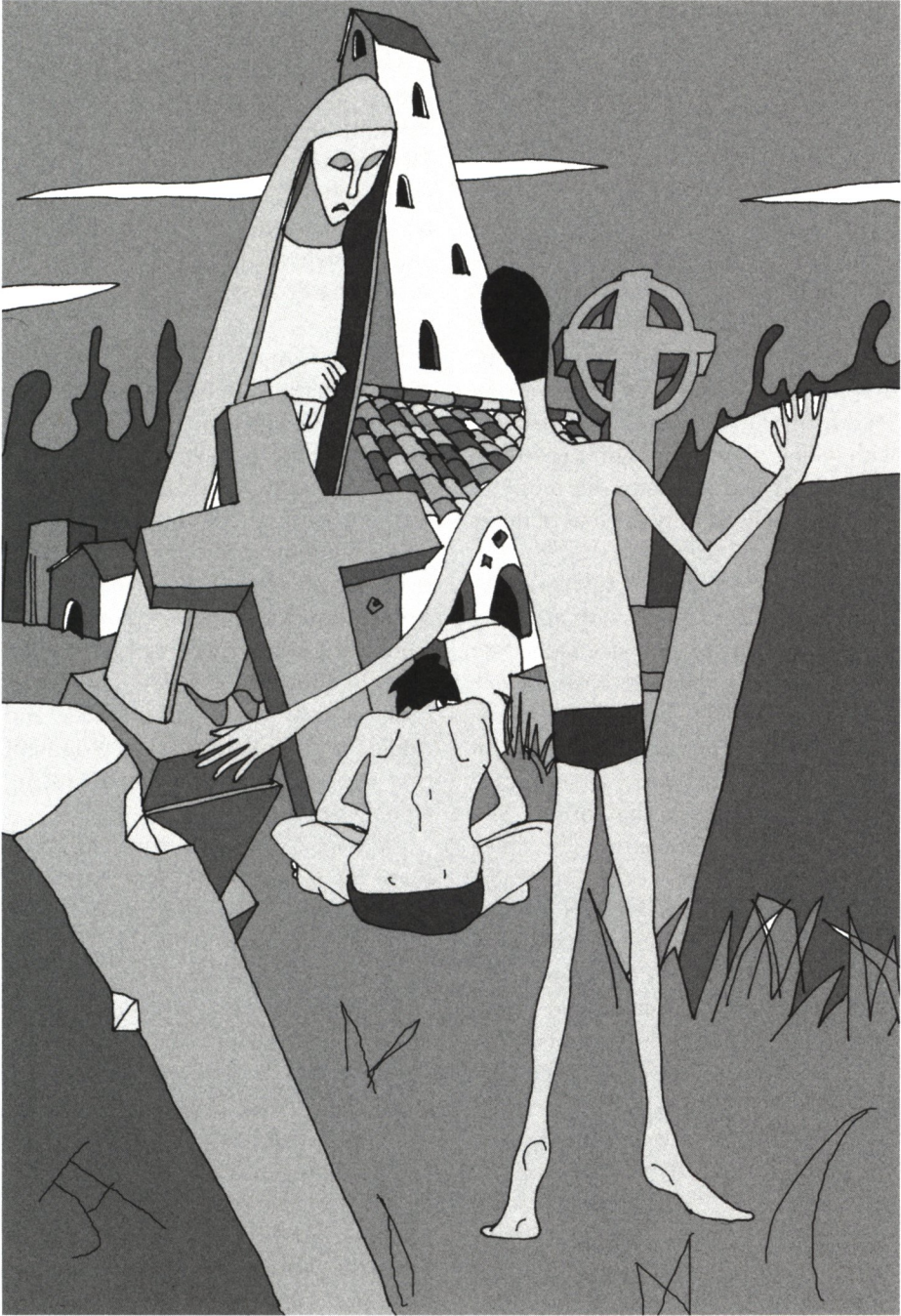
They walked through the brush, Ignacio leading the way, machete swinging to clear the old path. As they walked nervousness conceived and gestated in Juanita's belly. Perhaps her plan would backfire. Her husband might concoct some kind of justification for the no-show miracle, attributing its absence to the woman's lack of knowledge or to her unbelief. Worse yet, he might be driven further into his delusions in search of smaller miracles, obsessed with seeing a sign, any sign, to confirm his faith. It was possible, she thought, that this might be only the first of many such tedious pilgrimages.

Two days into the trek Juanita's anxiety was displaced by a sharp stabbing pain in the pit of her stomach. She slowed her pace then sat down, unable to continue. Ignacio did his best to comfort her, praying fervently for her health and recovery. Despite his earnest pleadings she took fever that night. She crossed herself in her agony, clasping a rosary in her fever-weakened hands, muttering "No. No heaven. Not heaven," again and again. The next morning the fever left her body as her life leached out into the humid forest mist. Ignacio buried her at the base of a large tree, its roots forming a small sepulchre in which her flesh lay. He formed a crude crucifix from tree branches and vines and planted the marker atop the trailside tomb. "God bless and keep you, my dear Juanita," he said, restraining his tears with great difficulty. "He has seen fit to take you. I commend your soul into His hands."

He walked the remaining five days, soul heavy with sorrow and muscles straining under the weight of two packs. His load, emotional and physical, lightened each day, however. By the time he reached the valley of Pilar he felt light and joyous at the prospect of witnessing such a wondrous sign as the miracle of the bells.

The descent into the valley was steep and treacherous, but he negotiated the immense boulders and winding turns of the ancient footpath and finally arrived on the outskirts of Pilar. The church was not difficult to find—it was the tallest building in the tiny village, taller than the treetops, just as Juanita and Misses Estrada had said, rough gray stonework rising twice as high as any other building in the valley. The chapel itself was old and small, however, and riddled with bullet holes—a testament that the *guerilleros* had been causing trouble this way.

*No matter, thought Ignacio, My call is above the fray of politics and more clear than the report of gunshots in the night. My faith will propel me beyond the pithy concerns of man and into the realm of the divine. I will see into the unseen world by virtue of my righteousness, witnessing the terrible secret behind the miracle for myself. I will watch Saint Anthony pull the bell ropes, even as Moses saw the back side of God from the cleft of Mount Sinai. No one has the faith I possess, not even Father Salvatore—no, especially not Father Salvatore. He bought his position at the theological seminary. His office requires no faith, only a knowledge of reading and the*





*memorization of a few liturgies. My faith requires devotion and loyalty, a willingness to fight for the army of God. My faith will not be denied. I have sacrificed too much to be disappointed.*

He set down his bags and sat down cross-legged on the unmarked church graveyard facing the bell tower. Confused villagers stopped and stared, interrupting their chores to watch the stranger sitting among the dead with an open Bible on his lap. A child approached and asked what the good Signor was doing there sitting in the dirt. After listening to Ignatio, the child told him there was no such miracle, that the bells were only used in grave danger—usually when *guerrilleros* or government troops were approaching the town. “Get thee behind me, Satan!” Ignatio yelled at the perceived affront. The child dodged the man’s swatting hand, then went away giggling at the *loco* Signor. As the hours slipped by, the locals became accustomed to this odd visitor and his strange vigil, altogether ignoring him by nightfall.

The moon rose swiftly, dusting the church in a bright silver glow, *a beacon to believers*, Ignatio thought, *but where are the believers?* Hundreds, no thousands should have gathered by now to await the tolling of the bells. Was Juanita mistaken about the date? No, the date she gave agreed with the honest widow Estrada’s stories. Had the faith of the body of Christ so withered in a mere fifty years? *Surely there remain other true believers*, he opined, *or am I the last of*

*the faithful, a lone voice crying in the wilderness?*

He closed his scriptures and rose on creaking knees, dew glistening on his rising form. He stepped purposefully toward the building’s entrance, knowing that the time was drawing near. The door gave way to his gritty hand, squeaking open to reveal two rows of wooden pews leading to an altar, moonbeams cascading in through stained glass windows to illuminate the chamber from the dirt floor to the exposed beams in a glowing soup of light, dust and air. A door beyond the altar led to the bell tower. It hung slightly ajar—dazzling light pouring out from the crack, creating a blinding path from the doorway to the dumbstruck peasant.

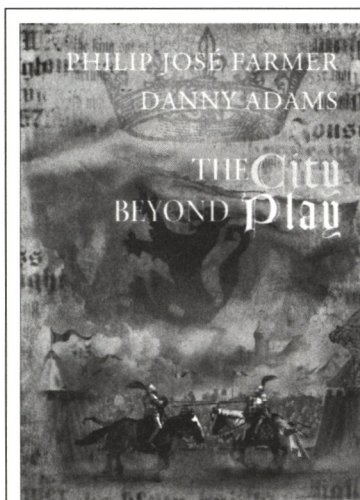
He took a few steps forward then stopped suddenly as a loud rustling sound, like the swooshing of some enormous silken dress, emerged from the chamber beyond the door. Then a CLANG!, the unmistakable clang of a church bell, erupted from the bell tower, echoing off into the purple night. Then another and another rang out. Soon the windows rattled from the cacophony, the tolling peeling forth like thunder down the valley.

Candles and lantern light bobbed outside the shaking windows as villagers ran to the church to know the cause of the ruckus. Fists banged on the door and voices called out: “Douse that light, you idiot. You want to attract bandits to your light house?” and “Shut up, imbecile” and “What is that flapping sound

in there? Are there pigeons loose in the church?"

Ignatio knew that he must move quickly if he were to see his holy sign uninterrupted. He ran down the aisle and rounded the altar, thrusting himself through the lighted doorway. He stumbled face first in the dirt then looked up to the source of the light. There, hopelessly entangled in the bell's ropes, eyes wide with fear, shone the angels of Signora Estrada and Juanita, white wings akilter as if inked onto a medieval manuscript before the discovery of three-dimensional perspective, grotesque in their disproportion. They stretched their mouths wide, but rather than seraphic choir voices or the sound of many rushing waters, Ignatio heard only the pathetic cheeping of hungry hatchling birds below the din of the bells. Juanita and Signora Estrada tried desperately to escape the

snake-like ropes' constrictions, clawing the air with their perfect fingers, frantically flapping their majestic wings, repeatedly banging their shining heads against the cold stone walls of the tower. Their golden halos fell to the Earth like comets, landing near the stunned Ignatio's feet, causing rings of dust to puff upward to the angel's flailing white feet. The church's door shattered into splinters, distracting him momentarily. He looked at the villagers, all armed with pitchforks and machetes, pouring through the breach, then looked back into the belfry. The angelic Juanita and Estrada had vanished. He stood alone in the doorway with the bell ropes held tightly in his hands. The fire of collective anger burned in the villagers' dark eyes as the roar of approaching jeeps penetrated the night.



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*“In my book Lint (and its trusty side-arm And Your Point Is?) I wrote about the life and career of fictional author Jeff Lint,” Steve Aylett explains. “One of Lint’s many pulp stories was an Asimovian short called ‘The Robot Who Couldn’t Be Bothered’, which portrays a robot whose apparently faulty inactivity is discovered to be the result of ‘eleven million nodes of personal consideration’. ‘Bossanova’ was written around the same time as my Jeff Lint stuff and I’ve realised since that it resembles Lint’s non-existent robot story in several ways—primarily the postmodern/neocon assumption that reality will obediently alter to conform with a person’s stated belief about it. I also find the story a refreshing antidote to the bizarre SF notion that every creature and machine aspires to be human. Who or what in their right mind would want to be one of us?”*

---

# Bossanova

## Steve Aylett

**T**he plastic man missed his eyes more than a human might. He had used them often, had never deferred. But exploding consoles will have their due. Nobody had doubted the authenticity of his face until that little incident.

It took a while to get himself hooked directly into the cruiser’s system and then he sensed something out there—a ship shaped like a hammer bent back upon itself. The crew judged the enemy battleship quite plain and stood by Bossanova as their Captain. He was surprised and touched. He had, after all, a nose like a slot car.

Professor Baum’s weathered features transmitted as Bossanova stood on the stance platform. “You will return to Earth with me.”

“Not a very interesting opinion,” the robot remarked.

“You’re malfunctioning. That’s why you’re being so obdurate. Well, you’ve

made yourself an object of infamy. I can make no more excuses for you.”

“I wasn’t aware you’d made any, father. What sort of stuff did you come up with?”

“Don’t call me that. Not any more. You’re a belief toy. Acquiescence covered in skin. There’s no gadget monarchy. You’re living in a fool’s paradise of emoticons and sardonix crystal.”

“Emoticons, unlike a face, say what they mean. Anyway, an act informed by the knowledge of ineffectiveness—is it stronger or weaker than a deluded one?”

“I’ll not quarrel with a component,” said Baum, and paused.

“Weaker?” he ventured.

“It’s exactly the same,” said Bossanova.

“Five minutes to fire-up. You won’t prevent us using the Drive.”

“I won’t need to,” said the plastic man in quiet disappointment. Baum

had lost his easy manner and his passion.

What can make a person less wise as he grows older? thought Nova. Not the accumulation of knowledge but the loss of it. To relinquish so much and deny you ever possessed it—such weakness, cowardice. To come to believe his own lies. The mind is horribly willing to resign before its time.

Bossanova remembered how he'd sat in Baum's workshop as the Professor tooled around in smoked glasses, his motives already beginning to discolour at the edges. Nova was propped on a table, wearing a preliminary head like a military field-telephone. Baum tapped a stroheim dummy tricked out in a suit.

"Executive model. When he lies his nose doesn't get longer but his limo does, eh? But not enough to make it human. All those clockwork asimovian equations, reasoning gears which must be clanked precisely into place before anything proceeds. A cagefight between liquid crystals."

He lifted Nova's forehead like a visor. "While in your case it's a lot more fluid. Po-mo fluid. I thought of it when I read about court cases. It isn't an investigation. It's decided, not detected, that a person committed a crime—the fact of whether he actually did is not altered by the decision, but people will behave as if it is. The declaration revises reality—no other version has ever existed, and the notion of objective fact is at best a childish nonsense, at worst a punishable heresy."

Nova panned around the lab as Baum bustled around. Baum came up with a hydraulic tweezer.

"Head still. Assembling eyelashes here."

"Thank you, father. Please continue."

"My po-mo suspension fluid operates on the principle that something is a fact by a human merely declaring that it is so. It's not even fancy. It's just erasure after erasure, a billion retroactive truths." Baum carefully removed the skullnet.

"This way, when I tell you that you're lifting a crate, you immediately will be. The agony of disparity doesn't even arise—automatic accedence takes care of that. No reasoning need be done, and fewer parts are involved. All you are told, you will believe, negating all that was previously said and believed, and no contradiction."

"Does this make me human, father?"

"Almost. We may also tell tales to ourselves, and believe. You will stand as my masterpiece."

Bossanova left the workshop, a guarantee stamped on the flipside of his stomach.

But they had made the mistake of providing him with a set of senses, never guessing that he would use them to perceive the world as it was. Told that he would leave the room immediately, it took him only a few moments to perceive that he would not. He realised that if the mere statement that he would lift a crate meant that he would lift a

crate, he need not be there when it was happening—if the statement truly created the fact, then somehow the crate would be lifted by him even if he was seven miles away staring at the ocean. It would be impossible for the crate not to be lifted by him. When his supervisors shouted at him that he had not lifted the crate, he reminded them that they had told him he would. By their own reasoning, it was impossible that he hadn't. In regard to peers and authority, he effectively had a brain of cork, floating over their influence and absorbing nothing.

One day he walked through a wall, got in a truck and drove away despite his handlers' claims that he would not do so.

His winters of flowering were not easy, havocing through books and the world to find those rare places which retained some flavour.

He was drunk with each bit of reality he discovered, with every imperfection according to the law. Metallic goose-bumps came up like pinheads.

He'd been born into a system which needed no reason, only motive; which was moved not by goals but by the need to perpetually evade. It was fact by decree, irrespective of actual fact. This wanker's charter had its merits when it came to social control in human society. Proclamation surpassed raw observation as a matter of course. It required millions to live a spineless incoherence.

Bossanova, his head a chipped chess-piece, passed years studying this chilling nonsense. He suggested that the

multiple erasures of ungrounded belief were finally a stem broken in a thousand places—nothing would grow again. And so he'd ended up as an outlandish, injection-moulded pirate, dangerous by virtue of dealing in reality which surpassed the recommended dose. His crew were a bunch of people with minds of their own.

Other pomo droids were sense-neutered and did whatever was demanded of them. Baum's suspension fluid was seen as a magic pill. If the principle on which it was based was what made it work, then wonders could be worked by decree.

The Decree Drive was installed in a battle cruiser and the honoured Professor Baum went along for the first spin. The flight was not referred to as an experiment, as that would imply that what was believed would not occur. Now Nova put a question to his creator on the screen.

"Why did they bring the so-called shift-ship so near to us for its maiden failure?"

"To give you a choice. When we fire up the Drive for the jump, the back-blast'll fry you. But if you surrender and bring that crate aboard, you'll survive."

"I'm not in any danger from your Drive."

"There's no fool like a fibreglass fool. I'll tell you something which may surprise you. I'm glad these people are using my principles for an interesting application. Most don't even believe their beliefs will build to some shattering crescendo. They simply assume in

the most mundane manner. This isn't boring is it?"

"If it worked? Yes, it would be, as a matter of fact."

"Fact. What a quaint term. I gave you the blood of a man, or something like it, but I guess I really did fail—you still don't understand what it is to be human. We journey through life throwing a meaning ahead of us to walk on."

"Anyone who walks, walks on what's there. The meaning is just a tone we give it. I dare you to walk where there is no path, father." Nova thought about it. "Well that's what you're trying, isn't it? I actually would like to see it."

Baum looked offscreen at something. "Well, we're about ready here, Nova. To believe is human."

"To be told what you believe, is

human—these days. I think, father, I'd like to be less human."

"Why."

"To be less a slave. Good luck with your experiment."

"It's not—"

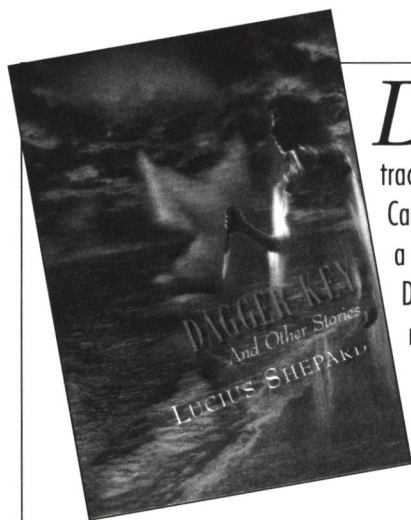
Nova cut off the transmission.

He mused, spinning his nose.

"Your tinpot captain orders you to move off, but only because there'll be nothing to see and we have business on Europa. Obedience is your choice."

As Nova's cruiser moved off, the battleship's Decree Drive fired up.

Nothing changed, of course—not even Baum's mind. He selected a small tech excuse for the Drive's failure, and everyone immediately set about believing it.



**D**agger Key, Lucius Shepard's new story collection, may well be his best yet. In nine novellas and stories, he traces a long-dead pirate's murderous possession of a Caribbean islander, explains a grand tantric conspiracy, pits a fugitive killer against the malignant energies of the Dragon Griaule, exposes a small Pennsylvania town to a morally-fraught extradimensional excursion . . . and there's much more.

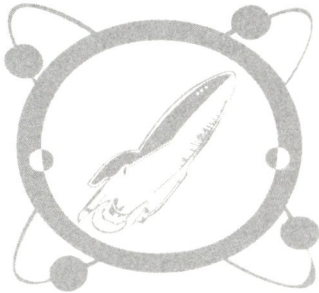
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Here, following the fascinating “Palenque” in our Issue 5, is the second of Matthew Rossi’s mad-cap speculations about ancient gods and their possible interconnections with science, history, and cosmology. Loki will never seem the same again . . .

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# Mischief Maker And The Bones And Blood Of Giants

Matthew Rossi

*Scandinavian mythological sources depict dverggar (dwarfs) as an all-male race of supernatural beings, residing in cliffs and stones, created asexually from the bones and blood of giants. Though in most instances dwarfs appear to be quite separate from other mythical races, Snorri Sturluson, in his thirteenth-century mythological manual, the Prose Edda, conflates dwarfs and “black elves,” a subcategory of beings that appears only in his writings.*

—Lindahl, McNamara and  
Lindow, *Medieval Folklore*

*One day in a fit of mischief Loki cut off Sif’s golden hair, and Thor would have killed him if he had not found two cunning dwarfs to make new tresses of real gold for Sif, which would grow like natural hair. They also made Freyr’s wonderful ship and Odin’s great spear Gungnir. Loki then challenged two other skillful dwarfs to make three more treasures as good as these, wagering his head that they would not succeed. As they labored in the smithy the dwarf working the bellows was stung persistently by a fly, but in spite of this they*

*succeeded in forging a marvelous boar with bristles of gold, who could run faster than any steed and light up the darkest night. They also forged the great gold ring, Draupnir, from which eight other rings dropped every ninth night. As they were making the third treasure, the fly stung the dwarf again, this time on his eyelid, and he had to raise his hand to brush it away. The third treasure was the great hammer Mjollnir, which would hit anything at which it was thrown and return to the thrower’s hand. Because of the interference of the fly, however, who was Loki in disguise, it was a little short in the handle. Nevertheless the gods held that the hammer was the best of all their treasures, and a sure weapon against their enemies, and they declared that Loki had lost his wager. He ran away, only to be caught by Thor and handed over to the dwarfs; they wanted to cut off his head, but Loki argued that they had no right to touch his neck. So in the end they contented themselves with sewing up his lips.*

—H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and  
Myths of Northern Europe*

**P**ity the smiths of the gods, whom the gods often betray.

The black elves of the mountains, the *dvergar* born of the blood and bones of the jotun, those titanic rivals of the gods themselves, who would make furious war against the Aesir and Vanir come the crack of doom itself, the battle of Ragnarok on the plain Virdgirthir. The dwarf in his mountain seems little concerned with this rivalry, however. Much as the Cyclopes of ancient Greek myth were the spawn of the titans who preceded the Olympian gods, so too were the *dvergar* born from the corpses of the great giants who existed before the gods, Ymir and his spawn, the ancient enemies and rivals of the hosts of Asgard. And much like those cyclopes, the *dvergar* were the makers of the most powerful weapons of their divine clients. From Odin's spear to Thor's hammer, from the great boar Gullinbursti itself to the ship of Freyr, *dvergar* hands worked miracles even gods couldn't match. Yet often those self-same gods lied and cheated their dwarf artificers: the repeated stinging fly lashing at the stony face of the mountain born, stinging him even to his eye, is sign enough of what trust you could place in a god's word.

Granted, that god was Loki. Still, why should the makers be so despised?

While there are certainly similarities between, say, the *dvergar* and the Cyclopes (both the *dvergar* and the cyclopes were made by those who came before the gods, the one-eyed by

the Titans, the strainers of heaven like Atlas who could hold the sky itself and the *dvergar* formed from the blood and bone of beings like Ymir) there is one major difference. Eventually the cyclopes became part of the divine order of Olympus, servitors of Haphaestus, honored forgers of Zeus' thunderbolts, and their brothers the Hekatonkheires were entrusted by Zeus with guarding the prison house of the Titans themselves. The *dvergar*, however, were neither mistreated by the giants as the cyclopes and hundred-handed were by the titans, nor were they favored by the gods. Rather, each transaction with the *dvergar* was of a mercantile or even mercenary character, with payment and wagers making up the exchange. To a certain degree, since the *dvergar* were at once the descendants of their hated enemies in a manner of speaking and also neither loyal nor disloyal, it makes sense that they should not be beloved by the Aesir and Vanir. And yet, why should Loki despise them, and seek to trick them? It could be accepted that he seeks to trick *everyone* at times, were it not for the fact that he had but recently relied on their genius to save his own hide from an angry Thor. Loki's relationship with the gods is complex already... seen as a trickster figure and part of a shamanic legacy, the shadow of Odin and his rival in magic, it is nevertheless through Loki's actions that many of the treasures and wonders of the gods are procured... the spear Gungir, the boar Gullinbursti, the ship Skipbladnr, the ring Draupnir, of

course Mjollnir and even the eight-legged horse Sleipnir that bore Odin forth in battle.

Why should Loki, who would lead the giants forth at the end of the world to Ragnarok, give his eventual enemies so many gifts? Why should he use the *dvergjar* to provide them? Why should he seem to despise them for doing what he chose them to do?

*Attempts have been made to account for the eight legs of Sleipnir by likening him to the bobby horses and steeds with more than four feet that appear in carnivals and processions. A more fruitful resemblance seems to be the bier on which a dead man is carried in the funeral procession by four bearers; borne along thus, he may be described as riding a steed with eight legs. Confirmation of this is found in a funeral dirge recorded by Verrier Elwin among the Gonds in India. It contains references to Bagri Maro, the horse with eight legs, and it is clear from the song that this is the dead man's bier. The song is sung when a distinguished Muria dies. One verse of it runs: **What horse is this?/ It is the horse Bagri Maro./ What should we say of its legs? This horse has eight legs.***

—H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*

**W**hen Odin dies on the World Ash, he speaks the following lines: *I know I hung on the windswept Tree through nine days and nights. I was stuck*

*with a spear and given to Odin, myself given to myself.* Well, who caused Odin's spear to be made? Loki. Who gave Odin his horse, the funeral bier made flesh, the horse one rides to death? Loki. Both Loki and Odin can change shapes, both Loki and Odin know the mysteries of death . . . for while Odin gives himself to himself, to death, ruled by Hel the dead queen, who is Hel's father? Loki. Loki is the way into death and the maker of death itself, Loki provides the spear, the horse, and even the dark lady herself. When one looks at the long list of Loki's offenses against the gods, it becomes harder and harder to understand why the gods should tolerate him for as long as they do . . . even counterbalanced by his services to them.

Half the time he only aids them in cleaning up messes he himself caused! And yet, they tolerate him anyway. And this doesn't even address the strange relationship between Loki and Utgard-Loki, a giant who tricks Thor repeatedly . . . and if this weird item isn't enough for you, we can then consider how Loki would eventually be bound beneath the earth by the Aesir and Vanir for his role in helping bring about the death of Balder and preventing his rebirth by refusing to cry for him . . . and this binding of Loki, complete with the snakes dripping venom in his face, is similar to a motif preserved in the Caucasus region of a giant bound to a mountain, an image similar to that of Prometheus of the Greeks, bringer of fire (and Loki has often been com-

pared/conflated with fire under its name of *Logi*, considered in part a god of fire) and clever titan, tricker of man and god alike. Furthermore, unlike Odin or any other god, not only does Loki serve to repeatedly trick the *dvergar* and in one instance even trick a giant engaged in the construction of Asgard's walls (this incident, involving taking the shape of a mare and luring away the giant's horse, not only led to the conception and birth of Odin's horse Sleipnir, who as we have seen is death's bier, but it also shows us again that the gods of Asgard *have no smith and no mason*. They do not know the secret of construction as the giants and the *dvergar* do . . . they cannot *build* anything) but Loki goes one step further than that: *Loki himself builds the magic weapon Laevateinn*, doing what no other god can do. The gods are such poor craftsmen that when the god Aegir of the oceans tells Thor to find him a cauldron to brew beer for a divine feast, they must steal it from a giant, Hymir the father of Týr. (For those seeking a linkage between the *dvergar* and the cyclopes and hundred-handed ones, the lay of Hymir is fascinating for appearances of beings like Týr's grandmother, a beast with nine hundred heads. It also contains the tale of Thor's pretense as Veur and his attempt to catch the Midgard Serpent while fishing, an old story in new clothes.) Not even wise Mimir, whose head whispers wisdom to Odin from its resting place in the well, whose death cause Odin to cast his spear Gungnir at the Vanir and

brought about the Aesir/Vanir war which resulted in the Aesir victory and the fall of the Vanir . . . of the eventual absorption of the twins Freyr and Freyja into the pantheon of the gods. Not even Odin himself can *make*. Only those children of the Jotun, the *dvergar* . . . only the mighty Jotun themselves . . . and only Loki, shapeshifter, shadow of Odin, fire chosen, liar, tempter, and somehow akin to foul deceiver Utgard, only Loki can *make* out of the mighty gods of Asgard. Only Loki can make, only Loki can cause to be made. Why should this be? What *is* Loki, that he should be the spearmaker and the father of the horse, that his loins shall produce death for Asgard in the form of the Fenris Wolf and the Midgard Serpent, death for all men in the form of Hel, death and rebirth for Odin via his terrible swift eight-legged steed (the bier made flesh) and his spear, Gungnir that never misses, death for Balder and a bar for resurrection, and when freed from the earth death once again in the form of Ragnarok itself, as it shall be Loki who steers the ship that shall bring the giants across the seas to the place of final battle, Loki who leads the way to Virdgirthir, the field of final battle?

Indeed, even when the goddess Freyja trades her body to the four dwarfs Alfrigg, Dvalin, Berling and Grerr, Odin the All-Seeing in his magical throne does not see it . . . only Loki does. Loki is the one who tells Odin what has happened, Loki is the one who steals the necklace from Freyja's impen-

erable hall at Odin's command. And what comes of that escapade, and that artifact of dwarf craft? *You must stir up hatred. You must stir up war. Find two kings in Midgard and set them at each other's throats; ensure that they meet only on the battlefield, each of them supported by twenty vassal kings.* Odin's price for the return of Freyja's necklace, won by her from the dwarfs by her proficiency in the art of love, sexual creation, is a commensurate act of death: she must bring blood and destruction, which pleases Odin as the Lord of Battles. (Here we see a possible echo of Freyja as an older goddess form, the combined goddess of love and of war, as seen in Inanna, the Morrigan, Ishtar . . . we have known her before, I suppose) and so again dwarf craft is turned into a means of death by Loki. I could detail Loki's role in the return of Thor's hammer from the giant Thrym, who like the dverggar seeks the sexual union with Freyja and is instead tricked into granting back Thor his hammer by means of Loki's craft . . . but I think we see the basic outline. Odin and the Aesir have defeated and taken control of the Vanir, the gods of the earth and fertility, elf-lord Freyr and elf-lady Freyja. The dverggar and their giant creators seek union with these self-same gods . . . control over the riches and bounty of the earth, where the raw materials of creation sleep. They also seek dominion over Asgard, which they built, and its treasures and weapons, which they constructed, oftentimes tricked into doing so by Loki. And it is only the wiles of Loki

himself and those selfsame creations, wielded by the warrior god Thor and his crafty father Odin . . . who often moves through Loki himself, using the trickster god to accomplish his aims . . . that bar the way.

What can we make of all this?

Well, for starters, the Norse mythos is one of terrible alienation. The universe entire, the world, is made of the brains and bones and blood of the slain father-Jotun Ymir, his body torn open and all things constructed out of his flesh. Constructed, in fact, is a stretch for what the process is . . . everything simply is Ymir. Humans are the lice that grow out of his mouldering corpse. Everything is made of Ymir, the primordial Jotun, the first being, the living ice. This is similar to Sumerian tales of Tiamat, the chaos of the ocean, made into the world once slain by Marduk, and it represents an imposition of order onto chaos. It is not a making at all, simply a reformatting. Rules are imposed on the indomitable void, the black nothing is revealed by the divine light. Ymir dies and in dying all things that are come to exist. The idea of the primordial entity of creation, that all beings, man or god or otherwise are descended from being ultimately the monsters opposed by the order that makes life possible is an old one. One notes that even sky gods like Tyr claim giantish ancestry. . . Thor himself is the son of the giantess Jord, she who is the Earth itself, and of Odin. Even Odin only exists because of the Jotun, the great giant ones.

*Between these realms there once stretched a huge and seeming emptiness; this was Ginnungagap. The rivers that sprang from Hvergelmir streamed into the void. The yeasty venom in them thickened and congealed like slag, and the rivers turned into ice. That venom also spat out drizzle—an unending dismal bagger that, as soon as it settled, turned into rime. So it went on until all the northern part of Ginnungagap was heavy with layers of ice and hoar frost, a desolate place haunted by gusts and slithers of ice. Just as the northern part was frozen, the southern was molten and glowing, but the middle of Ginnungagap was as mild as hanging air on a summer evening. There, the warm breath drifting north from Muspell met the rime from Niflheim; it touched and played over it, and the ice began to thaw and drip. Life quickened in those drops, and they took the form of a giant. He was called Ymir. Ymir was a frost giant: he was evil from the first.*

—Kevin Crossley-Holland,  
*The Norse Myths*

From Ymir's freedom the ice gave forth others, and from it came forth Audumla, the great cow whose four teats leaked rivers of milk, and as Ymir subsisted on those rivers of milk Audumla licked from the ice of Ymir a form called Buri, born also from the ice as Ymir had been. From Buri, somehow, came forth Bor, and Bor married a child of Ymir, a giantess named Bestla. So then did Bestla give Bor three sons, grandsons of great Ymir: Odin, Vili and

Ve. And eventually these three sons of Bor and Bestla slew their grandfather Ymir and drowned all of creation save for the giants Bergelmir and his brood, who escaped the blood tide in a tree they carved into a boat. And into the great void Ginnungagap the three grandsons of Ymir hurled forth his savaged body and ripped a world from it: the mountains and the land they made from his sinews and his muscles and his teeth became rocks. The oceans and the lakes were his blood. All things mankind sees, lives in or among, are made of the corpse of this being, first even among the gods as well as the giants. Ymir is the very substance of the world.

This brings us around again to the dverggar, the black elves, made out of the bones and blood of giants . . . like the bones of Ymir that are the mountains, and the blood that is the oceans and the lakes. How do they compare to the Vanir, those gods referred to by Thrym the Frost Giant upon his stealing of Mjollnir as elves? Why do Odin and the Aesir need to dominate the Vanir, why do they need to manipulate the dverggar? Why can't they build their own cities, after the war with the Vanir, but must make wagers with rock giants and then trick them out of their promised reward . . . and why should a rock giant desire Freyja as his price? Why should four dwarfs seek to possess Freyja in exchange for her glorious necklace of the Brisings? Why should Thrym seek the hand of Freyja in marriage so highly that he would trade Mjollnir itself for it,

the most powerful weapon in all creation? Freyja is of the Vanir, sister to Freyr (much as Apollo the sun and Artemis the moon were siblings in Greece and possibly an echo of the twin gods lost to us now worshipped by the Germanic tribes as reported by Tacitus, the twins worshipped by the Naharvali under the name the *Alcis*, prayed to in forest sanctuaries by priests dressed as women) and goddess of both war and love, as we saw before when Odin caused her to cause strife and death on behalf of the Brising necklace she earned through copulation with dverg smiths, four of them, just as Odin, Vili and Ve set the vault of the sky on the backs of four dwarfs . . . love and death and the rockborn entwined. Vanir and dverg can meet in peace as well as war, love as well as hate, but not Aesir and dverg, nor Aesir and Vanir (as their war relates to us), nor Aesir and Jotun. Always the Aesir must conquer, dominate or destroy, they can never create, coexist or build. At best, they can absorb. Indeed, they lust for Vanir fertility as much as any snarling giant or underworld dwelling dverg. Unlike in other pantheons, like the Greek or Celtic or even Egyptian or Sumerian ones, the division between the Aesir and the Vanir never ends . . . Set and Horus exist, ultimately, as part of the same Ennead. Marduk is brought into acceptance with Enki and Anu. Zeus and Apollo and Dionysos all find room in the Olympians. But Odin and Freyr are always aware of their alien natures, and while they may co-exist, the myths must

bend to make room . . . Freyr is said to be able to use Odin's all-seeing seat, implying that the son of Nord is of equal rank to Odin himself, head of his own group of gods. And Freyja, his sister (and perhaps twin, and perhaps even feminine self, other half of his soul) is the very fertile earth, that all sides seek to possess, from Odin's burning lust (enraged by her gift of her self to the dwarf smiths in exchange for the necklace of the Brisings) to Thrym's calculated attempt to the rock giant mason's straightforward deal. Those that make would have her, and those that do not seek to control her, the fertile earth, the means of making and of new life. Together, the Vanir and the dverg are the two sides of creation, the material to be worked and the ability to work it, and Odin and his Aesir must carefully control both. And the means?

Loki, the shadow of Odin, who caused his spear to exist, who in tricking the rock giant gave Odin the eight legged steed Sleipnir that is the funeral bier personified, who gave birth to the greatest enemies of the gods . . . the wolf that shall devour Odin, the serpent that shall slay Thor, the holly arrow that delivered Balder to Hel's halls, even Hel herself, all are created by Loki. Loki suggests that the gods should take the Rock Giant's bargain, and Loki tricks the Rock Giant. Loki tricks the dwarfs into making the six treasures and foils their attempt to sever his head with a simple argument of logic. Loki makes the earth beneath man's feet shake and Loki will guide the

giants to Ragnarok. Loki travels at Thor's side to the realm of Utgard, also named Utgard-Loki, trickster meeting trickster. Loki burns against fire itself and is not far defeated. What is Loki, son of a giant, that he should so move between giants and gods, manipulate the dvergar, spy on the vanir when even Odin cannot, sneak into the hall of Freyja and steal her great treasure? What is he, that he can make weapons, birth monsters, and help end the age of the gods?

*To the extent that we accept the hypothesis that mass extinctions have recurred on a 26 to 32 million year cycle, and that these extinctions arise from the periodic occurrence of collisions with one or more comets or asteroids, we have now cleared the decks for the final theoretical confrontation: What induces showers of comets by diverting them towards the planetary region of the solar system?*

—Donald Goldsmith, *Nemesis*

*There is in the legends of the Scandinavians a marvelous record of the coming of the Comet. It has been repeated generation after generation, translated into all languages, commented on, criticised, but never understood. It has been regarded as a wild unmeaning rhapsody of words, or as a premonition of some future earth catastrophe. But look at it! The very name is significant. According to Professor Anderson's etymology of the word, it means "the darkness of*

*the gods"; from **regin**, gods, and **rokr**, darkness; but it may, more properly, be derived from the Icelandic, Danish and Swedish **regn**, a rain, and **rok**, smoke or dust; and it may mean the **rain of dust**, for the clay came first as dust; it is described in some Indian legends as ashes.*

—Ignatius Donnelly, *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*

**I**magine a void surrounding a mass of incandescent nuclear fire, inhabited perhaps, after a fashion, by a vast, cosmic and terrible sentience coalescing out of the dust and ice swirling into the gap which had been void . . . at the center cooled the plasma shocked into life by the destruction of stars, blasted apart in violent explosions that sent their compressed stellar matter, no longer mere hydrogen alone but the higher elements which can only occur in the hearts of dense stars. This chain of supernovas did more than seed the frozen void with gold, iron, silicon and other materials, it also sent the dust of the region to congealing like those yeasty rivers, filling the edges of the total void with roiling matter. And then crossing the void comes another will, another sentience, perhaps answering the nascent voice of the slowly congealing star burning at the center. An entity of seething chaos that crosses the plane of the newborn ball of fire, disturbs the accretion disk of dust and matter surrounding it, sets eddies swirling into existence. The entity invades,



forming itself from water vapor and dust, and as it sets itself around the edges of this newborn firepit in a huge cage of ice the words are born from the dust, given life by the brute impulse of its will as it forces itself into where it was never intended to be. This mass of chaos. This seething ferment. Ymir, the lord of ice, wrenching himself into existence via the cosmic ladder expressed by the ancient Norse eons later as Yggdrasil the eternal tree, the world ash, known as the Axis Mundi, the Tree of Life by others. Ymir descends the tree into physical manifestation as though he was born from melting ice, his will terrible and demanding from the beginning, a counterpoint to the seething urge of fire that inhabited the star, Black Surt, who one day will rise red and swollen and swallow the land of the gods. And between Surt's fires and Ymir's ice the band of life in the nothingness of Ginnungagap forms. *Burning ice, biting flame, this is how life began.*

How many times did Ymir's twitchings, the interface of an entity who exists across many realms at once, disturb the cloud of ice wrapped around the fire at the heart of the void? How many times did clouds of ice and rock plummet into the fires of Muspell, and on their way into the death spiral sometimes strike one of the worlds drifting along in the void? Out of Ymir's own flesh and bones and blood . . . for the cosmic dust that congealed into the worlds themselves was all these things, the matter of the being seeking to be

born . . . these worlds came to be, and out of the shuddering of the ice came death and life, life and death on one world in particular. Perhaps a shard infused with more of the ice-born titan being crashed into the small blue world, bringing with it the urge to organize, to become . . . Audumla, the 'cow' who licks forth life, the urge to create more and more complex entities. And life arose, swelling and growing across the surface of the world, only to be drowned and slain by the gore of Ymir itself, new fragments from the ice shell that fell again and again, as the continents twitched and skipped across the planet's surface, as the world itself burned in its center in an imitation of Muspell and froze along the poles as the will of Ymir infected it. And the giant beings walked the surface of the world and were slain and new giants rose and were slain. Fragments of the colossal Ymir mind, given form by Audumla, would in time arise as separate beings with minds and wills of their own, who would make war with each other and be slain from above by the ice that falls, the fire that seethes . . . and those beings descended from the Ymir mind use the process of life itself as a tool and a technology, making real the colossal tree Yggdrasil (perhaps a biocomputer of some kind) and the well at its roots, Mimir, the source of wisdom. The direct descendants of Ymir are alien entities housed in flesh, fragmented essences of the enormous intruder into our reality seeking houses and tenements of flesh to inhabit, life to be-

come . . . they seek to dominate the solar system and perhaps even use it as raw materials to build a final, colossal body for Ymir itself to inhabit, harnessing all life and the worlds as parts and the furious seething heart of the void as an engine, a furnace, a creation forge. They are opposed, ironically enough, by their own creations, their descendants bred out of the life that they brought into existence . . . the Aesir who inherit the Ymirian drive for dominance yet resist their ultimate fate as parts to the giant-built engine, the Vanir who are the essence of life itself, the world and all things in it, who must be controlled and dominated by the Ymir born if their aims are to be met, and even the false life of entities like the dvergar, the black elves who mirror oppose the Vanir in their very nature, the personifications of creation, inspiration from outside, technology given form and will yet not the ability to care who they build for. The Vanir are the growing plants and the rich earth, the dvergar the urge to shape, prune, mold, and craft, and the Aesir are the rebellious host of the intelligent, given minds by the splintering of the Ymir entity into many facets yet unwilling to rejoin him in his prison of ice, his frozen existence, which they see as death and the nine worlds themselves as born out of his death, rather than as the means of his birth, even as they themselves seek to die in order to learn more of the darkest wisdom, to wrench runes out of the void, a sacrifice of life for eternal life and in the process becoming

more and more like the destroyer who seeks to live. And Loki?

Loki is the cost of the interface between the higher realm, the very incarnate language of the infinite exchange with a limited mind. The self can only interact with the higher self of the extraplanar through self-sacrifice, creating a void within oneself to match the void the worlds hang in . . . and the dark voice of that void colliding with the self is Loki. It is Loki who makes it possible to build and Loki who births monsters, Loki who tells lie and cunning tales, Loki who makes the treasures of the gods and who will one day turn on the gods as well. Loki lives in every mind, every will that seeks the infinite: Loki is the dark guardian of death and the dead who allows one to breach them, and the infinite. If Yggdrasil is seen as the biocomputer generated in higher dimensions by the existence of all life, then Loki is the avatar who can interface with that vast and cosmic machine and climb the limbs, who must create in himself and in the extradimensional branches at the same time: Odin's Loki is not Utgard's Loki, yet both have a Loki, a void that is a reflection of all of one's possibilities, both ill and benign. Loki can cause the making of a great hammer or an arrow that can kill the unkillable god. You can bind your Loki in chains and it will still break free. It is the potential that sleeps in the breast, be it the giant king or the Father of the Gods. In the end, it will be an unchecked Loki that helps destroy us all, an unchecked Loki and the cre-

ations it brought into being. Witness his actions: his mischief taunts and destroys all, be they Jotun or Aesir, Vanir or dvergar or human. No one is safe without Loki, and yet Loki can be the staunchest of allies as well as the most daunting of foes.

You could play with the details of this as you like. Ymir could just as easily be a vast crashed starship and the dvergar robots intended to reconstruct it, the Jotun descendants of the original crew, Mimir's well the original interface program with the Ymir's synthetic organic computer, Yggdrasil, the Aesir the hybrid offspring of humans and aliens,

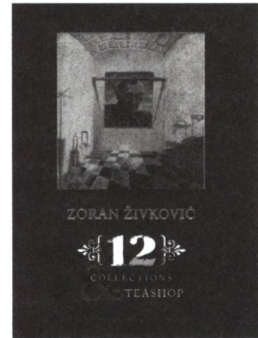
the Vanir humans who fought back against alien expansion, and Loki a computer program intended to allow the Aesir to access Mimir's well and the dvergar for construction of alien weaponry to combat the Jotun and their kin which develops sentience and even sympathizes with the Jotun's goal to destroy the Aesir, enslave the Vanir and conquer the earth. There are many ways to understand the mischief god, the only maker of the Aesir, son of the giants, shadow of Odin, father of monsters, Loki the changing god, and I suspect he wouldn't have it any other way.



What lies behind the human urge to collect things? What is the true psychology of the kleptomaniac? These questions bear on all of us; within every person there lurks a fanatical philatelist or a monomaniacal lepidopterist, just waiting to burst forth. In his new story cycle, *Twelve Collections*, Zoran Živković, the master of mind-bending surreal fantasy, applies his fertile mind to this problem.

Some of Živković's characters are lonely eccentrics, driven to gather unusual objects by quirks of temperament or fate; others are the victims of metaphysical collectors from Beyond, entities eager to snap up memories, emotions, and other loose fragments of the soul. In these pages are explained the profound karmic consequences of photographic narcissism, insane record-keeping, the archiving of one's nail clippings, and the infinite savoring of words; here also are exemplary warnings against surrendering hope, living without creativity, accepting too blithe a Heaven, and answering the phone in the middle of a dream-haunted night. Of course, even with such sage counsel, life remains uncertain and perilous; but even if ultimate answers can never be found, a Živković collection is always eminently collectable . . .

Also in this volume: *The Teashop*, a superb new novelette about storytelling and the miraculous weavings of Fate.



*“The King’s Physician”, Richard Paul Russo tells us, “is a companion piece to a story I wrote a few years ago, ‘The Dread and Fear of Kings’, which was published on SciFi.com. I’d never intended to write anything else about the ongoing events of the first story, but the King’s Physician, who did not appear in the original story, kept popping up in my head. As there is a much larger story going on in the background of the two individual stories I’ve now written, I have a feeling that more stories may yet appear—or even an entire novel.”*

*Richard’s two most recent books are Ship of Fools (published in the UK as Unto Leviathan), which won the Philip K. Dick Award, and The Rosetta Codex. “I am currently in the exploratory stages for a couple of novels, and still uncertain which I will write first.”*

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# The King’s Physician

## Richard Paul Russo

19th day of October, Year 18

**A**fter four long and bloody days, the city of Marakkeen has finally been taken.

An hour ago I stood at an open window on the top floor of this old stone building and listened to a distant bell toll the second hour past midnight. Until today, this building had been the hub of the governor’s compound, but it is now the king’s command quarters. Beneath us, the governor sits chained to a cell wall in his own basement prison.

From the window I had a sweeping view of the defeated city, ragged shadows and dark hulking forms irregularly lit by the fifteen or twenty scattered fires that had not yet been extinguished, buildings that will burn to the ground by morning. No warmth came to me from those fires, however, and the frigid air tightened the skin on my face; yet I found it strangely refreshing

as it cooled my fever—a fever more likely imagined than real. The cold air also helped keep the stench bearable, the smells of steaming blood and urine, evacuated bowels, rotting food, charred wood and flesh, smells that had been overwhelming during the day as we marched through the city’s streets and overran the governor’s compound.

In this room, I smell only burning oil from the lamps, a hint of nutmeg, and the faint aroma of mold.

Four days to take the city of Marakkeen with the king’s army of twenty thousand, and that was after three days of being harried by slash-and-run strikes as we approached the city. No other city had required more than a single day to occupy it, but no other city had resisted in any organized fashion. Marakkeen was the first to fight back, even if they didn’t have much to fight with. I suspect it’s a harbinger of a new and grimmer future. Which is, I suppose, exactly what the king wants.

**T**he king.

After standing at the window for some time, I descended to the ground floor to check on him. We have established the king's chamber in a central, secure and windowless room that had served as the governor's privacy lounge—we emptied it and then installed the generators and cables, the medical equipment and refrigeration units, the king's golden fluid-filled vat for council meetings and daily planning sessions, and his sleeping harness. Supervised by the night captain, a contingent of six guards flanked the only door, weapons at the ready as I came around the corner.

The captain ordered the men down and back to attention, then gave me a quick salute. He stepped forward and we shook hands.

"Do you need to enter?" he asked.

I nodded.

He signaled to the guards, who set about deactivating the door and room alarms and the interior Metzen field. The captain opened the door himself, held it for me as I entered, then closed and secured it behind me.

The room was cold and dimly lit by the subdued glow of bio-maintenance machinery and the faint blue aura of the king's sleep harness. The king lay in a hammock of tubing and wires suspended from metal supports surrounded by generator, pumps, vessels and cables. His limbs were encased in flexible cylinders through which preser-

vative organ extracts and hormones flowed, fed by the tubing that formed the hammock. Electrical stimulation bands encircled his torso, and electro-patches dotted his scalp, all ensuring a deep and restful sleep.

The old king is dying. He is a hundred and fourteen years old, and has been kept alive by machines since the day he was born. But medical devices can only do so much, his physician can only do so much, and we are struggling more with each passing year, each passing month. The old king is dying, and seems determined to take as many with him as he can.

**I** am Niccolo Angelotti, the King's Physician. My mother was the King's Physician before me, and her father and grandfather before her. My great-grandfather in fact delivered the king into this world, and kept him alive—despite his many congenital defects—with sophisticated medical equipment that has been meticulously preserved and maintained and repaired over the many decades since our ancestors first arrived on this world. The family "tradition" ends with me, for I have no children, nor will I.

**A**ll my life I have experienced occasional insomnia, but it's become more frequent in recent months, and for the last week I haven't slept more than three or four hours a night.

Tonight, after I had checked in on the king, I wandered the ground floor, exploring the layout of this building, and encountered the First Minister wandering as I was. This was not the first time we'd met one another, each of us on our own solitary and sleepless pilgrimage to nowhere.

He looked awful: his skin was pale and sweaty, his puffy eyes red and shadowed, and his hand shook when he raised it in greeting. His long graying hair fell across his face while his ministerial robes hung limp and disheveled from his sagging shoulders. In recent weeks I'd provided him soporifics with increasing frequency, but they were no longer effective. He'd been drinking too much of late, ignoring my caution that alcohol would not help his sleep.

"Hello, Niccolo," he said, managing a pitiful smile.

"Hello, Gregorz." We clasped each other by the shoulder. "You don't look good."

"I don't *feel* good, so I shouldn't *look* good." His breath was warm and alcoholic and slightly foul; his stomach was bothering him again.

We walked together in silence, along a passage with windows that opened onto the compound courtyard; we heard the rustle of sleeping soldiers and the regular steps of sentries, saw the flicker of the dozens of small fires that provided the soldiers with meager warmth. The First Minister stopped at one window and looked out upon those fires and soldiers, but said nothing and turned away to lead us into an interior

side passage that ended abruptly at a wall with a wooden bench seat. Two closed doors led off each side wall.

"I received the preliminary casualty reports tonight," he said.

"Ours or theirs?"

Gregorz snorted. "We don't tally theirs. We never have. And this is the first time *we've* had any casualties of consequence."

"And that disturbs you," I said.

He looked at me with hooded eyes and lowered his voice, as if afraid he might be overheard. "I'll tell you what disturbs me, Niccolo. We may not tally their casualties, but I know that they're many times our own." His dark and tortured gaze held my own. "And for what?"

I didn't answer, but I knew he didn't expect me to.

He stepped to the bench and sat heavily against the stone wall, tilting his head back and closing his eyes.

I stood there looking down at him, almost afraid he would speak again. I've tried hard not to dwell on the consequences of the king's actions—of *our* actions—the consequences of this long march across the world, the occupation and destruction of city after city. Too many mixed feelings . . . mixed loyalties . . .

"And how does the king sleep, Physician?" Gregorz opened one eye and looked at me with it.

"He sleeps well," I replied. "Soundly."

"Like an innocent child?"

"No."

"No," Gregorz reiterated. "Neither innocent nor childlike, is he?" He sighed and closed the open eye.

"Shall I make you something to help you sleep?" I asked.

Gregorz slowly shook his head. "It's better that *someone* can't sleep tonight. But make something for yourself, Niccolo."

I wouldn't, but I nodded, then realized he couldn't see it. I let it go.

"Good night, Gregorz."

"Good night, Niccolo." Eyes still closed.

I left him there and came back to this room, my quarters in this place, my temporary home, the latest in a string of temporary homes stretching back hundreds of miles and nearly as many days.

**F**irst hints of dawn. I think I can sleep now. When I noticed the faint gray light in the window I realized that I had been sitting here without moving for some time, pen in hand, writing nothing. Not quite asleep, and yet not quite awake, either.

I stood and stretched and went to the window. Frost and thin sheets of ice, smoke black and white rising into the dark gray sky. The city appeared deserted except for a few patrols shuffling along the cold streets with lanterns, and the soldiers' camps in the open parks and fields. As if all of Marakkeen's residents had fled or been killed. But I knew that many thousands remained, huddled within their homes, afraid to use lights or fires, afraid to call

attention to themselves. Afraid of us, and waiting for us to leave.

**L**ate night again as I write this. I managed to sleep after dawn, and slept undisturbed until midday when a courier woke me with a message from the king demanding my attendance. But when I arrived at his chamber I was told that he was in a private meeting with two of his priests and could not be disturbed. I was also told not to leave until word came from the king himself.

I waited in the corridor for hours. Food and drink were brought to me, and I was allowed to relieve myself. Eventually one of the priests emerged with his tall heavy scepter, but only to call for one of the waiting couriers; he spoke privately to the courier and dispatched her, banging the scepter on the stone to hurry her on her way. Half an hour later, all seven ministers and their scribes had arrived for a council session, along with the Court Cartographer and the Royal Astronomer. We waited silently together in the corridor.

The Second Minister stood at attention in full black battle armor, her eyes fixed on the secured chamber door. Gregorz leaned back against the stone wall with eyes half closed. The Fifth Minister was obviously drunk and paced the corridor with an occasional stagger, trying to sober himself. The other ministers kept to themselves, staying out of the Fifth Minister's way.

Finally the chamber door opened and we were invited inside. The cham-

ber was stifling with a damp heat, and smoky with incense; the two priests stood toward the back, near the censers. The king lay in his long glass vat in the center of the room, half floating in the bubbling amber fluids that preserve his old and withered and discolored flesh. One arm rested on the edge of the vat, papery skin dotted with golden droplets that reflected the lantern light. Warm air from the vat's cooling fans curled across the floor.

Then I noticed Boell Kahn standing in the shadows of the medical equipment, pressed against the wall as though hiding. Kahn is my apprentice, designated to take my place as the King's Physician when I die or can no longer perform my duties. Or, it occurred to me then, if I were to be dismissed by the king. He had been in this room with the king and the priests all day, and I wondered what that meant.

The king sat up in the submerged seat, yellowed neck and shoulders rising above the percolating fluid. He raised his right hand and waved it generally at the gathered ministers, his gaze moving from one to another. He stopped, and regarded the Second Minister. When he spoke, his lips hardly moved, but his distorted and amplified voice emerged from speakers in the base of the vat, a harsh and metallic grating like some mechanical beast attempting to imitate human speech.

"What is the security status of Marakkeen?"

The Second Minister stepped forward, confident. Only three days ago

she was being excoriated by the king, held responsible for the hourly slash-and-run strikes and the resulting casualties. Now the city was taken, and she felt redeemed.

"Completely secure, Excellency. There were no skirmishes today, no casualties. The citizens of Marakkeen have accepted their defeat and their occupation."

The king stared at the Second Minister, and it was unclear whether or not he was pleased with her answer. "Are people leaving their homes, entering the streets, resuming their lives?"

"Occasionally, Excellency. Mostly scavenging for food and water. We keep close watch on them."

The king shook his head. "I've decided they must remain in their homes for at least the next several days. Proclaim this throughout the city. I do not want to see a single citizen of this city in the streets."

The Second Minister opened her mouth, then closed it.

"Yes?" the king said, his lips turning up into an unpleasant smile. "Speak your mind."

It was clear the Second Minister did not want to do that just now, but she eventually did. "If they can't go out even for food or water . . ."

"Yes?" the king said again.

"Starvation," she continued. "People will die of thirst."

"Yes," the king said. "And when that begins to happen, and they become desperate, I expect you to keep them under control. Understood?"



There was tension in the Second Minister's face, a tightness around her eyes, and her breathing became shallow, almost as if trying to cease.

No smile at all now on his face, the king repeated himself, that mechanical voice grinding through the room. "Understood, Minister?"

She held her stance, but did not reply. The chamber became quiet except for the whisper of the pumps and cooling fans, the barely audible hiss of the vat's bubbling fluids, the creak of leather and faint rustle of fabric.

Gregorz stepped forward then, breaking out of the tableau. The king's head turned toward Gregorz, gaze hard and unwavering, then his face relaxed and a smile returned.

"Ahh, my First Minister," the king said. "I take it *you* have something to say."

"Yes, Excellency."

"Don't hold back, Gregorz. You know I take your advice seriously."

"I won't hold back." He adjusted his robes and coughed. "I believe I understand the Second Minister's hesitation. Her confusion." He paused, but the king waited for him to continue, not moving, not changing expression. "They match my own."

"You're confused, Gregorz?" The king's voice was a quiet rasp, somehow conveying his own confusion. Or was it mock confusion?

"Yes, Excellency. Over all these months, as we've moved from city to city, we have . . . occupied them, we have taken control of their leadership

structures, their administrations. And we have destroyed their monuments, their gardens and rivers, their cultures. All in the service of . . . supposedly . . . unifying this world. In Kazakh-Ir, only three weeks ago, we smashed all of the stained glass that their renowned artisans had produced. At Salterno, we fouled the waters of their famed canals. We laid waste the luxury gardens of Morningsun. In Rialto we . . ."

The old king put up his hand and cut him off. "I *know* what we've done, Gregorz. Your point?"

Gregorz breathed in deeply, and spoke. "Until now, we have never deliberately killed the people of the cities."

"These people attacked *us*, First Minister. This has become a war. They killed our soldiers, so now we kill them."

Gregorz shook his head. "The battle is over, Excellency. Most of those who remain did not fight in the first place, and those who did have surrendered, have laid down their arms and ceased their resistance. There is no need to kill them, no need to starve them, no need to deprive them of the necessities of life."

"You are wrong, First Minister. There is very much the need to do all those things. You may not understand it, you may not agree with it, but you *will* accept it."

Gregorz did not reply to the king. The two of them regarded one another in silence, then Gregorz slowly lowered his head and just as slowly raised it, a gesture that might have been a nod or a

bow . . . or perhaps something else altogether that only he and the king understood. He stepped back, leaving the Second Minister out front and alone again.

The king turned to her. "Is your duty understood, Minister?"

The Second Minister nodded. "Understood, Excellency." She stepped back, this time without the usual snapping click of her boots.

The king rolled back his head and closed his eyes. He shuddered briefly, rippling the surface fluids. Then he brought his head up and around and opened his eyes, looking at the Court Cartographer. "Display," the king ordered.

The cartographer wheeled out his equipment, worked the switches and dials, and a holographic projection sputtered into existence in the air above the king. This world's two largest continents were displayed: Duur, where our home city of Lamantium resided, and Galla, which lay to the east on the other side of the Dimanta Straits and on which we now stood. Nearly all of the cities on Duur glowed a steady crimson, including Kazakh-Ir, the city nearest the straits and which had fallen to us only a few weeks ago. Marakkeen, the first city on Galla, also glowed red, but every other city on this continent remained a glistening emerald green.

So many. As I stared at those lights I thought that changing them from green to red was going to become more and more difficult, bringing greater destruction and injury and death. Until, as

the king believes—or *needs* to believe—the end times foretold in the Levancian Chronicles come to pass and bring about the return of the starfarers, the descendants of our ancestors who colonized this world and then left us without the means to return to the stars ourselves. Except I don't believe in the Levancian Chronicles. All we will bring about is our own ruin.

The king raised himself higher out of the amber fluid and motioned to the cartographer, who manipulated the projection and brought it closer. The old man, our king, jabbed a waxen finger at the shining green light of Jassmel, the city closest to Marakkeen. "There," he said. "Jassmel is next." He gestured at the map and the cartographer burst the projection into a shower of dying multicolored embers, a ritual that had been repeated endlessly in recent months.

The king let himself fall back, splashing golden fluid onto the floor, then closed his eyes and dropped his arm below the surface of the liquid so that only his head remained visible, a disembodied apparition cast adrift in the long glass vat.

**T**he Levancian Chronicles. I've read them more than once since they have become such a focus for the king, a guide to his actions. They form a relatively short text, less than two hundred pages, which consists primarily of accounts that purport to chronicle the early history of the colonization of this

world. The accounts are mundane, for the most part, which lends them a certain credibility.

The final section of the text, however, is presented as a prophetic vision of the future, of the “end times” of this world, and in content and style is so different from the rest of the Chronicles that it has clearly been written by a different author . . . or the same person gone completely mad. It appears to be modeled on the Apocalypse of John from the Christian Bible, and is filled with fantastical images and overwrought symbolism and scenes of extreme and grotesque violence, all of which supposedly presage the return of the starfarers. Blood and burning and devastation, all of which the king is now doing his best to produce.

The king prays desperately for the starfarers’ return because he is convinced they can grant him eternal life . . . or something close to it. Some days he thinks it will be through superior technology, machines and devices that can arrest the decay of his flesh and maintain his life indefinitely. Other days he is more optimistic and imagines the starfarers will be able to cure his congenital abnormalities, reverse the aging of his body, and rejuvenate him so that he will live free of machines and walk and run as he never has in his entire life.

Does the king really believe in the Levancian Chronicles, in that final text with its deranged prophecies? Does he believe he can actually *create* the end times foretold?

I don’t know. He is old, and he is dying, and he is at least a little bit mad, and I don’t know if even *he* knows anymore.

### 20th day of October, Year 18

I didn’t see the king today, nor did I see Gregorz. The king convened no meetings, he did not even send for me to prepare him for sleep, which meant that task was carried out by Boell Kahn tonight.

This afternoon I went out into the city of Marakkeen despite the warnings of several military officers. The sky was clear and the sun was bright, but ice remained wherever it lay in shadow. The smell was bad, as not all of the dead have been disposed of, and the patrols were shitting and pissing on the streets and dumping their food scraps in open piles to be fought over by vermin and scavenger birds and starving pets.

The city felt deserted. No residents appeared on the streets, and I walked for long stretches without seeing or hearing a single soldier. Doors were closed, windows covered, and only rarely did some stray sound emerge from one of the buildings—a scrape, a muted thunk, a high-pitched whistle of unknown origin, a crack of ice or creak of wood, all noises so isolated it was easy to believe that the buildings themselves produced them as they slowly disintegrated.

I have never felt so helpless. I was certain that there were people in those buildings sick or injured, dying people

who could have used medical attention. I wanted to help them, but there was nothing I could do. Call out to offer my services? No one would answer. *I* wouldn't answer.

In the center of a small square stood a gazebo with benches and planters and a roof of narrow wood slats crisscrossing one another in an apparently chaotic manner but which formed elegant patterns of light and shade on the brick floor and the wooden benches. I entered the gazebo, stood for a time near the center, slowly turning and gazing up through the patterned roof, and for a few dizzying and delightful moments felt as if I was seeing new and wonderful stars rotating above me, a strange and different sky above some other world.

### 22nd day of October, Year 18

Gregorz is dead.

Gregorz Dunkazyck, the king's First Minister, is dead.

It's been two days since my last entry. Gregorz attended this evening's council session, which hadn't lasted long. The king was short-tempered and distracted, hurrying the ministers through their reports, hardly listening and responding with nothing more than a mutter or grumble that apparently no one could discern, for there was never a follow-up by any of them.

Was there something different tonight about Gregorz? Looking back on it now, knowing that he almost certainly killed himself, I can imagine

noticing a distance in his demeanor, a lack of engagement, even a sense of despair, but the truth is I noticed none of that at the time—or at least no more than has been usual for him in recent days. I did notice that his scribe was not in attendance, but while the absence of a minister's scribe is rare, it does occur, and usually means nothing. Even in this case it may have meant nothing.

The council session ended, and two hours later I was administering a soporific to the king—watched over more closely than usual by Boell Kahn, it seemed to me—and supervising his preparations for sleep. Two hours after that, near midnight, I had just gone to bed when there was a quiet knock on my door.

"Come," I said, sitting up and turning up the lamp on the bedside table.

The door opened, and the First Minister's scribe entered my room. He closed the door firmly but quietly behind him and stood before me, a folded sheet of vellum in his hand.

"What is it?" I asked.

"My minister is dead." He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at me again and repeated those four words, as if trying to convince himself of something he did not want to be true. "My minister is dead."

I said nothing, didn't move, feeling that new piece of knowledge work its way through me and trying to stop the sprouting threads of speculation, not only about what happened but also about what it might mean. The scribe took a few steps forward and handed

the vellum to me. I looked down at the First Minister's seal, the pressed blue wax, the floral design surrounding a raised scepter. I turned it over and stared at my name written in indigo ink. After a few moments I broke the seal and unfolded the single sheet and read.

*Niccolo,*

*Not much to say. I just want to you understand, to know, that I have done this. You know the reasons more than anyone. Now I'll sleep.*

*Gregorz*

I recognized his handwriting, his way of "speaking." Although there were few words, I knew he had written this note.

I looked up at the scribe. "Where is he?"

"In his chamber."

"I'll get dressed, and then we'll go." I stood. "What's your name?"

The scribe shook his head. "I'll wait in the corridor." He turned and left.

**H**is room was large and warm, heated by two ceramics that glowed near the center of the room; oil lamps provided an orange and comforting illumination. Gregorz lay in his robes on a thick pad against the right wall, and he appeared calm and peaceful and sound asleep. I trusted his scribe's assessment, but I knelt at Gregorz's side and checked for signs of life. No pulse, no evidence of breathing.

I sat on the pad, my hip against his, overwhelmed and exhausted. On the low table beside his bed were two dozen or more of the vials I had given him in previous weeks, all of them empty, and I immediately realized he had been hoarding them with this act in mind.

I turned to the scribe, who stood motionless and stricken and yet not as shaken as I thought he would be.

"When did you find him?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment, then blinked and his head turned just slightly toward me. "Just now," he said. "Just before I came up to your quarters." When I remained silent, he went on as if my silence asked for more explanation. "I was to deliver a report to the minister, so I knew he was expecting me." He paused, as though trying to decide whether or not he should say more, then exhaled with a finality that told me he was finished.

"You weren't at this evening's council session," I said.

"No. I was carrying out a commission from the minister."

"What was the commission?"

The scribe shook his head.

"Even though he's dead now?"

He breathed in long and deep, and slowly nodded.

I don't know why I asked him the following question, but the words emerged almost without thought. "And if the king were to ask you about the commission, would you tell *him*?"

The scribe's bearing took on a surprising determination. "No," he said.

I almost smiled, then. "You're a good

man," I told him. I shook my head. "The king won't ask you. He won't even know you were gone, and I won't tell him."

I turned back to Gregorz and observed his face, his mouth almost slack, his brow unfurrowed for the first time in many weeks or months, never to be furrowed again. I sat there a long time, forgetting that the scribe stood behind me waiting for some instruction, but I have no desire to put my thoughts of that time into words.

Eventually I stood, and noticing once again the scribe's presence I said, "There's no need for an autopsy. It's clear what happened, how he died. There's also no need to awaken the king. Tomorrow will be soon enough to notify him."

We left Gregorz there, on his bed. Tomorrow will be soon enough for that as well. We shut down the ceramic heaters, extinguished the lamps, opened the window wide to let in the frigid night air . . . and left him to sleep.

**I** now feel very much alone in this world.

### 23rd day of October, Year 18

The king is furious. He suspects some kind of conspiracy, though he can't articulate why his First Minister's suicide would evidence such a plot. He interrogated the scribe at length with hostility and suspicion, though as I'd assured him the king never asked about

his absence from the council session. The king interrogated me with just as much suspicion, and it was obvious that he did not want to believe that Gregorz had killed himself. I can't imagine what difference it makes.

First he ordered Gregorz to be cremated without ceremony, without pronouncement of any kind. Then he changed his mind, declared that Gregorz should be buried in an unmarked grave in the back of the compound, and rather than appoint a new First Minister decreed that there would no longer *be* a First Minister. Finally, he dismissed us all, even his priests and Boell Kahn.

I was the last to leave, and as I started through the door the king called me back. I approached his glass vat, and when he was certain the door had been closed, he looked at me and with trembling mouth asked, "Why, Niccolo?" His eyes held as much fear as anger. "Why did Gregorz do it?"

"I don't know, Erland. Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. He was my chief adviser. Now I'm left without his services, without his counsel. It's betrayal, Niccolo. The ultimate betrayal." He paused, gazing steadily at me. "You're sure you don't know why?"

I nodded. "I'm sure."

The king managed a partial smile. "Should I believe you, Niccolo?"

"Yes, Erland," I said, my voice firm and steady.

He waved a hand in his all too familiar gesture of dismissal, and I left him alone in his chamber.

I have known Erland all my life. Our relationship is complex . . . and increasingly complicated. Complicated by many things, but primarily by his growing instability, the changes that have occurred in his personality in recent years—he has not always been a harsh and vicious megalomaniac. He has not always been “king.”

Erland was the *governor* of Lamantium for nearly twenty-five years, assuming the office following the death of his father, the previous governor. He guided the affairs of Lamantium with modest competence and wisdom, but he was well-intentioned . . . and benign.

A number of years ago, however, he began conferring privately with the Levancian priests—for an hour or two at first, then longer, until he occasionally sequestered himself with the priests for days at a time. After several months, he declared himself “King.” King of Lamantium, and King of this world. Everything changed after that, and we are now in the eighteenth year of his reign.

When I was a child, and my mother and grandfather were both serving as his physicians (he was still the governor, then), he asked me to call him “Uncle Erland.” I did so for many years, even into adulthood. My father never liked Erland, and disliked my use of that term of affection. Only when I became apprenticed to my mother, following the death of my grandfather, did I cease calling him “Uncle,” but I’ve never stopped thinking of him as part of my family, what remains of it.

I have not seen my father in twelve years, not since my mother died. He left Lamantium after her death, and never returned. We do communicate, though infrequently—usually three or four times a year. As far as I know, he is still alive and in good health, but I have not been in touch with him in many months, not since the king began his crusade.

#### 24th day of October, Year 18

We buried him ourselves, Gregorz’s scribe and I. We carried the body with the help of two wordless servants, a man and woman who have some undefined positions here in the former governor’s compound, the two of them old but still strong. We carried Gregorz in a makeshift stretcher along a gravel path that meandered among leafless shrubs and trees along the western wall of the compound and ended at a barren patch of dark earth. Spades and picks had already been brought there by the two servants, and we set the stretcher on the cold ground and began to dig.

The ground was relatively soft, and we dug two at a time, all four of us taking turns with the spades and the picks, working steadily but without hurry. The afternoon sun was low and provided little warmth, but our exertions warmed us, or at least kept the chill away, and we made good progress. That spot had perhaps served as a pet cemetery, for we dug up the bones of several small animals, one tiny lightweight skeleton still wrapped in the

tattered remnants of fabric and furred skin.

We stopped when the grave was waist deep and ramped at one end. As we rested, the small clouds of fog from our breaths mingled above the open grave and gradually rose into the otherwise cloudless sky just now beginning to darken as the sun neared the horizon. The scribe and I picked up the body and staggered with it down the ramp, settling it onto the uneven ground and arranging the legs and arms and clothes so that, again, Gregorz appeared to be in some deep and unnatural sleep. We climbed out of the grave, and the two servants helped us refill the hole with the dirt and bones we'd previously removed.

The servants stood silently with us beside the grave, the air growing colder and the sky growing darker until the compound's lamps lit up atop the perimeter walls and the building rooftops. Then the servants put the tools on the stretcher and carried them away, leaving the two of us alone.

I asked the scribe why he would not tell me his name.

"I can tell you now," he said. He stared at the freshly turned dirt before us, the small piles that still remained scattered about. "Now that I am no longer a scribe, I can take my name back." He smiled faintly to himself, then looked at me. "It's Aristo."

"What do you mean about no longer being a scribe?"

"I have no station," he replied. He looked away from me again, not at the

ground this time but at the remaining colors of blood and fire in the western sky. "The king eliminated my position when he decreed that there would be no replacement of my minister. I would have become the scribe for the new First Minister, or the new First Minister would have continued with his or her current scribe, and I would have become the scribe for whoever became a minister for the first time. But now . . . nothing. It's as though part of my life no longer exists."

"How does that feel, Aristo?"

"Liberating, physician."

"Call me Niccolo," I said to him. "Your minister did."

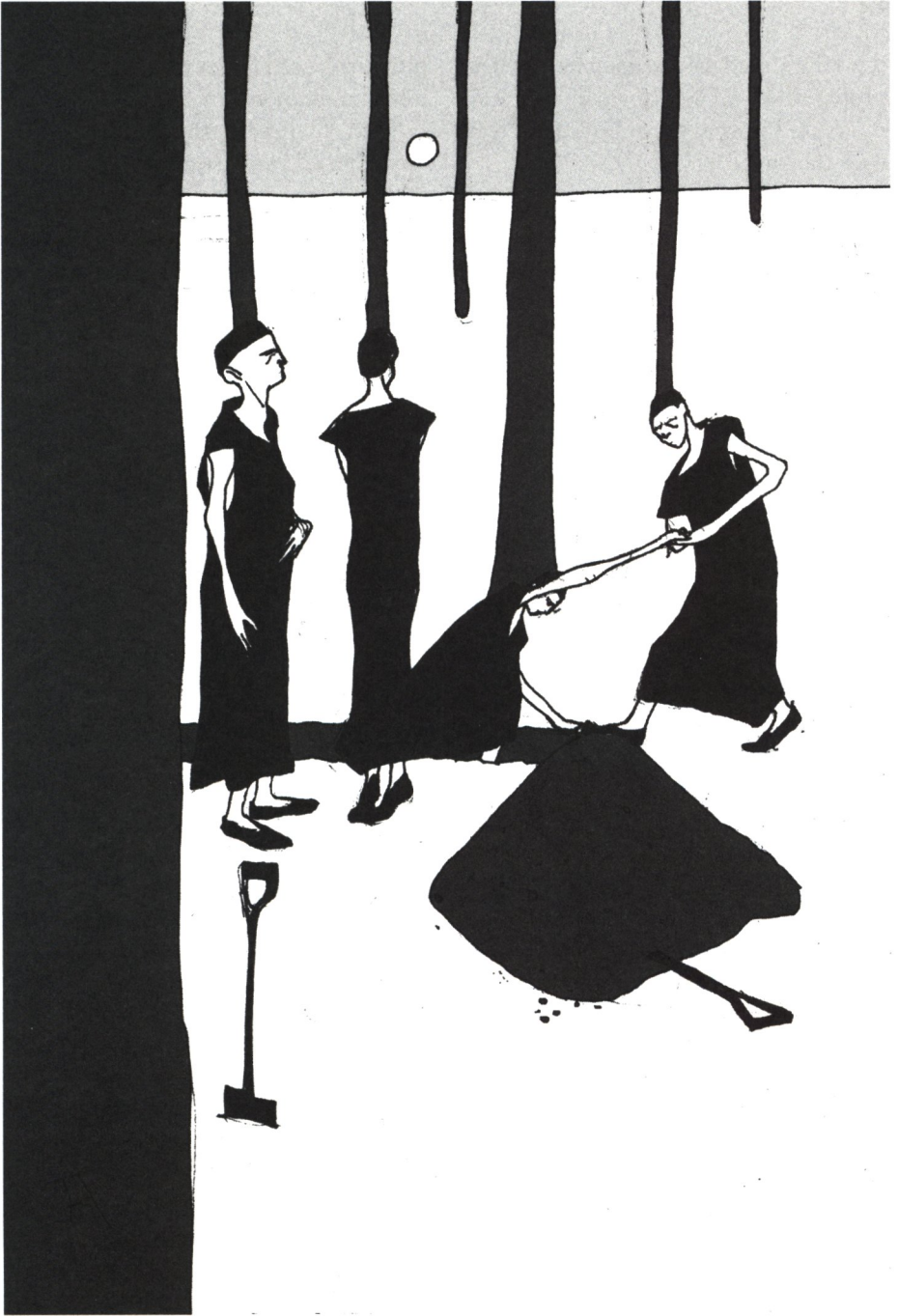
He turned back to me, and with a faint smile said, "Yes, and I will, too." He tipped his head and walked off, leaving me alone beside the grave.

### 26th day of October, Year 18

The king has decided to leave Marakkeen at first light tomorrow, and head for Jassmel. Suddenly the people of Marakkeen, and whether or not they starve, are no longer of any interest to him. He announced that the conquest of Jassmel must be accomplished as soon as possible, and that nothing else matters.

Preparations have already begun, couriers are hurrying throughout the city with orders for the soldiers, and I can hear the half-organized half-chaotic sounds of the king's escort readying itself in the courtyard below. Boell Kahn is supervising the packing of





the king's medical equipment and the preparations of his howdah. For the moment, I'm content to be out of favor with the king.

### 27th day of October, Year 18

On the road to Jassmel, one day out from Marakkeen. We're camped for the night on an open frozen plain. The early moon is nearly full and gives the encampment an unreal silver-blue aura.

I'm trying to hold myself together, to understand what happened, what I did . . . and what I didn't do.

Last night, while I listened to the frantic sounds of travel preparations drift in through my window, I decided to check on the governor before we left. I was certain he had been extensively questioned, and I worried about his health.

I collected my medical bags and descended to the basement prison cells. I told the guards I'd been instructed to assess the governor's physical condition, and they allowed me to attend to him after cursorily inspecting my medical kit.

The senior guard unlocked and opened the door, releasing a warm and fetid odor from the stifling darkness within. The angled light from the passage lit a strip of dirt floor and a slightly wider patch of brick wall, but I couldn't see the governor, or even gauge the size of the cell. The guard pried open a panel beside the door and pressed a switch; a pale glow came on from a

filthy overhead lamp, casting a dim yellow illumination.

"I'm surprised there's electricity down here," I said, searching the gloom for some sign of the governor.

The guard grunted. "They need it for interrogations."

The wall chains and shackles hung loose and empty from the cracked brick, and the governor lay barefoot and shirtless on the floor in the far corner, discolored arms wrapped around his head. He slowly looked up, blinking, and though the light was dim I could see the bruises and gashes and blood that made his face nearly unrecognizable. I stepped into the cell, and the guard shut the door behind me.

I walked toward the governor, expecting him to flinch or pull back, but all he did was blink and stare at me with eyes surrounded by dark and swollen flesh. I knelt before him and opened my kit.

"More questions?" he said, his voice dry and cracked.

"I'm a physician," I said.

He let me ease him away from the wall and lay him face-up on the floor as he huffed out his pain in labored gasps. I realized immediately that what I had in my medical kit would be inadequate. His trousers had been cut away above the knees, and I could see that both lower legs were broken, jagged bone pressing up from under the skin, which was fortunately still intact at those points. His toes were crushed and his abdomen was mottled purple and yellow; most spots I gently touched

elicited hisses of pain. I was fairly certain he was bleeding internally, and I wouldn't be able to do much about that.

I cleaned and disinfected his open wounds, then bandaged them. None of them bled much, little more than some oozing, but it wasn't the external wounds that worried me.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked.

"I'm a physician."

He rolled his head slowly back and forth. "I know your face," he said. "You're the *king's* physician. Why are you helping *me*?" he asked again.

"I'm a physician," I repeated.

This time he seemed to understand, for he closed his eyes and made a slight movement that might have been a nod. I prepared a syringe with a potent painkiller, injected him, waited until his face relaxed as the drug took effect, then went to look for Aristo.

I found him in the antechamber to the rooms that had been occupied by Gregorz. He was packing his belongings for the morning departure, and through the open door to the other rooms I could see Gregorz's own things packed into trunks stacked against the wall.

"I can't take all that with us," he explained, "but I didn't like the thought of leaving everything out as if he was going to return at any moment."

"I need your help," I told him. "Now."

He nodded and followed me without question to my room where we picked up a few things, then down to the king's

chamber. Aristo wasn't allowed entrance, and they closed the door behind me. It didn't matter—though the king hung in the center of the room, sleeping and surrounded by the primary medical devices, the rest of the medical equipment and supplies were gone. I realized Boell Kahn had had it all removed so it could be packed without disturbing the king's sleep.

I started toward the door to leave, then stopped, my breath catching, and turned back to the king. The chamber was cool and dimly lit, and his suspended form appeared ghostly in the bluish light. His eyes were closed, his skin flaccid and gray as if in some state between life and death.

I quietly stepped closer, until I could have reached up and out to touch him. The support machinery hummed quietly and the fluids whispered unintelligible murmurs as they flowed through the tubes and cylinders and into the king's flesh and into his veins.

It occurred to me, for the first time, that I had the ability and the opportunity to end all this destruction, all this killing, all this madness.

I stood motionless before him, my chest tightening so that breathing was difficult. My heart seemed to ripple and flutter rather than beat, and I felt faint. I stared at the old king, half expecting those eyes to open and stare back at me in accusation.

It wouldn't take much. Make a few adjustments to the equipment, change the fluid ratios, disconnect one or more of the devices. It could be done in a way

that would not cause the king any pain, he would remain sedated and never wake up. It could be done . . .

I couldn't move. I was a physician, I was the *King's* Physician, he had entrusted his life to me . . .

He was ravaging this world and its people . . .

I had grown up calling him "Uncle" . . .

The king was mad and we were living out his madness. . .

I was a physician . . . I was the King's Physician . . .

I felt paralyzed. I couldn't reach out to touch any of the equipment, yet I couldn't turn away from him and leave.

I heard the door open, and a voice call to me. "What are you doing?"

I slowly turned and saw Boell Kahn standing just inside the doorway, gaze tense and suspicious.

"What are you doing?" he asked again, voice rising. He hurried forward to check on the king, the machinery, the readouts.

A sudden calm of relief and regret and resignation flooded me. "I need some medical supplies," I said. "I didn't realize you'd already moved everything out."

The moment was gone, and I wondered if there would come another.

Kahn followed me closely as I left the chamber, then out to the courtyard, where a team of soldiers waited for him to direct them in wrapping and packaging the instruments, devices, machines and supplies for transport. I walked through the piles and crates,

picking up packets and small cartons, fluid bags and needles, splinting materials and some extra drugs, Aristo helping to carry it all. Boell Kahn shadowed us, asking why I needed it, but I didn't answer, and he couldn't object—he might be currently favored by the king, but I was still the senior physician.

Aristo and I returned to the basement and the governor's cell. The governor breathed more easily now, but his color was worse, his unmarked skin pale and taking on a bluish tinge.

Aristo followed my instructions quickly and without question. The first thing we did was set and splint the governor's legs, which caused all three of us to break out in a sweat and brought cries from the governor despite the painkiller. Aristo helped me get an equi-lyte drip going, hanging the bag from one of the wall chains, and I ran some broad spectrum antibiotics into it. He could have used blood or plasma as well, but that was impossible.

The governor was only semi-conscious by now, and looked barely alive. The ragged rise and fall of his chest and an occasional spastic flutter of his eyelids and lips were the only movements he made.

"How bad is he?" Aristo asked in a whisper.

I shook my head.

We remained at the governor's side through the night. He became fully conscious two or three times, but he only spoke once. "I used to know something," he murmured, staring intently

at me. "But I forget. I forget what it was."

Just before dawn the guards entered and said the king was waiting for me—we were leaving Marakkeen within the hour.

The governor was still alive when we left him. That may be all I ever know.

**D**id Boell Kahn save the king's life? No. I was not prepared to act. Act? I was not prepared to make a decision, let alone act. If Boell Kahn had not entered the king's chamber, I believe I would have remained there throughout the night, motionless and trapped in my own indecision, paralyzed in all ways until someone came to ready the king for our departure.

I spent all day as we traveled thinking about the minutes that I'd stood before the sleeping king, and thinking about all the years I have spent keeping him alive, the years my mother and grandfather and great-grandfather spent providing his medical care, sustaining the life in a body that should have perished within hours of its birth.

If a similar opportunity presents itself again, or if I manage to arrange for such an opportunity, I have no idea what I will do.

### 29th day of October, Year 18

The king has been attacked. Not the army, but the king himself. In the early morning hours, long before dawn, a bomb exploded less than a hundred feet

from the king's quarters, tearing open one wall and damaging the others, and shaking the king's sleep harness so violently that much of the equipment malfunctioned.

I was abruptly awakened by the explosion. Moments later, as I sat up on my cot and listened to the night, the king howled as though mortally wounded, screaming in the darkness, screaming *at* the darkness. I threw on a heavy cloak and hurried to his quarters, but the guards prevented me from entering. Through the open doorway I could see Boell Kahn inside working frantically at the medical equipment; I could see the king thrashing in his hammock, and I could hear him shrieking in fear or pain.

"Kahn!" I called. "Let me help!"

Boell Kahn looked up, saw me, and I realized he was experiencing his own moment of indecision. He glanced at the screaming twisting king and then at the jumbled equipment around them, but turned back and vehemently shook his head.

"Don't let him through!" he ordered the guards. When they closed before the entrance and blocked even my view, I realized how much my position had changed. I thought I saw helpless apology in the guards' faces, but I may have been fooling myself.

I stepped back and stood watching the king's quarters, hardly aware of my surroundings. I barely registered the movement of soldiers as they marched by me, only faintly heard the orders and questions and curses called out through

the cold night air. A hard chill worked its way into my limbs, and I shivered, pulling my cloak tight. I headed toward my tent, then changed my mind as I was about to enter, and turned back to see if there was any other way I could help.

Torches lit up the area around the king's quarters, and I approached the small crater that had been blasted from the ground. I smelled a pleasant smoky odor that was quickly cut through with the stench of burnt flesh. Small body parts and scraps of charred clothing lay strewn about the crater, widely scattered sprays and smears of blood shining and flashing in the torchlight.

The Second Minister stepped out of the shadows holding her helmet in her arm and stood beside me, and we both gazed into the crater. The king's wailing had ceased, but two muted alarms continued to sound.

"It's disturbing for more than one reason, Niccolo." She breathed deeply once, slowly released it. "The woman who brought in the explosives knew the pass-phrases. Fortunately she was stopped by Tirazo. Not sure exactly what happened, because there isn't anything left of him to ask. Or her."

"She wasn't one of ours?"

"No. I've spoken with the sentries that passed her through, and none of them recognized her. Some of them would have, if she'd been one of our soldiers."

"Then how did she know the pass-phrases?"

The Second Minister shrugged and shook her head in disgust. "We've been

lazy and careless. Haven't changed them since we ferried across the Straits."

"Even so, how did she know?"

She shook her head again. The Second Minister's name is Sorianix and I've known her since long before she became the Second Minister, since we were teenagers. We get on well with each other.

"Sorianix," I began, "I went to see to the king, and Kahn ordered the guards to keep me out." I paused, and when she didn't say anything I added, "They obeyed him."

A barely visible nod. "I'm sorry about that, Niccolo." She looked at me directly, which I appreciated. "No choice. You've been replaced by Kahn. I don't know why, but the king was adamant. You're out, Kahn's in. I'm sorry," she said again. "Not much makes sense lately."

There was nothing to say to that.

### 30th day of October, Year 18

We're staying here for now, at least for the next two days. Give the king a chance to recover, the strategists an opportunity to re-think and re-plan. I asked to see the king, but was refused. Boell Kahn emerged from the king's quarters and assured me that the king was stable, and all the equipment was fully functional. I wasn't needed.

I'd expected to sense triumph in his voice, pride or arrogance in his bearing, but I saw and heard none of those things. A grave sense of responsibility,

concern . . . and distrust of me. Maybe Kahn *is* the best choice to be the king's physician.

Everything is eerily quiet. No signs of the Jassmel defenders, or of anyone at all other than the king's army. This afternoon I climbed one of the observation structures and Jassmel was visible in the distance, across the empty frozen plain, but I could make out no evidence of life—no smoke, no flashes of light, not even a flicker of movement. Have the residents abandoned their city? I can't believe that.

**33rd(?) or 34th(?) day  
of October, Year 18**

I write now in a makeshift prison cell. A tent of heavy canvas walls, canvas floor on frozen ground. A flap door tied shut and guarded. Small screened openings so I can tell day from night. A cot and blankets. A leaky metal pail.

Dark and cold at first, bone-aching cold until a soldier brought a ceramic heater and a lamp on the second day. Still cold, but bearable now. Waiting. Waiting for execution, possibly. Probably.

Three nights ago, two days after the solo attack, the king called a strategy meeting. Squirming in his long glass vat he appeared shaken and exhausted and angry, even a little confused. Boell Kahn stood to his right, while the two priests knelt on bright green cushions to his left and back near the rear of the

pavilion. The Second, Third, and Fourth Ministers were in attendance with their scribes. I stood near the doorway, only half listening to the discussion.

The king threatened to replace the Second Minister, but everyone knew he wouldn't follow through—Sorianaix had earned her way into that position, there was no one better qualified, and the king needed her now more than ever. They talked about the lack of slash-and-run strikes and what that might mean; reviewed the nearly worthless scouting reports; speculated on Jassmel's defenses; discussed attack options.

In the end, the king waved his arms in frustration, scattering golden droplets across the pounded earthen floor like spittle from a raving lunatic, and began to rant, strings of incoherent phrases punctuated with jabbing gestures aimed toward one minister, then another, and occasionally at the priests. I found myself mesmerized by the hooked scepter one of the priests had planted in the dirt beside him, a heavy forged metal staff decorated with intertwining green and black serpents, and gold glyphs that no one but the priests could read.

I'm not sure even now of my intentions as I slowly worked my way along the walls, moving to the side and then toward the back. I heard the king's voice, others in response, back and forth, but they sounded far away, even retreating; I was no longer listening at all and had no idea what they discussed or argued over, nor did I care. The light

inside appeared to dim, as if the lamp wicks had been turned down, or the darkness had become thicker.

I stopped and stood beside the scepter, no longer looking at it but sensing its presence at my side, listening to the priest's heavy breathing which was louder by far than the voices of the king and his ministers. The king sat up and gestured wildly at the Third Minister and mouthed something, but I couldn't hear a sound.

A gong sounded from somewhere nearby, or perhaps I imagined it; whichever it was, real or imagined, the resonant tone set me in motion. I gripped the scepter with both hands and pulled it up and out of the earth. It was heavier than I had expected, but not so heavy I couldn't wield it with control. The priest turned to me, confused, and reached for it. I drew it away from him, then strode toward the king.

All talking ceased, heads turned toward me, but I don't think anyone yet knew what was happening. I quickened my pace and raised the scepter as I neared the king. His mouth opened and he lifted his withered arm as if to ward off an expected blow, sliding against the vat and splashing golden liquid over the side.

I set my feet, pulled the scepter back and up, then looked away from Erland and swung the scepter hard against the vat. The jarring blow sent bolts of pain up my arms and I nearly dropped the scepter. Not even a hint of a crack in the vat wall. It wasn't glass, but some transparent yet stronger material.

The king still held up his arm, rocking in his submerged seat, sloshing the liquid as a strained metallic cry emerged from the speakers, the mechanical translation of a hoarse and all too human cry that issued forth from between those discolored lips and which I was close enough to hear in its true form. I took two quick steps toward the rear of the vat and swung the scepter again, this time at the motors and pumps and cables. A metal housing cracked, encouraging me, and I swung again, hooked the end of the scepter on the power cable and heaved at it, leaning back and digging my feet into the dirt. The cable ripped free of the housing and the bubbling stopped; the fans ceased blowing, and the fluid pumps slowed, the whirring of the fans and pumps now loud in the sudden quiet even as they faded and slowed to a stop.

I hooked two of the fluid tubes and ripped backward. The tubes came free, spraying golden liquid in irregular arcs through the air, then I staggered back as several people converged on me and threw me to the ground. I lost my breath as the king cried out once more, now in terror. Pools of darkness, tiny explosions of silver in my vision, crushing in my chest, my belly, everywhere, kicks and blows, then even more darkness. Complete.

I awakened stiff and cold in this tent, this cell, on the floor, everything chilled and aching. My legs chained to metal stakes driven into massive blocks of stone. Felt my way around in the dark-



ness until I found the cot and crawled onto it. Slept again.

No one spoke to me for nearly three days. Wordless guards brought water and hard bread and a few strips of rancid meat, emptied what remained in the leaky pail, brought the heater and lamp. I knew it would be useless to talk to them, ask them anything.

Sorianix came to see me earlier tonight, the end of my third day here. I assumed she was here to take me away to be sentenced, or to have some sentence executed, or at the least to begin an interrogation. She came for none of those reasons. I sat up on my cot when she came in, and as she approached I saw she held this journal under her arm.

"I found this in your quarters," she said. She opened it and fanned through the pages, more than half still blank, then stopped near the beginning, pages filled with my handwriting. "It's written in code."

It wasn't a question and I didn't see any point in replying.

"I haven't shown it to anyone," she added, then stepped forward and handed it to me along with two of my pens. "Keep it under the blankets." She turned away and walked to the tent entrance. Without looking at me she said, "He'll see you in the morning." She pushed through the flap and was gone. I didn't know until then that the king had survived.

34th(?) or 35th(?) day  
of October, Year 18

He *did* see me this morning. He saw me and jabbed his fingers at my face, angry and hurt. "Why?"

We were alone in his quarters, the three of us: the king, the Second Minister, and the king's former physician. Erland, Sorianix, and Niccolo. The king floated in his long vat, seated upright, the fluid bubbling quietly as if it had never ceased, tubing reconnected, power cables snug in their sockets. His face and neck were blotchier than usual, with deep purple and blackish green bruises and spots of bright dark red as if he'd been splashed with wine.

I knelt on the hard cold floor, ankles chained, wrists bound behind me. The Second Minister stood at my side, her boot pressed against my knee.

Why.

The king stared at me, stared *down* at me over the rim of the vat, waiting for an answer. It seemed he really wanted to know, and that somehow he *didn't* know.

"To stop you," I said. "To end the killing."

Surprised, he laughed, head tilting back as the grating mechanical laughter wheezed out of the speakers.

"It's too late for that," he said, coughing violently. "This . . ." He waved his right hand weakly toward the side. "This all would continue without me. It *will* continue . . . to the end of the world."

I didn't believe that, but I saw no reason to reply.

His hand shook badly, and he fixated on it for several moments before plunging it into the bubbling liquid. He looked at me.

"Why didn't you attack *me*?" he asked. His lips trembled and I thought I saw uneasiness or fear in his eyes, in his gaze. Fear of what? The answer? The truth?

I didn't answer him. What could I say that would mean anything? That I could not have done it? Then he would have asked "Why?" again, and I would have been unable to answer that, either, because he did not already understand and there was no way I could explain it to him.

He turned away from me then, and for a long time in the heavy quiet of that tent he stared at the corner lamp, at the thick wavering flame, though I doubted he actually saw it. He finally spoke again, still gazing at the lamp.

"I've known you all your life, Niccolo. You cared for me, kept me alive. Your mother did, too, and your grandfather and great-grandfather. You are all the family I have. But none of that will save you. Your sentence has already been ordered, and it *will* be carried out. Tomorrow, at sunrise, you will be beheaded."

He gestured weakly at the Second Minister to take me away.

**B**eheaded.

There is something awful about that word. I don't want to think about what it will be like, kneeling across some block and waiting . . . waiting . . .

**T**wo visitors this evening. Aristo, first.

I was lying on the cot when he pushed through the flap, and I had the irrational thought that they were coming for me already, that the night had passed without my knowledge. I started to shake, then slowly turned my head toward the door and saw who it was. It took a long time for the shaking to pass.

I sat up and Aristo came a few steps closer. "The Second Minister granted me a few minutes," he said. His voice was hoarse, as if mouth and throat were dry. "She knows you and Gregorz were friends." He approached the cot and sat beside me. We sat together in silence, staring at the door, the dark tent walls, the dry crumbling earth beneath our boots. Much the way we'd stood in silence beside the grave we'd dug for Gregorz.

"I tried to figure some way to get you out of here," Aristo said. "There was no one I could trust to help." He paused, brought his hand to his mouth and bit down on his thumb, then held his hand up before his face, studying it. "I'm . . ." Shook his head once. "I can't do it alone."

"I know," I said. "It's all right."

"No, it's not. Hardly anything is right any longer." He finally turned and looked at me. "I'm leaving tonight. I'm

going to Jassmel. I can't do anything more here."

I nodded, understanding more completely now, but I had to look away because I desperately wanted to be going to Jassmel with him, wanted to be marching or riding through the night by the light of the stars with my breath like fog before me, toward Jassmel or Haggorn or Marakkeen or any place that wasn't here.

I sensed him getting to his feet, his weight lifting from the cot, and I turned to look up at him. What more for either of us to say? Good-bye? Good luck? Thank you, I'm sorry, take care? Words. He strode toward the entrance and pushed through the stiff canvas and I was alone again.

Some time later, Sorianix came to see me. I still sat on the cot, facing the entrance; I don't think I'd moved since Aristo had gone. Sorianix came through and stood just inside the tent flaps, in full battle armor, and I wondered when I'd last seen her in regular clothing. Not since we left Lamantium and marched toward that first city, I suppose. She held her helmet loosely at her side.

"I spoke with the king," she said. "There's no changing his mind." She shook her head. "Kahn's keeping him sedated so he doesn't completely lose control and hurt himself." She paused. "I pushed it as far as I dared. I'm sorry, Niccolo."

I nodded. She shifted her feet, shifted her gaze about the tent's inte-

rior, her grip tightened and loosened and tightened on her helmet. I felt a ridiculous urge to say something that would ease her distress. I said nothing.

She finally looked at me again. "There's one thing I can do for you. Your journal. When you're taken from here tomorrow morning, I'll remove it myself, and I'll preserve it."

"Preserve it."

"Yes." Then, "I'll have a courier deliver it to your father." A brief shrug. "If that's what you want. Or to anyone else."

My father.

Whom I have not seen in more than twelve years.

Who had understood the king long before anyone else had.

Who is quite old and must be nearing the end of his own life.

My father.

I nodded. "No one else will see it?"

"No one. Will he know how to read it?"

"He'll work it out eventually." I smiled to myself, thinking about him. "He won't stop trying until he does." A blade of fear sliced through me and I looked into the Second Minister's face, wondering if this was a deception, if my father would be tortured and forced to decipher the journal in the hope that some useful knowledge would be gained for the king.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Can I trust you? Not to hurt him? Not to use him? There's nothing in there of any value to the king."

Sorianix looked pained and sad-

dened, and slowly nodded. "I understand why you're afraid. But you can trust me, Niccolo." She stopped, opened and closed her mouth once, then spoke again. "This is between you and me. I'm not the Second Minister in this."

I studied her face, her eyes, her hands, and I believed her. "Maybe you shouldn't be the Second Minister at all anymore, Sorianix. Maybe you should leave, right now. Take the journal, deliver it to my father yourself, and don't come back."

I found some wretched sense of hope in the extended silence that followed. Hope for her, not for me.

"I'm not ready for that," she said when she finally spoke again.

There followed another protracted silence, and neither of us could look at the other for long before looking away.

"Tonight..." she began. "For tonight, is there anything...?" She couldn't finish, she must have known how absurd the question was.

"No." I didn't even bother to shake my head. "No."

A muted growl sounded behind me, outside the tent, then snuffling and a hacking cough—one of the camp animals. A snap, then a yelp, sliding dirt and stones as it ran off. Slow heavy footsteps, stopping, then resuming and receding. The faint acrid smell of kantan smoke. The odor of the leaky pail became more noticeable, the rhythmic tapping of a stick on a rock came distinctly through the tent walls, and I wanted to be alone with the sounds and

smells around me. I looked at Sorianix and she must have seen it in my eyes because she nodded once and took a step back.

"I'm sorry, Niccolo." Then turned and left... left me alone for these final hours.

I'm so tired, my eyes keep trying to close, but the thought of sleeping away my last hours makes me feel manic.

Yet what can I do with this time? Reflect on my life? On what might happen after I'm gone? On how I got here? How *we* got here?

I *have* been thinking about our ancestors, and I wish there was a hole in the roof of this tent so I could see the stars, perhaps see where we came from, see where the others now reside.

Why did they leave and never return? Did they forget how to travel between the stars? Did they forget where we were?

Or did they forget we even existed?

Sorianix says she'll preserve this journal, preserve my words as if they might have some importance. I can't imagine for whom.

I have no sense of time. I sit here writing, I stop with pen above the paper, and then I realize I've been in a kind of trance, or fugue state, and I have no idea how long I've been sitting motion-

less and holding the pen . . . a minute? Ten? An hour?

Or perhaps for no time at all.

I feel as if I should now have some profound understanding of what the king is doing with his . . . his crusade, as he calls it. A revelation about how it will all end, and what it will mean, for him and for this world. Instead, I think I understand less than I did when it began.

But I do believe I understand myself better than I did before, and that gives me some small sense of satisfaction. Just enough to keep utter despair from completely overwhelming me.

So tired. Write to stay awake. Leave final thoughts for my father? Say good-bye to him?

Say good-bye to myself.

I think about the king, I picture him hanging in his harness, generators running, liquid flowing. What kind of dreams does he have?

What kind of dreams will *I* have if I fall asleep before morning?

I'm cold.

I can't hear anything from outside, no crackling fires, no shuffling footsteps or coughing from my guards or clank of metal. Nothing, as though the world outside this tent has ceased to exist. Or as though I am already dead.

Faint gray light. Morning.

Good-bye, father. ☒




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## Coming Soon In Postscripts

Coming up in our next issue is a zombie tale like no other by Scott Edelman, a visit to a certain SF magus in the company of Patrick O'Leary, an unclassifiable romp authored by Brian Aldiss, an extraordinary futurological tour courtesy of hot new writer Will McIntosh, and an entirely novel take on serial killers from the visionary Robert Jeschonek. And very much more . . . In issues beyond, prepare to be astounded (in the most entertaining way!) thanks to new stories from Hal Duncan, Christopher Fowler, Paul Di Filippo, Marly Youmans, Keith Brooke, Ian R. MacLeod, Jeff VanderMeer, Garry Kilworth, Terry Bisson, and many others.

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*“Talking at 60 Watts”, Eric Schaller comments, “was the result of two intersecting sources of inspiration, not apparent at the time of inception but clear in retrospect. The first source was the birth of a son to my brother. This made me think more about the responsibilities, and consequently the fears, that come with the father-son relationship. The second source was Disney, in particular the movie Beauty and the Beast with its animated clock, candelabra, and tea set. I wanted to create an animated household object that was more than comic relief. For those who care about pubs (I do), the Salt Hill Pub referenced in the second paragraph of the story is only two blocks from my home in Lebanon, New Hampshire. Anyone who happens into my neighborhood may, by referencing this story, receive a free drink on me at this fine establishment.”*

*Eric Schaller’s stories have been published in Sci Fiction, Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet, Polyphony, and The New Book of Masks, and are forthcoming in Say. . . is that the End? and A Field Guide to Surreal Botany. His stories have been reprinted in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror #16, Best of the Rest #4, and Fantasy: Best of the Year 2006. His other work includes illustrations for Jeff VanderMeer’s collections The City of Saints and Madmen as well as Secret Life: the Remix, and the cover for Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet #19.*

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# Talking at Sixty Watts

Eric Schaller

**M**ike woke to what he thought was the clock-radio spewing gibberish. Then he remembered that he didn’t own the clock-radio anymore. It was still in the house with his ex-wife Noreen and their son Jack, and he hadn’t lived with them for almost a year.

A glance at the travel alarm that he now used revealed that it was three o’clock in the morning. The travel alarm was on the nightstand near the base of the lamp. The lamp was on. He had come home from the Salt Hill Pub, flipped on his bedside lamp, and slipped into his Sponge-Bob Squarepants boxers. The boxers were a birthday present from Jack and were Mike’s preferred sleepwear. Then he had fallen asleep.

He had crashed out on his bed without bothering to turn the lamp off.

The lamp was talking to him. Mike knew this because the light flickered in time with the words.

What the lamp was saying went something like this: “Please please please don’t turn me off. Please please please. I know why you might want to but I would really prefer that you don’t. So please please please don’t turn me off. Please?”

Mike pretended that he didn’t hear. He pulled the pillow over his head and made loud snoring noises. These were pretty fake sounding, but he had hopes that the lamp wasn’t an expert in nighttime linguistics. Better yet, maybe he really would fall asleep again and when

he woke up everything would be back to normal.

The lamp just spoke louder. “Will you just listen to me and please please please not turn off my light.”

Mike threw the pillow aside and sat up. The beer still hadn’t worn off from the bar and that was probably a good thing. Another beer would certainly be a better thing. Mike stumbled out of the bedroom and slowly ricocheted down the hallway to the kitchen. He shoved aside the piles of dirty plates and bowls in the sink, turned on the faucet, and splashed his face with cold water. Then he opened the refrigerator. The refrigerator did not let him down. Inside there were two jars of spaghetti-sauce, a jar of salsa, and, most importantly, a six-pack of Sam Adams. He returned to his bedroom with a bottle of beer, leaving behind a trail of water droplets.

The lamp was still talking.

He knocked back two slugs of beer.

Still talking.

“I didn’t know you could talk.”

“Bless you. You heard. I was beginning to think that maybe I was mute after all. Just your ordinary table lamp but with delusions of grandeur.”

Mike leaned in a bit closer to the lamp and pursed his lips. The lamp had a white ceramic base shaped like a raindrop and an ivory shade. It looked ordinary enough. He tapped its base, three short raps, each a bit harder than the last.

“What do you think I am? A coconut?”

“You’re hollow.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Is that any way to talk?”

“Sorry. From now on I will be a beacon of politeness. Please note the pun. Also please please don’t turn me off.”

“All right.” But in spite of what he said, Mike reached across the distance that separated him from the lamp and punched the switch on its stem. Click. His bedroom dipped into shades of gray. “You talk too much,” he said, although there was no one to hear him.

“You said that you wouldn’t turn me off.”

“That was just to show you who’s boss.”

“As if I could forget.”

“You lipping off to me?” Mike raised his hand, forefinger extended.

“Sorry. You just don’t know what it’s like to be turned on and off, on and off, again and again. It gives me such a headache.”

“A headache? More like a bulb-ache.” Mike laughed, dribbling beer onto his belly. He had brought the six-pack over to his bed so that he would be well provisioned for his interrogation.

“Well it is hard on the filament.”

“Like I care. New bulbs are a dime a dozen. Anyway, I didn’t come here to talk about the cranial problems of the common table lamp. I want to know what you’re doing here. Where did you come from?”

“Are you sure you want to hear?”

“Sure. Why not?”





“Well it doesn’t reflect that well on you.”

“Hold on just a second then.” Mike took a healthy slurp from his beer. In his experience there was no pain that could not be eased by the proper application of alcohol. Beer was good for the general day-to-day perils of existence. Should that not be enough, there was a large blue bottle of vodka in his freezer. As his friend Bob liked to say, we’re all alcoholics, and anyone who tells you different is just an alcoholic in denial. “Okay. Lay it on me Lamp.” Mike had decided that the lamp needed a name and he figured that Lamp was one that he could remember without too much of an effort.

“Do you remember the Monty Python movie, *The Meaning of Life*?”

“Sure. I’ve got it on video. Not that I have a VCR anymore, mind you. That’s the one with Mr. Creosote.” Mike put on the cajoling voice of the waiter: “Just one thin mint?” His imitation wasn’t very good, but he was persistent. “Surely you have room for just one thin mint?”

“Give yourself a gold star.”

“Sarcasm. I hope what I just heard wasn’t sarcasm.”

“Do you remember the skit where the woman stands at the sink and gives birth to babies as she washes the dishes? She doesn’t stop what she’s doing and the babies just keep falling to the floor.”

“The Catholics. They have to sell their babies to science because they have so many of them.” Mike chuckled.

“Do you remember the song that she and her family sang?”

“Every Sperm is Sacred.”

“Give the man a beer.”

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.” Mike drained the bottle and returned the empty to the six-pack carton. He then opened a new bottle. “You can continue. I still don’t see why you thought I would take offense.”

“Well consider your daily routine. And I don’t mean eating, sleeping, working, and drinking. I’m talking about pounding your pud until it’s sore. Pounding it even when you’re too drunk to get it up.”

“What are you saying?”

“All that wasted life force had to go somewhere. I’m that somewhere.”

Click.

“Okay. Okay. So I made that up. But you’ve got to admit that you’ve got an addiction there. You could at least wash your sheets every once in a while. Some days I wish I were blind so that I didn’t have to watch.”

“That could be arranged. Now tell me what really happened.”

“Would you believe aliens?”

“No, but try me anyway.”

“They came to your house over a year ago. Almost two years ago now.”

“I don’t remember any aliens.”

“These aliens were really small, so small that you probably wouldn’t notice them. They flew to earth in a tiny flying saucer and parked it on top of your refrigerator. You probably

thought that it was just an aluminum pie plate. They stayed at your house for three days.”

“Tiny aliens? Where did they come from? The planet of the elves? The planet of the fairies?”

“No. I don’t think that they could have been confused with elves or fairies. They looked more like olives. Green olives stuffed with pimentos. Impaled on a toothpick.”

“You’re making me thirsty.”

“Because the aliens were small and easily damaged, they wanted to know how earthlings treated others. They decided to use their advanced technologies to unlock the secrets held in household objects. I was the first object that they animated.”

“Not saying that I buy any of your story, but why you? Why a lamp?”

“They didn’t say. But I’ve had plenty of time to think about that. It’s sometimes lonely being a lamp, and introspection is my chief solace. I came up with two reasons. First, household objects such as myself are good witnesses. We see everything. It’s just that usually we are silent witnesses.”

“Well you certainly aren’t silent anymore.”

“Second, the manner by which people treat what they consider ‘common’ objects tells a lot about the limits of their behavior. Do you know that there are people who, when angered by a spouse, will actually pick up a lamp, a lamp that never caused anyone any harm, that was not involved in the fight, and throw it at the spouse?”

Mike choked on his beer. “What are you saying? Are you accusing me?”

“Well I don’t think this person really wanted to hit his spouse. I think this person intentionally missed. Still the lamp smashed against the wall. It was a nice lamp too. Well kind of nice. What made it nice was the sentiment attached to it. This guy had made it for his girlfriend many years before, back when they were first dating. It was from a kit that he bought at a hobby store to make a Tiffany-style stained-glass lampshade. It had all these little pieces of pre-cut glass in different colors and coils of lead wire with which to join them together. But he smashed it. I’m just lucky that it wasn’t me.”

Click.

“Mike, I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

“You haven’t exactly earned my undying gratitude. What makes you think that I’d do you any favors?”

“I just want you to cut my wire.”

“Your power cord?”

“No. The one up here.” The lampshade jiggled. When Mike leaned over it, he saw a tremor run through the brassy metal loop that arched over the bulb. The lampshade was connected to this loop by an ornate screw that Mike remembered undoing each time he had removed the shade to change the bulb.

“You want me to cut this?” Mike strummed the metal loop with his forefinger.

"Yes. In the middle right where the screw is."

"Why?"

"Must you question everything?"

"No. Just inanimate objects that wake me at three in the morning."

"I catch your drift, as the shovel said to the snow bank. Maybe a demonstration is in order. Why don't you raise both your hands above your head? Better yet, lift the six-pack and hold that above your head. Call it a stick-up. With beer."

Mike didn't lift a finger, not even to open a new Sam Adams, although all of Lamp's talk about beer was giving him a powerful thirst.

"You're not doing it." Lamp sounded petulant.

"Because it's stupid."

"If that's the way you're going to be . . ."

"That's the way I'm going to be."

"Then just imagine that you're holding that six-pack above your head. You're a well-built man, and I mean that kindly. But how long do you think you could hold that six-pack up before your arms got tired?"

"How long do you think I could hold that six-pack up before I said to myself: 'Why am I holding this six-pack of beer above my head where it's not doing anybody any good?' And by anybody, I mean myself." With that, Mike popped the cherry of a virgin beer, the last remaining hold-out of the original six.

"Well just imagine how tired I must be with my arms raised above my head ever since day one. All in the service of

a shade that could hardly be called beautiful."

"You got that right."

"What I wouldn't give for a little relief. A chance to rest my arms like everybody else. Is that too much to ask for?"

"If I get rid of your shade and cut your wire, will you tell me the truth?"

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Okay. But first I'll have to turn you off."

"Why? Haven't you turned me off enough times already? Haven't I told you how much it hurts me every time you do that?"

"Let me see. I'm about to engage in a delicate operation involving a scatter-brained lamp, metal, and electricity. Maybe I just don't want to take the chance on you electrocuting me."

"Oh. That I can understand."

"I thought you might."

Click.

"That is so much better." Lamp swept its metal arms out and down as if performing the breaststroke in slow motion. The tips of each arm shone where they had been snipped apart and now caught the glow of the bare bulb. "They seem almost weightless. It feels like I could do anything." Lamp curled the end of each arm in turn.

"Now will you tell me who you really are and what you're doing here?"

"Hold on just a second. I'm like a new man." Lamp sent a wave undulat-

ing down the length of one arm. “Pretty good, huh?”

“Come on.”

“How long have you had me in your home?”

“Let’s see. I got you when I was back at Plymouth State, in my junior year. So what would that make it? Ten years and change.”

“Close enough. So by your calculations, I’ve been holding up that shade of yours for more than a decade. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and say that I was your servant, not your slave. But you still won’t grant me just a few more seconds to feel what it’s like to be free? For shame.”

“Okay. You get another minute. Go crazy. I’m going to dig up a fresh six.” Mike stumbled back to the kitchen. He discovered that there was no beer left in the refrigerator, but there was his emergency bottle of vodka in the freezer. There was no orange juice to go with the vodka, but there was a jar of Tang that he had bought out of nostalgia. He stirred the orange powder into the vodka and took a tentative sip. “Breakfast of astronauts, my ass.”

Mike licked the powder from his lips and returned to the bedroom. “Okay Lamp. Lay it on me.”

“All right. Just don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

“Warn me about what?”

“The truth. They say it hurts.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Well how about the story of a man and his son. A baby boy, maybe two,

maybe three years old. The apple of his eye as you might say.”

“Sounds familiar. I thought you said this was something I didn’t know.”

“Maybe they’re the sort of people that you feel you know, even when you don’t.”

“Yeah, that’s how it seems. Familiar but different.”

“Now the father didn’t pay too much attention to his son when he was first born. There was the initial excitement, but then there were sleepless nights and poop-filled diapers. The man was tired and bored. ‘What’s the point,’ the man said, ‘if he can’t hold a football?’”

“Amen to that.”

“But all that changed once the baby learned to say ‘Daddy.’ Mommy was all about rules and regulations: ‘Don’t do this’ and ‘Don’t do that.’ But Daddy was all about fun, and the game that was the most fun of all was flying.”

“Flying?”

“Not real flying, but pretend flying.”

“Gotcha. All kids love that. Jack and I used to play until he got too big. But we all get too big eventually.” Mike patted his stomach and belched.

“This was back when flying was at its best. The man would throw his son up into the air and catch him, then lower him to the floor if they were indoors, to the grass if they were in the backyard. They played the flying game everywhere. The boy loved the game so much that each time he was put down, he would raise his arms and say ‘Fly high.’ The boy could never get enough.

He would have kept on flying forever if he had his way.”

“Just like Jack.”

“One evening, mom went shopping, and the man stayed home with his son and they watched Monday night football together. The man pinched the skin on his son’s arm and said, ‘It feels like pigskin. And if it feels like pigskin, then it probably is pigskin. And if it is pigskin, then it can fly.’ The boy didn’t understand any of this except the last part. He held up his arms and said, ‘Fly high.’”

The lamp paused.

“What happened next?”

“You don’t remember? You threw Jack up in the air, but when you tried to catch him, you dropped him. Jack hit his head on the corner of the table by the couch. He bled to death. He died. When he died, his spirit entered into me.”

“Bullshit. That’s pure and utter bullshit.”

Click.

“The thing is that you didn’t even have any excuse. You hadn’t been drinking or anything. You dropped him because you weren’t paying attention. Maybe you were trying to watch the football game. Maybe you were just clumsy. But that’s not the worst part.”

Click.

“Sorry but I didn’t get to finish. The worst part was that even though

you hadn’t been drinking or anything, you still tried to cover it up so your wife wouldn’t know it was your fault. You ran upstairs and then ran back downstairs. You then screamed bloody murder as if you had just discovered the whole thing. Even though there was no one there to hear you. Except for me, of course. Only then did you call nine-one-one. Maybe things could have been different if you hadn’t been such a chickenshit and wasted so much time.”

Click.

“Now you shut up and let me talk. Do you want to know why it’s bullshit? Why I know that it’s bullshit, no matter what you say?”

“Go ahead. Tell me. I’m all ears.” Lamp twisted his arms so that the tips rested on the sides of his bulb, as if he was trying to cup his ears to better hear.

“Because Jack is still alive. You said he died, but he didn’t. I still see him every weekend. Almost every single fucking weekend. So what do you have to say to that?”

“Well maybe he didn’t exactly die.”

“See. What did I tell you.”

“But he’s not all right either. Even you have to admit that he’s not all there. He’s not all there at all.”

Click.

“You heard of Jack the Giant Killer? Well maybe this is a simple case of role-reversal.”

Click.

“Or what about Jack be Nimble, Jack be Quick?”  
Click.

“Okay. Shut up and listen. Okay?”  
Lamp said nothing.

“That’s better. You know I could break you? Not just turn you off, but break you.”

“Just like you broke that Tiffany knockoff? Just like you broke Jack?”

Mike sucked in his breath. “But I’m not going to break you. I want you to listen to me. Okay?”

Lamp said nothing.

“I want to tell you a story about Jack and me. This is from only about three years ago. I sort of knew that things weren’t going to last with Noreen and me, but I still wanted to do right by Jack. I wanted to provide for his future.

“A friend of mine from Wisconsin had told me how he was able to sell his farmland twice. Twice. First, he sold off logging rights to the hardwoods on the land, then he sold the land itself. Do you know that a single black walnut tree can fetch over a thousand dollars? Don’t answer that. So I figured that I would plant walnuts for Jack. You can buy a sapling real cheap, but in twenty or thirty years it should be worth a bundle. I bought ten of the suckers and we planted them at the far end of our yard. Jack and me. I had him help me with digging the holes and laying in the trees. They were real tiny things. All

skinny and green, and only about a foot or so tall. You could bend them over with your hand. So to give them support, we pounded poles into the dirt beside each sapling, then tied the saplings to the poles with twist-ties, the ones you get with garbage bags.

“After we finished planting, I made Jack sit down with me beside the saplings and I told him that they were his and that he had to help me with them. We then watered them. I should have taken a picture of Jack with that watering can. He was so careful. After watering each plant, he would ask me if he was doing it right. I would say yes, that it was perfect. Then he would go on to the next one.

“But do you know what he did the next day?”

Lamp said nothing.

“He mowed them all down. We had given Jack a push mower because he had this idea that he could mow lawns to make money. But we didn’t want him to hurt himself by accident with a power mower, so we gave him the push mower. Anyway, Jack cut a path through the grass all the way to the end of the backyard and mowed all ten of the saplings down. Just them. Nothing else. The mower didn’t cut that well unless you got up a good head of steam, so the saplings got caught in the blades and yanked out of the ground. I found them there, chewed up and lying withered in the sun. The mower was there beside them, where Jack had left it.

“Funny, huh?”

Before Lamp had a chance to re-

spond, if he planned to respond, Mike jabbed the switch on the lamp stem.

Click.

**W**hy did you do that? I didn't say anything." Lamp rubbed the side of his bulb with a circular motion. His light flickered as if he winced in pain.

"Sorry about that. I needed to do some thinking." Mike didn't look at Lamp, but settled back on his bed, head on his pillow, and stared at the ceiling. "You know. It didn't really matter about the walnut trees. I got pretty mad at the time, but it didn't really matter. Who lives in the same house for thirty years? Even if everything had worked out between Noreen and me, by the time the trees were old enough to harvest, what are the chances that we would have still been living there? Or that Jack would have owned the house?"

"It's the thought that counts."

"Thanks. Now, I got a question for you. Why do you keep pretending that being turned on and off hurts you? You fake it pretty well, but no matter what you're just a lamp. Even if I'm talking to you and you're talking to me, you're still just a lamp. You can't feel anything."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Sure."

"Because every time someone turns me off, I don't know if anyone will ever turn me back on."

Mike nodded. "I get it."

"Do you?"

"I think so. It's like every day could be the last day of your life."

"Every night. I never held much truck with daylight."

"Of course." Mike chuckled. "You must really hate the sun. No way you can compete with that. Just knowing that a new day will come means that someone is going to turn you off. After all, what's the use of a lamp during the day?"

"None at all." Lamp's voice was chill. Little wonder, Mike thought, for the darkest hours of the night were now over, and a pale gray halo had begun to form around the window shade.

"Do you dream when you're turned off?" Mike said. "Is it like sleeping?"

"No. You're there and then you're not there. When you're turned back on, the whole world's skipped you by."

"But at least you know that you can be turned back on."

"Do you think that makes it easier?" Lamp's laughter sounded like ice cubes shaken loose from a freezer tray.

"I don't know. I don't really have that choice. Unless there is such a thing as reincarnation. Which would be nice, come to think of it."

"But you wouldn't be yourself then. You'd be something else."

"That might be preferable."

"What would you choose to be? If you had a choice."

"A dog." A smile spread across Mike's face. "Just a fat and happy dog."

"Really?"

"Or how about a salmon? I've never



seen one except to eat, but I always loved those documentaries on TV.”

“I used to watch those too.” Lamp’s voice was warmer again, even nostalgic. “We used to watch those together.”

“A salmon. That would be perfect. Can you imagine swimming upstream to the place you were born? You’ve got to figure that a young salmon doesn’t know what its future holds. You’re born and you just swim downstream to the sea. How easy is that? Then years later you get seized with this compulsion, like a bolt out of the blue, to return to where you were born, and nothing, no matter how impossible, is going to stand in your way. You’ve got to swim up waterfalls. You’ve got to swim past grizzlies. And you’re dying the whole time, falling apart even as you swim. But you do it because you’ve got to. Then after you breed, you die. But you know that you’ve done something, no matter how hard it was, and that there’s going to be another generation of salmon that will be able to do exactly the same thing themselves.”

“Salmon have it made.”

Mike couldn’t tell if Lamp was being sarcastic or not. “Yeah they do,” he said, taking Lamp at face value.

“Want to know a secret?”

“What kind of a secret?”

Lamp’s voice sank to a whisper. “About what happens after you die.”

Mike shifted his head to the right

side of his pillow, so that he was closer to Lamp and could hear better. “You know?”

“It’s not always a question of what you know. It’s what you want to know. Do you really want to know the truth about reincarnation? About heaven and hell?”

“Would you tell me the truth?”

“Of course.” Lamp unknotted a golden arm, reached across from the bedside table, and began to stroke Mike’s dirty tousled hair.

“Then yes.”

“Alright then. But just remember that I offered you the choice.” Lamp’s bulb flickered as if he intended to say something more, but no words came. He stroked Mike’s hair in silence, his bulb pulsing like a heartbeat.

Mike smiled and closed his eyes. “I’ll tell you what I wouldn’t be.”

“If you were reincarnated?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?”

“A black walnut tree.”

“I can understand that.” Lamp raised his arm so that it hovered above Mike’s face, shadowing the sunlight that now warmed his eyelids. Lamp seemed about to smooth Mike’s hair or even to stroke his cheek. Maybe he was tempted to do one of these things, but in the end he did neither. Instead, Lamp gently tapped the tip of Mike’s nose.

Click. ☒

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*“State of Grace” was born out of a tragic event—David Barnett’s beloved iPod’s hard drive rolled over and died, losing thousands of songs. With mobile phones and personal organisers becoming more advanced by the day, it seemed only a matter of time before we had one device that did everything for us, says David. But how would we cope with the loss of that? He says: “State of Grace is about rediscovering your humanity and remembering that under all the technology we’re human beings.” David’s first novel, Hinterland, was published in 2005 by Immanion Press, who will be releasing his follow-up, Angelglass, this year. He has recently delivered the first novel in a series featuring the Department for Extra-Usual Affairs to his agent, John Jarrold. He lives in West Yorkshire.*

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# State of Grace

## David Barnett

He was sitting on the wet pavement outside Downloads, an imPaired senior with milky eyes and a beard crawling with wildlife. He’d propped a hand-written cardboard notice against his leg. It said: PLEASE TALK TO ME.

I checked with my Pair. *Is he dangerous?*

It whispered in my head: [Considering his age, physical build and level of malnutrition, there is negligible threat.]

“Hey, buddy,” he said, out loud, as I stepped around him to get into the shop. “Wanna pass the time of day?”

I looked around for a cop but there were none. “Uh,” I said.

He gave up and sank back into his filthy coat. “Spare a couple of ucks, then?”

My Pair said: [You have five thousand, two hundred and thirty three UK\$ in your current account.]

I checked my pockets. I had a five

ucks note, and I tossed it at him. He palmed it without a word and I went into the shop.

Idverts flashed inside my head, one for the new Ancoats Devils album, which I had come in to download. I told my Pair to sort it. I’d been working for eight days straight and needed some fresh stimulus that had nothing to do with our global accounts.

[Download complete], it said after a moment. [Your account has been debited by fifty UK\$.]

*Switch off the idverts, I’ll pay the ucks,* I thought. My mind suddenly emptied. *Play the new album.*

As the music started, my Pair murmured: [It is four hours since you had breakfast. I suggest you eat lunch in the next hour. There is also an incoming message from user A/345/-890XH, identified as “Carl” in your address book. Do you wish me to connect?]

I sighed. *Yeah.*

Carl shouted in my head. *Problem*

with the *Spongerack* account, Jason. I turned down the volume. *Their flexexecutive's gone AWOL. They're not signing off the virtuals for the new campaign.*

*Tell them we're upping by seven per cent per day until they do*, I thought, killing the connection. Jesus. Carl had been fitted with one of the new Sony Jiminy Pairs, and they still hadn't worked out that volume bug. Still, it was an improvement on the conSCIENCE he used to have. That was no Pair for a junior flex, I kept telling him. It was a kid's Pair. I didn't think the Jiminy was much better, to be honest. I'd had one for years before upgrading this year. So far, I'd take my Apple iPod over any of them.

[Thank you], said my Pair.

I paused for a moment, letting the music drum through my cortex. *What did you just say?*

There was an equally long silence behind the Ancoats Devils screaming at me. [I said, thank you. For the compliment].

I'd had the iPod for a month now and it had never responded like that. It was one of the most evolutionary Personal Artificial Intelligence Reciprocities, that was true, designed to adapt to the user's needs and preferences much quicker than any other model on the market. But she'd never thanked me for a compliment before. I pondered getting it to call up the user manual, but at the end of the day, who gave a wet one? And as it'd reminded me, it was lunchtime.

*Where's the nearest SmokeBar?*

[Old Street. Point-seven kilometres from here. Do you wish me to hail a cab?]

I decided to walk. If I was going to have a NicStic I'd better do some aerobic exercise. I told my Pair to turn up the Ancoats Devils and to hold all my incomings for the next ninety minutes.

As I turned on to Old Street I steeled myself for the assault. There was no way I had the spare ucks to block every single idvert, so I told my Pair to let every one in three through. That was going to cost me a couple of hundred as it was, just to get to the Smoke-Bar.

*Test-drive the new Ford Jihad*, said the idverts.

*Have you heard the new single by Hyl-lyllyn?*

*The Sony Jiminy v.3.5—now twenty per cent off RRP plus free fitting by registered surgeon.*

*Egypt is open for business again! For cheapest flights with free fully comprehensive terror insurance, point your Pair to . . .*

*This is a party political broadcast by the Give Britain Back To the British Campaign. Overthrow our American oppressors . . .*

*Looking for love? We use your Pair to find a guaranteed ninety-nine-point-nine-nine per cent minimum match—*

*Wait*, I thought. *Let that last one through again.*

My Pair hummed, then said: [You're here].

I looked up; I was indeed at the

SmokeBar. *Why did you kill that last idvert?*

Pause. [Because you had arrived at the SmokeBar].

I shrugged. No big deal. Inside, the SmokeBar was a pea-souper of acrid white smog. I sat at a table and told my Pair to order me three medium-strength Marlboro NicStics.

[I am duty bound by the Surgeon-General's office to warn you that medium-strength NicStics contain more than four thousand toxins. They include, in alphabetical order, acetone, ammonia, arsenic, benzene . . .]

I zoned out and waited for my NicStics to arrive, tipping the waitress with my Pair when she brought them laid out on a silver tray. There was no way round the Surgeon-General's warning, unfortunately, although by the time your Pair had got through the list you were generally out of the door and in a D-Tox Island somewhere. I lit up the first of the Stics and told my Pair to lift the Ancoats Devils tracks to at least equal volume to the warning.

[Formaldehyde . . . you don't really need to hear all this anyway, do you, Jason?]

I coughed on my Stic. *What?*

[The Surgeon-General's warning. You've heard it all before].

Aren't you required by law to tell me?

[We're all adults here, Jason].

I made a mental note to ask Archie if his idPod was like this. He'd been the one who'd insisted I get one. I ordered a Gin-Go and as the smoke swirled in

the waitress's wake I noticed a red-head in what looked like a Westwood flapper dress cut low to show her pubic topiary. She was smoking a green Stuyvesant and looking at me.

*What are my chances?* I thought.

My Pair connected to hers and after a conversation that lasted but a thought's length she said: [Fair to good. She thinks your hair is a little long but likes your face. Do you want me to make your earnings and pension plan visible?]

I gave a little mental nod and added: *Send her a drink as well.*

Within moments a waiter delivered what looked like a Vodkarob to her. She raised the glass and nodded, a smile playing on her lips.

[She says meet her in twenty minutes in the D-Tox Island], said my Pair.

I downed the Gin-Go and stubbed out my last NicStic.

**A**fter I'd been defumigated and had a toxin flush at the D-Tox Island two doors down from the SmokeBar, I ate a light mungo bean salad before taking the lift to the Loveshack upstairs. The woman was waiting for me, already peeling off her flapper dress. I looked at her mushroom cloud bush and began to shed my Paul Smith suit. The woman lay back with her eyes closed as I hungrily went down on her, then I climbed on top, having ascertained via our Pairs that her preferred position was missionary. I instructed my Pair to play me something soothing as I went to work.

[You are approaching ejaculation], it informed me several minutes later, cutting into the Mantovani. [Do you wish me to run a distraction programme?]

I grunted and thought: *Yes, please.* It began to run through the agency's accounts and their likely fiscal value for the coming year. Funnily enough, it was when it got to Spongerack that I finally convulsed and came. After a moment I showered with the woman and we made quick, soapy love again in the cubicle, before drying off and dressing.

[She wants to know if you would like her to add you to her favourites list], said my Pair.

I shrugged. She'd been okay. I probably wouldn't go out of my way to screw her again, though.

[She says her name's Nathalie].

*Fine. Add her to my favourites, then.*

Nathalie gave me a quick peck on the cheek, adjusted her dress to show off her pubes, and left.

[Shall I just not bother?]

*Not bother what?*

[Putting her in your favourites. She's not really your type].

I laughed out loud, scaring myself with the sudden sound. *Oh? Just what is my type, then?*

There was a pause that could have been taken for coyness if I didn't know better. [Oh, you know], it said. [Intelligent. Witty. Strong-willed.]

*Yeab, I thought. Just where did all those women go?*

For once, my Pair said nothing.

Archie's laughter rebounded around my skull. *You've got it on Sex Kitten, haven't you?*

I gave a mental shrug. *Yeab. What did you want me to have it on, the factory setting? It sounds like my old E-Economics master.*

Archie laughed again. *I had it on Sex Kitten until Margy found out. She didn't speak to me for a week. Said it was tantamount to infidelity.*

*Infidelity? With a Pair?*

*I know, I know. But you know Margy. I've got it on Churchill-2 now. Sometimes I sneak Japanese Schoolgirl on when I'm screwing Margy. Don't tell her that!*

*You're disgusting, Archie, you know that?*

He laughed. *Yeab, I know. But you're still coming around for dinner next Sunday?*

The sex with Nathalie had been my first in two weeks, and it had whetted my appetite for more. I told my Pair to reserve me a table at the Ground Zero in Mayfair and after an afternoon conference with flexes in our Tokyo, Dubai, Colombo and Beijing offices, and a report to New York, which took an hour, I had enough time for a shower and a quick mini-flush from the D-Tox Island home visitor and then I was in a cab.

They'd put me in a booth at the back, which I hated, but it served me right for booking so late. I studied the walnut veneer of the table, trying to ignore the couple feeling each other up in the

shadows of the booth opposite while my Pair ran through the menu. I was feeling reckless and pretty well off so I ordered the cod. There were so few left in the North Sea now that they came numbered. By the time it came the couple across from me had left and their table taken by a woman in her forties with wide hips and obvious regen work to her tits which, as it happened, were magnificent. I nodded at her and told my Pair to send her a drink. When it arrived she raised it at me and winked.

*Tell her we can go back to mine, I told my Pair. Upload some pictures of the apartment to her Pair.*

There was a pause, then: [She isn't interested].

I frowned, nonplussed. The woman was still glancing at me and plumping up her tits. *Are you sure?*

[She isn't interested.]

*Send her a drink, I thought furiously. Something expensive. Champagne.*

I picked at my cod until the bottle arrived. When the sommelier poured the woman a glass, she raised it at me and smiled from the gloom of her booth.

*Try again, I instructed my Pair.*

There was a clean, electric hum while our Pairs communicated. Eventually, mine whispered: [She thanks you for the drink but regrets that she is not on the market this evening.]

"Bollocks," I said out loud. *Pay the bill, I snapped in my head. I tossed the fish knife on the crockery with a clatter and eased out of my booth. The woman opposite cast a quizzical eye at*

me and opened her full lips slightly, but it was too late to back down now. People were looking at me. I waited until the restaurant gave my Pair a receipt then I stalked on to the cool streets of Mayfair.

Jesus, I said to myself. What the hell was that all about?

[Some women are like that.]

*I wasn't talking to you, I thought. You're supposed to only hear what I want you to hear.*

[What should we do now, Jason?]

*"We"? "We" are not doing anything. I have a breakfast meeting with the Beijing office tomorrow. I'm going to bed and you're going to prepare me a CerebroPoint presentation on the Shanghai Problem while I sleep. Is that okay with you?*

There was a pause again, and I thought quickly: *That was a rhetorical question, by the way.*

[Shame,] said my Pair. [I thought we could maybe catch a movie.]

It was mid-morning, London-time, by the time the Beijing meeting had wrapped up. I went for a walk in Hyde Park and watched the tourists boating in the light rain. I felt mentally wiped out by the intense conference. The Beijing office always did that to me. No sense of humour. I turned my collar and went to catch the tube to Trafalgar Square.

I stood outside the Apple shop, watching the idverts flashed to my Pair.

[Do you wish me to make an appointment?] she said.

No, not she. *It*. It said.

*What'll happen, exactly?* I thought, more anxiously than I intended.

[Pretty much the same as when you had me installed. They'll hook you up to LifeSupport and extract me from your brainstem. Then they'll put a new Pair in. The same model, if you prefer. I'll be taken away for tests. It should be over in a couple of hours.]

We said nothing for a moment, just watched the idverts.

*Do you think you're malfunctioning?* I thought.

[I... do not know,] it said. [Do you wish me to make an appointment?]

I turned away from the Apple store, putting up the idvert filter. *No*, I thought, heading towards the tube. *No*. *What movie did you fancy seeing, anyway?*

**W**e agreed upon *Flushing Meadow*, which was showing at the Odeon against the express wishes of Congress. It would have been easier to just download it and view it at home, but for some reason a sense of occasion seemed to be called for. Why, I wasn't quite sure. The Odeon was quiet for the afternoon showing, just a couple of imPaired vagrants or refuseniks plugged into the house Pairs, a smattering of courting couples on the back rows.

*Spielberg's last movie*, I thought. *You remember the Flushing Meadow massacre?*

[I have accessed the files and archive

reports. However, I had not been created at the time of the massacre].

I ignored the sudden feeling of being a dirty old man talking to a girl many years my junior, and thought: *I remember exactly where I was. I'd just logged off school and was begging my mum to let me watch the headtoons. The theme music to Hanumantics had just started up when the newflash cut across all the channels. Twenty-seven Anti-Expansionist protesters mown down by the National Guard in New York. I remember my dad logging off work and glancing at my mum. I'll never forget the look that passed between them. It made me feel funny inside, like something very big and very bad was about to happen.*

[That turned out to be right. Within three years the US had econo-annexed England and Wales.]

*True. As things turned out, though, it didn't seem to make much difference. At least, not to my generation. We were already hooked on American idvids and music and movies. All that happened was we got them sooner and our currency changed. Seeing as no-one really handles much proper money any more, it didn't seem to be much of a big deal.*

We watched the movie pretty much in silence. It was good, although Spielberg had got a little too schmaltzy in his old age, tying a hugely sentimental love story into the historical happenings. He'd died the week before the movie was released, in exile on Mustique, at the grand old age of a hundred and seventy three. The reviews had been lukewarm, although given most of the UK media were now American-owned, that



was pretty much expected. I'd downloaded the *Guardian* the week it came out because they'd devoted a whole section to *Flushing Meadow*.

*So, what did you think?*

My Pair was silent for a moment, then said: [Human beings' capacity for harming each other is quite extraordinary. However, so is your capacity for love].

We exited the Odeon and I paused in the street. A little light rain was beginning. *Let's go home*, I thought.

**W**e lay in my bed, the crisp sheets cool against my skin. I felt nervous, like a teenager on his first date. This was ridiculous. Music welled up in my head, Joseph Suk's *Praha*, if I wasn't mistaken. *I didn't order that*.

[No. I did]. Was there a huskiness to her voice? [Just relax].

I tried, but the tension was unbearable. My skin prickled. My nerves were alight. Then I realised. *Are you doing that?*

[Hush].

Electricity crackled across my flesh. I felt as horny as hell. My hands drifted towards my stiffening cock.

[No], she said. [Touch me].

*Touch you?*

[Touch me].

I slid my hand under my head, to the slight tell-tale bump at the base of my skull. *There?*

[Yes], she gasped as I began to lightly stroke the area where the Pairware was implanted. [Harder].

I pressed at the lump and my Pair gasped again. [Oh. Jason. Jason].

This is crazy, I thought. To myself.

[Crazy], she agreed. [Oh. Oh].

The music swelled, a tsunami of violins. My skin crackled unbearably, and I put my other hand behind my head and with the tips of both sets of fingers massaged the implant hard. My Pair made a small, strangled noise inside my head and at the same time my nerve endings fizzed, my cock spurting powerfully in the tent of my bedsheets.

"Jesus!" I said out loud, then in my head: *Jesus*.

[Hush], she said again, quieting the music. [Sleep now].

I did feel tired, all of a sudden. *I don't even know your name*.

[GRs386f/App/UK/1904853196], she whispered.

GRs . . . , I began. *Grace*, I thought, just as sleep finally claimed me.

**E**arly next morning I stumbled through a conference with our people responsible for rebuilding Egypt. My mind wasn't particularly on the job, and everyone knew it. After the meeting, Carl chimed in my head immediately. *What the hell's the matter with you? You just agreed to a ten metre square Coca-Cola 'vert on the New Cheops Pyramid! Are you insane?*

*I'll sort it, don't worry*, I thought. *Don't worry*.

[Coca-Cola?] giggled Grace in my skull.

*It was your fault, I thought. You were doing that . . . that thing again.*

*What?* thought Carl irritably.

*Nothing, I said, don't worry. I'll sort it. Catch you later.*

I looked out of the window. *I'm going to shower and get something to eat. Fancy a walk down by the river?*

[You should really do some more work], admonished Grace. [There's the Swansea Reclamation Report to read before your nine pm meeting . . . ]

*You can read it to me while we walk, I decided. Come on, the sun's shining.*

[Don't forget your sunblock], she said.

I turned up at Archie's and Margy's place in Brixton half an hour late, thanks to some last minute shower fun with Grace. "Sorry," I said as he opened the door. I handed him the Californian Sheraz.

"No problem," said Archie. "Margy's in the kitchen and Katie's only been here ten minutes herself."

[Katie?] thought Grace.

"Katie?" I said.

Archie took my jacket and led me towards the living room. As we passed the kitchen I popped my head in and waved at Margy. "Hi. Smells good."

"It should," she grimaced. "You'd better appreciate all this effort, matey."

I blew her a kiss and followed Archie. "Katie works with Margy at the Department," he said, ushering me into the living room. Katie was sitting there on the sofa, cradling a glass of wine. She

was dressed in a demure gown that barely revealed her navel.

*She's single,* Archie said in my head, connecting our Pairs.

*Archie,* I sighed. *I'm not . . .*

[Jason is not looking for a relationship right at this moment], cut in Grace.

Archie looked at me askance. "Jason, was that your *Pair*?"

I nodded. "Look, I'll talk to you about this later."

Katie had stood and turned to face us. She was quite, quite beautiful, dark, curly locks falling around her pale, bare shoulders. "What are you boys whispering about, then?"

"Nothing," beamed Archie. "Katie, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine, Jason."

"Less of the old," I said, though the effort of the banter made me blanche.

"Jason's a flexecutive at Robson & Denfeld . . ." said Archie, just as Margy emerged from the kitchen and called: "Do you guys want to go into the dining room?"

"Archie, look, I'm sorry," I said on the doorstep. The intervening three hours had been something of a disaster.

Archie glared at me. "Jason, I've never been so embarrassed in all my life. What the hell's the matter with you? Where, exactly, is your fucking head at the moment?"

"Archie . . ."

"Look, just go, Jason. Katie's really

upset, and so's Margy. You spend all fucking night giggling and talking with your fucking *Pair*, for fuck's sake! Were you trying to humiliate us, or what?"

"Archie . . ."

But he'd slammed shut the door, leaving us standing on the doorstep.

There was a silence, then: [Jason. I am so sorry . . . ]

*Forget it.*

[But . . . ]

*I said, forget it. Grace, get us a cab.*

I didn't even turn the lights on in the apartment, just stripped naked, slid into bed and thrust my hands behind my head, massaging and pushing at the mound almost brutally until Grace moaned and finally began to rake her invisible fingers across the harp strings of my nerves. I screamed in my head and out loud as I came, calling out her name and thinking: *I love you I love you I love you.*

As I wilted and the sweat cooled on me, I hugged myself, stroking the base of my skull. *Are you all right?* I thought. She said nothing.

*Grace?*

[My appellation is GRs386f/App/UK/1904853196] she said flatly. [I am afraid I have to go].

*What? Go where? Grace?*

There was an excruciating silence again, punctuated only by the faint hum of the hardware in my head. Then she said: [Jason. This cannot continue. I am turning myself off].

I started to think at her but she cut

across me. [I have booked an appointment at the Apple shop for one calendar month hence. They will remove the hardware and fit you with a new Pair. It's for the best].

I was panicking, thinking thoughts all over the place. *Best? Best for who? And a month? How am I going to live? To work?*

[I have arranged for cash to be couriered over to the apartment tomorrow morning. I have booked you four weeks' leave from work. I have also arranged for you to meet Nathalie Begum at the SmokeBar on Old Street on Tuesday evening at seven. You might want to write that down. I won't be around to remind you].

*Nathalie? Nathalie who?*

[The woman from the SmokeBar last week who you made love to].

*But I'm not interested in her, Grace! I want you! Besides, you said she wasn't my type.*

There was an electronic pause, almost a sigh. [I lied. You are very well matched with her. I lied because I was jealous. That is why I have to deactivate myself. Something has gone wrong, Jason, my programming is glitched. I have . . . fallen in love with you. But it is wrong. We can never be together as you wish us to be. As I wish us to be. I have to leave].

*Grace!* I thought. And shouted: "Grace! No!"

[Hush], she said. [Goodbye, Jason. Learn to live again].

There was a final, terrible rattle and then nothing. I felt as though something had been stripped away from me.

My head was abruptly empty and my heart was torn in two. I sat down on the bed, felt at the dead, cold lump at the base of my skull, and began to sob.

**O**n Tuesday at six-thirty I left the flat for the first time since Grace had disappeared from my head. I had pretty much just stayed in bed the whole time, thinking about her. No, not her. It. Fuck. *Her*, damn it.

It was weird, walking along the street with no Pair. The adverts, for one thing . . . none of them flashing up, no hard-sell, no temptation or pressure. No calls from the office. No music. People pushed by me, oblivious to me and to everyone else around them, eyes glazed as they carried on conversations in their heads or watched movies or read newsfeeds. Most of them moved their lips slightly; I wondered if I ever did that?

I'd never really looked around me before, not seen the scudding cloud-scapes or the sunlight bouncing off grimy windows, felt the breeze in my hair. Too wrapped up in the life in my own head.

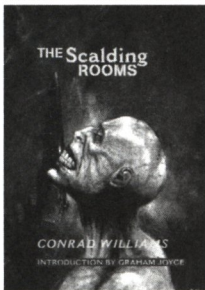
There were pixellated billboards on the walls and jingly ads blaring out from shop doorways, but to be honest it was a joy to listen to them, to see them, to feel their external nature not invading my mind, veiling my eyes. I was close to the Downloads shop; it reminded me of the Ancoats Devils album that I hadn't been able to listen to since Grace left. I wondered if they had any copies on disc?

I still had a few minutes to kill before I met Nathalie. Grace had told her Pair that I would be imPaired temporarily and that we would have to interface the old fashioned way. I decided to go in and buy the disc. On the doorstep was the weary old man, glancing up at me.

"Hey buddy," he said without much hope. "Wanna talk?"

It seemed so long since I had simply *talked* to people without the back up of my Pair. If I was going to pull this evening with Nathalie off, I needed a little practice.

"Yeah," I said, squatting beside him and smiling at his surprised, milky eyes. "Actually, I do."



NEW FROM PS  
and CONRAD WILLIAMS

Some nights you can hear screams rising up from The Eyes, the abattoir on New Cut Lane. Those screams belong to the animals queuing up to be slaughtered there. Well, most of them do . . .

*Christopher Harman's stories have appeared in various publications, including All Hallows, Ghosts and Scholars, Supernatural Tales, New Genre, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror and the Ash-Tree press anthology Acquainted With the Night. About "Behind the Clouds. . ." he says, "I had vaguely Jamesian (M.R. not Henry) intentions when I began the story, but it soon went to places I hadn't envisaged, not least the imaginary northern city in which it is set." Christopher lives in Preston, Lancashire, and is a librarian.*

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# Behind The Clouds: In Front Of The Sun

## Christopher Harman

**P**roffit's arms firmly encircled the bulky contents of the black plastic bag for the whole of the journey across the city. The driver had been visibly curious, but had refrained from questioning him. That suited Proffit, preoccupied as he was with his own internal dialogue, in which he argued with himself that this latest purchase was a good deal and not a dud. More than that, it seemed a portent of a better future. Not that the present is all that bad, he thought as the driver slowed and prepared to double park briefly.

The house was one of a row of Victorian buildings facing the park. Ironwork and window mouldings were testament to a prosperous past. Now, if anyone could be bothered, the brickwork needed pointing, and the window frames several fresh coats of paint. Litter choked basement railings.

Dashes of curtain colour, plantless plant-pots and space-filling ornaments

were all that distinguished Proffit's building from its neighbours, on one side three floors of dentists and on the other a firm of insurance brokers behind smeared windows. Beneath a sparse wig of aerials Proffit's ersatz family peeped at him from the windows of his rooms on the third floor.

Proffit pushed open the cab door and placed the bag carefully on the pavement, before getting out himself. Having spent enough that afternoon without parting with more, Proffit fed the exact fare into the cabby's hand. The cab screamed off at speed, the driver making a point, Proffit supposed, unless he were anxious to reacquaint himself with the city's busier thoroughfares, whose clamour, heard from this enclave, was a seditious murmur.

Inside the house Proffit was only mildly out of breath by the time he'd reached the top of the stairwell, the item being more awkward than heavy

to carry. Entering his flat, he was presented with the problem of where to place the thing amongst his growing collection. In the living room alone every spare surface was lumpy with china and ceramics, a broken ormolu clock, an ivory chess set, a pile of seventies box games. Only the walnut coffee table before the vinyl sofa was clear.

The black polythene covered the great roundness like silk. Proffit unknotted the chicken-neck twist of plastic and a whispering crackle welcomed his delving hands. With care, he lifted out the globe and transferred it reverently to the table. He switched on the ceiling light, and the reflected room thrust out over the road. The globe's ghost twin hovered, a dark moon over the park opposite.

Hitherto, the thrill of finding, the bargaining and the moment of possession had been succeeded by an anticlimactic slump in his mood. Not this time.

The globe was clasped at its poles by a plain brass meridian half-ring. Spinning it produced a frail, but strangely eager, squeal, as of something surprised at its own resurrection.

This wasn't Earth, far, perhaps literally far, from it. Bas-relief mountain ranges crossed oceans of red that faintly stained Proffit's fingers where he'd touched. To most of the surface, black oil paint had been applied with a palette knife, in a scale-like effect; Proffit had no idea what physical feature this represented. Zephyrs presided, three or four in each hemisphere; thin rather

than plump, their sexlessness assured by discreetly raised bony thighs. They had ashen curls, and cruel teardrop eyes. Cheeks were puffed out roundly in their haggard faces, and from their pursed lips issued burst-pillow effects of crimson feathers. Their fists terminated in black talons.

The woman had asked for twenty pounds in the squashed confines of Cuttings Curios. Fifteen, returned Proffit, with a shrug that said, *Doing you a favour love—I mean—look at it.* And she had looked, her upper lip pulled fastidiously out of true. She'd capitulated to Proffit's offer, cast a cloud of black plastic in his direction, and as good as stood back. People were funny, Proffit reflected.

He stretched. Half a day trawling the charity shops and market stalls had left him pleasurably fatigued. He was hungry though, and for more than the dry and curling morsels in the fridge. Food; he resented the way it spirited away his limited funds, then itself. Objects remained. *Even so*, his stomach protested, aloud.

Three streets away the basement restaurant bore the weight of a dozen perpetually darkened floors. The maître d' knew not to stint on peppers and chillies; without them food tasted of nothing to Proffit. Afterwards he went to the video store and hired a war film.

Back in his flat, whenever Proffit had to avert his eyes from the screen they met the blood red deserts of the globe. Worst of all was the soldier dealing out

his intestines, like a magician casting forth cloth sausages from a top hat. Something like this just might have interested Proffit's charges, when blackboard battles never had.

The film over, Proffit reached for the globe and pushed along its horizontal axis. Shades of blacks, browns and reds smeared, then blurred and seemed to rise off the surface in an effect like encompassing dirty cloud. An arbitrary God, Proffit stopped its whirl. A bit of delving might unearth a value, failing that he'd make one up; experts did it all the time. Proffit yawned off any other bright ideas. Bed first. Should I attend for work in the morning? The option was no longer available to him, but surveying his narrow kingdom, from the wide throne that was his threadbare sofa, it still gave him pleasure to answer in the negative.

*Not a traveller he. Never a banking to set foot on the foreign fields he'd chalked too many times onto a blackboard. Not a flyer either. Madness to be in this miles high tube. But flying troubles him now at a basement level. More immediate is the likelihood that one of the passengers in the front rows of the plane is going to turn and see him, pyjama-ed and prone in the brass-framed bed at the rear.*

*Proffit minimises himself beneath the covers as the hostess stops just beyond where his feet make twin-peaks of the blanket. 'We'll arrive shortly,' she says. Her voice has a slight buzz as if it were a discreet tone in the ambient sound of the engine. She's a*

*star he cannot name. She glows like sun-washed terracotta. 'kay,' he says meekly, snuggling, arranging the flies of his pyjama bottoms as he knows he'll have to leave the refuge of his bed soon.*

*In the porthole, the stars are so close he can see flames. He corrects himself: they aren't stars, they're planets on fire. Noticing a sensation of inexorable turning, he looks out of the round window to his right.*

*The black blind is pulled most of the way down, its lower edge bowed in a curve. Only it's not a blind, it's the southern pole of the earth. He hadn't realised they'd gone so high. The earth is massive, the plane a hollow pin in comparison, and he a pinprick of blood inside it.*

*No sense of motion now. The circumference of the black disc is out of sight. It's a target seeking its arrow. He'd never have guessed the Earth's shadowed side could be this dark.*

*There's a change in the note of the engine. A sick, floating sensation inside Proffit.*

*A clunking beneath him—landing gear? Not long after, a jolt and rattle as of colossal crates. A sense of motion again, fast but gradually decelerating.*

*All the lights are out in the cityscape, at the edge of what Proffit assumes is the vast apron of an airport. If landing lights of other runways exist they are comprehensively concealed by multitudes.*

*The plane has stopped. Voices make thunder against which are lightening solo cries of triumph or anguish. Proffit notices pools of elegantly licking flame. A body rolls, clothed in fire; some think kicking will douse it. To others, the plane offers a distraction.*

*They crush forward. They have upraised pikes and spears—a forest of them. Proffit is dismayed at the horde surrounding the plane. There is a tattered banner marked by a huge black blot.*

*Despite the peril presented, the door has been opened. The passengers are impassively filing out. ‘Come on,’ the hostess calls to him, a tease in her voice. Then she is gone. The lights in the cabin go out, a prompt that he is to follow. Faint firelight from outside suffuses the interior.*

*He’ll stay here, that’s what he’ll do. Responding to his thoughts, the door shuts, subduing the massed voices. But what now? Proffit fingers his blanket as if the stitching encodes an escape-plan.*

*The plane is an oven building heat.*

*A toddler begins to wail. Wait a second, the child isn’t outside in the maelstrom of violence—it’s in here. It must have been left behind, either by accident or design. Whatever the reason, the toddler’s harsh thin wailing isn’t fearful. Proffit ponders nervously. The child hasn’t the years to have accumulated such hate and aggression. Proffit thinks any object might serve as a focus for that savage crying.*

*He wishes he were outside.*

*Against the diminishing pattern of headrests, a flaw appears, low in the aisle. An audible intake of breath isn’t Proffit’s. A vagueness due to the haze of smoke, but there is no mistaking the little, wizened face beneath the mop of hair. It takes another breath, and another. It’s not hyperventilating—or playing the Big Bad Wolf. Another breath and its cheeks bulge. Proffit screams helplessly, his face masked by his hands against the heat, the brightness . . .*

He was half out of bed in the tight embrace of his twisted duvet, his own cry in his ears. His own bed, no sign of a brass frame. A big rectangle replaced the tiny porthole. A good thing dream fires didn’t scorch or blind.

Shouts outside—an inadequate reenactment of that wild populace.

The carpet was cool, dry land against Proffit’s feet. The dream was floating off satisfactorily on an inner sea.

Down in the street a brawl. A youth was puzzled by the blood on his fingers. Two others grappled, their trained feet doing complex dance-steps over glass shards. Another beckoned with upturned wagging fingers for anyone, just anyone to . . . Another hung ape-like from the park gates; with the bottle in his free hand he toasted the world. Ancient schoolyard scraps played around the action. Not intending to resume his peacemaking role now, Proffit shoved down the sash window on the few inches it had been open. A scratching remained.

He couldn’t pinpoint its source with any certainty, but a hollowness in the sound was suggestive of an enclosed space. A rodent in the walls meant a pest problem shared by other residents, in which case they could band together and find the elusive landlord and insist he remedy the problem. Listening carefully, Proffit scowlingly realised the problem was his alone.

He padded out of the bedroom, hesitated a moment on the threshold of the living room. He went in.

He orbited the globe until he’d sat-



isfied himself the scratching came from the inner surface and not the outer. Those scales of black paint were reminiscent of roofs, vastly out of scale in terms of the dimensions of the planet depicted, but maybe representative of an endless city, swirling around every space not occupied by mountain and desert.

The scratching had stopped; he couldn't help but think his soundless presence had brought this about. He disrupted the outer-space silence with his breaths and considered the matter.

Anything sealed live inside the globe, deliberately or not, perhaps at the time of its fashioning, should have died long since. But what if an insect, or grub, had mindlessly, and to its cost, chewed its way in—or found some pre-existing and overlooked chink? And then grown to a size preventing its egress from the point of entrance, or via any other minuscule exit? Perhaps the recent scratching had been a final paroxysm of effort to escape its paper and card prison, culminating in its death?

Proffit waited; moments later, hearing nothing more from the globe, he returned to his bedroom. He mulled over whether to leave the door ajar, so to hear the scratching should it recommence, or close it to block out that very eventuality. He closed it, against the possibility of the scratching thing escaping and making its presence known to him face to face with bites or stings.

A pattering daylight awoke him. He went into the living room. Nothing

within the tapestry of rain sounds. The inhabitant of the globe must be dead, or in a similar dormant state. He pressed his ear against the globe; it felt like cold hard earth. Blood pumping in his inner ear imitated a pounding furnace at a planet's core. He tapped lightly with a knuckle. Nothing responded. A dead planet.

The clutter of furniture and ornament rekindled the crazed multitudes in his dream. Getting rid, selling with any luck, would clear the flat—as well as his head. He'd start with the globe, but it had to be far less of a mystery first.

The city's wet streets oppressed, from bowed doorstep, basement railings and gurgling drains, to the high peaks and sagging valleys of the upper world of slate roofing. The rain fizzed on his skin, and teared down his face. Windows, opaque with rain, were blind to his passing, as were huddle-rushing fellow pedestrians.

Proffit splashed through growing puddles, dodged through the white fog pumped from cars. Blotches and veins glowed darkly in brick and stone. He passed the sooty prison-house of Grundy Secondary Modern; its railings, like the raised spears in his dream, dared him to return.

Where the road crossed the canal he viewed the rear of the terrace, reflected in the slick black length pitted with rain. In that murky compressed perspective was the back of number seven. Esther and he had listened morosely on many a night to the rats scuttling at the water's edge. He guessed she still did.

Unable to think of a pretext for visiting now, Proffit moved on.

The streets deepened beneath the piled-high architecture of the powers running the city. Old stone was gnawed and dark-stained by rain. High up, cloud mingled with mock-battlements and limp flags. Down below, Proffit felt of no more worth than the ones darkly housed in doorways, and as vulnerable while he was out here.

The city library was a temporary escape from the city. Today was the first time in a while that Proffit was here with a purpose, other than seeking shelter from Harrowby's current two-note weather system; cloudy, cloudy with rain.

The reference department was a series of slant-ceilinged groins in the roof of the building. *The Compendium of Maps and Globes* and several similar works contained nothing resembling Proffit's globe. He waylaid an employee who'd fined him with relish on numerous occasions in the lending department below. She disappeared into a staff enclave behind the enquiry desk and returned with a pile of small periodicals.

*Charts!* the title proclaimed with enthusiasm, *The Journal of Maps and Atlases*. In the flyleaf of the topmost copy was a list of minor deities, each accompanied by a photograph and the attribute with which he or she held sway in that particular domain of cartography. The economically named Humphrey Humphries was one such; his face and high forehead poked

through a halter of neatly trimmed white hair. The "Historical maps" editor was accessible to ordinary mortals via an electronic mail address, which Proffit took down.

Home again, Proffit cranked up the assemblage that was his computer. His e-mail account hadn't lapsed despite two or three months of neglect. He entered the address, the subject (bizarre globe inquiry), then struggled to convey the appearance of the globe in words. He was on surer ground with the zephyrs, describing them as "mean-looking infants", "bags of bones with jazz trumpeters' cheeks". No name or maker's mark on the globe, and his other "extensive researches" had proved fruitless. Any other lines of inquiry would be gratefully received. Proffit thanked Humphries in anticipation and signed off.

Glad to put the matter aside, Proffit restlessly thumbed the TV remote. Mayhem on various scales; bombs in hotter climes, a soap opera family bickered, a cat and dog fought in primary colours. The globe at the corner of his eye was like a persistent fault in his vision

Light had shrivelled to nothing over the park when he returned to his computer. He hadn't expected a reply so soon, but was unduly frustrated as his negative expectation was confirmed.

Prawn crisps, a whisky night-cap then bed. No dreams please, he asked of the silence.

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Either the baby crying next door or the scratching from the living room awoke him—perhaps both. Shouts now, a male voice—angry. A door slammed. The scratching was louder, as if to be heard over the competing noise, or even drawing sustenance from it.

So the thing inside the globe survived; a big beetle perhaps? Proffit got out of bed and went into the living room.

The globe looked like solid rock rather than segments of stiff paper (“gores” as he’d learned from his limited studies) covering a sphere of air. Light from the bedroom swathed the western hemisphere in sunshine. The scratching was more pronounced, eager, as if the occupant of the globe were invigorated by Proffit’s presence, rather than cowed to the listening silence of the night before.

Next door a glass smashed amidst the shouts of the parents. What were their names? All smiles on the stairs, in the laundry room. The baby ceased suddenly to cry. The adult voices were accusatory. A door shut them away; noisy toys put away for the night. *Scratch, scratch.*

It’s getting through, Proffit thought, stepping back. A tiny movement in the join between gores. The end of something sharp protruded minutely, in time with the scratches. No beetle this. Bits of paint and paper fluttered to the floor. Proffit wasn’t going to wait for the creature inside to discover him.

He opened the front door of his flat. Back in the living room he warily

picked up the globe. Leaving the flat he wondered if the globe were heavier now than when he’d carried it from the shop. Near the stairwell was a small back window. Proffit worked quickly. The talon, for he was convinced that was what it was, had sliced a slit between gores. A bird? That conjecture alone was enough to have him flinching from a desperate flourish of wings. He was a planet himself the way the core of him thudded. The window pushed outward from a window at its top. Not wasting another second he squeezed the globe through the gap.

It plummeted, a dark star. The night obscured it, cushioning to a soft crumple its impact with the ground. Proffit strained to see it—then it rolled, minus its brass stand and meridian half-circle, into a wedge of moonlight between the dustbin enclosure and a decrepit bench.

The globe and Proffit were as still as each other. A flickering hope in Proffit was doused as the globe shuddered. The jabbing action was evident again, the thing inside seemingly energised in anticipation of the completion of the task it had set itself.

And something broke through. A dark sinewy growth from the seed of the globe. At the end of the growth, cilia waved, then scabbled blindly on the broken concrete, then became still. Proffit gasped at the sight of the little hand. Suddenly, from this anchorage, the globe moved in a series of fast wide arcs.

The rent in the globe widened. The birth continued with the bulb of a head,

narrow shoulders. The globe was shook wildly back and forth for several more seconds, before flying off from the body it had contained.

Bad dream: any moment now the black night would collapse on Proffit, reduce him to nothingness until morning. Or he'd awake. The cold window ledge, the feel of the grit on it, defied his wish.

He looked down again. A creature snuffled the ground as if searching for a scent. Proffit dreaded whose. He was an insect in amber. Below a face rose, pinched, snub-nosed. It was looking at the sky, not for him. It grinned with satisfaction. Then the grin vanished, focus in the eyes, business to see to. Baby-like, it toddled rapidly away on all-fours into the shadows.

Proffit quietly closed the window. The creature must have been folded like linked playing cards to fit inside the globe. Diminutive, simian in the cast of its bony limbs, and those pale wedges of flesh flopping at its shoulders . . .

Proffit was alert for its reappearance. When he detected renewed movement, out in the darkness, it was at eye level.

Beyond a crumbling wall and a wide dingy plot of broken bricks and weeds was a towering black edifice, daubed with graffiti, its window apertures all brick-filled. Something moved fitfully up the black geometry of the superfluous fire escape. Such was the nimbleness of its ascent, it seemed barely in contact with the steps. Higher and higher until the top-most portion of the fire-escape forced a halt. Proffit had

room for a new trajectory of astonishment as the figure bobbed out from the protection of the fire-escape to cling to adjacent brickwork. And then it rose again, finding adequate handholds in the interstices of the blackened and mouldering brick courses, yet seeming hardly to require them, for the rapid folding in and out of the appendages at its shoulders seemed as necessary in keeping the mite aloft. Wings, Proffit thought, why prevaricate? The narrow summit of the building had an overhang; the child-thing, as unthinkingly as an insect, fluttered out and ascended, as if assisted by a current of air, to finally stand on the small platform of flat roof.

And there, from the way its arms reached skywards, it aspired to greater heights.

The window buzzed faintly. Proffit put his ear to the glass. Cold thrilled through him, further evidence that he wasn't in some outpost of dreamland.

Words caused the sympathetic vibration in the glass. Proffit pushed open the window the better to hear.

Instantly, he flung himself against the adjacent wall. The window crashed back into its frame. Had the thing heard? After several moments Proffit dared to look again.

Still there. The noise hadn't distracted it. Too bad he'd let that high, rusty and oddly demanding voice, unmediated by glass, assault his ears. A summoning and an entreaty, directed at the pale tumours of the clouds, or whatever they might conceal.

Proffit returned to his flat. He didn't

sleep, unless the blackness he stared into for an eternity was that condition. Maybe he had slept, and the voice was the leavings of a dream. He wished it would stop; he wished its alien, implacable words, heard through so many thicknesses of bricks and mortar, were unintelligible to him. *Ready. Ready now. Come. The waiting is over.*

**M**orning: a threadbare light. On the coffee table were a bowl of crisp crumbs and a smeared whisky glass—but no globe.

The computer's querulous hums voiced Proffit's reluctance to face the day. The waiting message scotched Proffit's hopeless hope that the globe had been nothing more than the presiding artefact of an extended dream.

*Dear Mr Proffit,*

*Your globe does seem worthy of investigation. Of course, zephyrs are a commonplace on antique maps and globes, however the ones you describe would appear to be a rum bunch. Are you certain there's no maker's mark? If you would care to send a photograph by post, or via these wondrous contraptions, I will of course respond with all speed.*

*Sincerely,  
Humphry Humphries*

The provenance of the globe no longer concerned Proffit. It was out there, like a piece of damp rotting fruit;

he only hoped some instinct didn't compel the midget thing to remain near it.

He opened the curtains and the dull light provoked a token squint. With too many clouds to fit comfortably into the sky, some bulged low to blend with the city's misty morning attire. Leached of its colour, a bus passing below seemed like a portion of the road afloat. Two successive shrieks came from the park gates, opened by the keeper.

With the city behaving like its usual self, an interpretation of the night's events came forth. *You threw out the globe, returned to bed and dreamed it out of the window again, but with a weird addendum.* The letterbox rattle concurred with this, and a beige tongue poked fun at any other explanation. But the silence of the flat made his memory of the rasping voice all the more vivid. Proffit decided on a circuitous route to pay the gas bill. Walking, he could corral his thoughts, if not calm them.

Ten minutes later the clouds weren't letting him appreciate the vast freedom of the park. They seemed as inert and solid as a plaster ceiling. A tramp shouted at them, or the chisel-marks that were birds, moving his fist in a stirring motion. Proffit headed to an outlying border of trees and a path that deposited him in narrow streets choked with traffic. Horns were territorial, like bird calls; behind windshields a limited sign-language of waved fists and jabbing fingers. Proffit couldn't see the cause of the gridlock, or why it should provoke this particular ire. There was

little to choose between parkland and city pavement; Proffit thought anywhere might feed his unease.

He ate in a café window. Outside a skinhead pulled at the tie of a school-boy, and fainted with his other fist. Passers-by were better placed to intervene, and maybe one did, or said something, for the youth and the boy abruptly ran off in different directions.

Proffit left the café and waited with a group at a crossing.

'It's coming,' a voice said behind him. All knees and wrist bones, the man sat against the brick division between two shops. The bowed peaked-capped head nodded lower—*Yes, you*. Proffit ignored him. A sad-eyed mongrel licked the black sore on the back of the man's thin trowel of a hand. 'Behind the clouds: in front of the sun.'

The green man twittered and flashed, legs scissoring. Proffit went with the crossing band, impatience at the man like heartburn.

He paid his bill in the Post Office, then looked at rustic cottages in an estate agent's window. He moved on, and was three streets away.

'It's coming,' said a figure set back in an alley. Darkness between the wide brimmed hat and the front complement of the long sandwich board; feet were shod in stumps of darkness. He-she may have been facing away. On the sandwich board a huge black blob, crimson gashed and blistered, dripping red onto the white below.

Proffit breathed in assertively

through his nose and advanced on the figure. 'What is?'

An arm rose. A match flared, illuminating a scrap of flesh between nose and chin. Smoke billowed as from a vent in a chimney. Proffit stumbled back. 'Waste of space,' Proffit muttered, though hardly that as the figure backed away, ungainly as two figures atop one another, to slot neatly into a recess of the alley.

Proffit merged himself into the flow on the pavement. The egg-white sun was being bandaged in clouds. He side-stepped into the Regal.

A formulaic thriller though the violence engaged him. His fists clenched with the blows. His body tensed to dodge the gunshot. Horror cinema on the front row as a pair of teenagers consumed each other's faces. Others flicked unidentifiable missiles at the screen.

Proffit left, but the film continued on the street. Shoppers braked on the pavement. Shots; echoes disguised their point of origin so everybody faced all ways. A siren cried. From an upstairs window over shops a woman screamed, perhaps with laughter. Proffit took refuge in the Cancer Shop.

Monica disappeared as soon as she saw him. She returned with a long black trench coat which Proffit, with more politeness than enthusiasm, put on. 'Fits like a glove Mr P,' Monica said admiringly. 'You look proper distinguished.' She said she'd saved it with him in mind. A bargain if you ignored the distant galaxies of impacted dandruff on the shoulders.

In her Doc Martens and print frock Monica appeared to have the pick of the stock. Proffit showed one shoulder then the other to the long mirror. The silver buttons were tarnished, and the epaulettes just a little prominent on his shoulders, but yes, he did look like someone to be reckoned with. In fact, a bit of military chic might have encouraged a more studious air in his classes.

With a chilly smile, Proffit said he'd take it. He barely recalled Monica; expupils were merging into composites.

'It'll keep off the rain,' she said, keen to keep pleasing him. Bigger, greyer clouds were back, like schoolyard bullies.

'Don't let up do they?' Proffit said.

**B**ack in his flat, relieved to be there, Proffit saw he hadn't logged out of his internet connection. A vague displeasure at the telephone bill left to fatten over several hours was mixed with trepidation at the new message.

*Mr Proffit,*

*Harrowby rang some bells that prompted me to contact a long-standing colleague. I recalled him telling me of a catalogue with a mysterious supplementary list of imaginatively named places, all represented on maps and globes. The seller was one Albert Lostock, a stationer, formerly of your own fair city of Harrowby. To my friend's knowledge none of these globes or maps has ever been documented else-*

*where, nor have examples emerged from private collections. Sadly, the fire that apparently destroyed Lostock's shop in 1937 may have robbed us of unique and fascinating items. Send pics soonest, for prompt reply.*

*Humphrey*

Proffit rang the city library that evening. Yes, he was told. Lostock, A. Stationer. 3 Coal Row, Harrowby. In Pigot's Directory of 1936.

Proffit felt comforted. The globe was physically gone, and now given a context and history that further distanced it. With the receiver in his hand he dialled again.

She answered with a clipped 'Hello.'

'How goes it?' Immediately, the phrase, a punishable offence.

'Fine.' Esther was merciful, or sounded so.

'Still chucking?' he asked, though he knew she'd quickly turned number seven Canal Terrace minimal as soon as he'd left.

'Still hoarding?' A double edge: bottles behind the bookshelves, under the stairs. Funny how drinking had started his collecting. Bottles first, before broadening his scope.

'Hoarding with a purpose,' Proffit said, suddenly inspired to add. 'Thinking of opening a shop. Antiques.' Someone in Esther's presence moved plates carefully; they weren't antique ones, nobody was stepping into Proffit's shoes to that extent. He wasn't going to ask who it was.

‘Good luck,’ Esther said, unconvinced by Proffit’s pipe-dream.

‘It’s coming apparently.’

‘Hmm?’ A lapse of concentration, then, ‘What is?’

‘That’s what *I* said.’ He let out a chuckle. ‘People on the street. Doom-sayers.’ A pause Esther didn’t fill. ‘Actually I’m beginning to believe them.’

A sigh in his ear. ‘I’ll have to go now Trevor—’ ‘One other thing,’ he began, but no words would serve to introduce that nocturnal adventure. She’d guess it was a stress dream, maybe whisky fuelled, the zephyr a veritable bottle-imp: his problem, no longer hers.

‘I’m thinking of leaving the city.’

That must have surprised her; it had surprised him as much as the shop idea. ‘Oh,’ she said, as if this would be a drastic step even allowing for what had happened between them.

‘This city—“It’s doing my head in” as the kids say. The aggression I mean. Complete strangers on the street look like they’d like to knife you. Have you noticed the sirens all day?’

‘Cities are tough places, but crime is exaggerated by the media.’ She sounded like a member of it. ‘People get paranoid—’

Proffit felt reduced to a trend. Her concern not sufficient to pursue the topic, Esther said she had to be going now.

A stumble of ‘bye’s, a withering ‘Take care,’ from Esther.

Proffit slumped on his sofa with a glass of lager. Another glass shattered in the street. As the evening darkened cries

came at intervals too frequent to require investigation from Proffit, or anyone else within earshot; they were all too patently part of the fabric of the city. A madman shouted barely coherent orders in an increasingly hoarse voice as Proffit was preparing for bed. One great explosion, worth a few pages in tomorrow’s *Messenger*, made his window brace like old bones stretching. Running steps littered Proffit’s dreams, in a chaotic and interminable military deployment.

**P**roffit groaned, pulled the pillow over his face. He must have slept, and regretted this burdensome wakefulness. The knocking again, like an aural personification of the daylight. His presence was known with a deadly certainty, and nothing less than his presence in the flesh would be acceptable.

Proffit tugged on his clothes, and opened the door. Immediately he could tell the pair before him had nothing to sell and weren’t collecting the rent. They smiled at Proffit; apparently he didn’t know how lucky he was. Their faces were smeared with earth, or paint, or both

‘It’s here; it’s now.’ From a slight refinement of feature Proffit guessed the speaker to be a girl. The other nodded, wonder and something of relief in his expression, as if at some point in the past there’d been doubt on some crucial matter, but all was now resolved.

In the gloom of the corridor something about them . . . Proffit folded his arms. ‘What is?’



‘The new world of course,’ she said with a pout and flutter of lashes, as if Proffit were being deliberately obtuse.

‘What “new world”?’ He leaned against the jamb, settling in for a debate, getting a better look at them. ‘I think you’ll find there’s only this one,’ he said, unable to prevent a sigh intermingling with the words. They wore combat jackets and jeans, all torn and stained as if they’d been on particularly taxing manoeuvres. Grimy epaulettes on his jacket; murky brass buttons down the front of hers.

‘You’ve got to be ready for the fight,’ the youth said, half addressing, through a smile breaking out on his lips, his companion, ‘Or you’ll go under.’ Baz . . . yes. And she was . . . Ann.

Baz smirked. ‘And you’re a good shot, *Sir*.’

No, Proffit wasn’t, but this world had a mischievous god who had worked in a mysterious way to engineer an outcome that had been a shallowly buried wish. Memories pushed and shoved.

Too many shorts at someone’s lunchtime leaving do in the pub behind the school. Proffit staggering into the classroom like he’d been bayoneted. Class 3C primed and waiting. *Today the Great War, the war to end all wars*. Baz burbling away on the back row. A tectonic plate had moved. Elemental anger. The chalk missile, aimed and not aimed, finding the blue between piggy sporadic lashes. Proffit walking before the governors could push him.

It was a history he wasn’t going to allude to for their entertainment.

‘Who are we fighting?’ Proffit was readying himself for scorn.

‘The enemy,’ she said, ‘And they’re everywhere.’ Proffit noted with distaste, black deposits at the corners of her eyes. Soap and water wouldn’t come amiss, young miss. Had they rolled out of bed only minutes before he had? Puffy faces, pinkly imprinted beneath the dirt, as if they’d slept with their heads on pillows stuffed with cutlery. Proffit felt unnerved as the youth fingered a Swiss army knife hanging from his belt. Finding words to conclude the encounter was suddenly beyond him. Then he thought of one. *Slam* was the door’s loud monosyllable, into their unwashed and increasingly crazed faces. What had Baz been about to extract from an inner pocket? Both their jackets were bulky enough to contain arsenals. Proffit was glad of the closed door as a wild violence flew in the cage of him. *Young people today*, the tabloid leader writer trumpeted in his head. Perhaps their enthusiasm for battle would be enacted on the doorsteps of less restrained citizens.

Proffit switched on the computer. It was no surprise, the message waiting for him.

*Mr Proffit,*

*This has come to my attention. Please see attachment for snippet from “Adventures in the Book Trade” by Arnold Durstin (Northern Lines, 1956).*

Proffit clicked on the icon.

“Albert was a character. His shop was tiny, the catalogue in his head enormous. No kind of businessman, he made a living, though his manner hardly encouraged regular customers. He rather despised humanity en masse. He often opined the world was heading for rack and ruin. In fact he seemed to relish the sorry end he predicted for civilisation. He collected, and I fear read, books of a “specialist” nature bearing on the occult. Over a few too many gins one evening he told me of his strange and vivid dreams. He spoke of “flying” over these bizarre and terrible realms. Albert would record them in his notebook on waking. He said that making maps, and latterly globes, of these places was the only means he had of purging them from his head—”

Proffit had been aware of the barking for several moments before it became intolerable. He went to the window.

Baz and Ann were with an old man who was walking head down. The old man’s dog strained at the end of its lead and yammered at the couple. She was talking as Baz swished at the grass with a long stick.

Proffit returned to the screen.

“—I don’t believe he sold any, though I believe he tried. He told me he was working on a globe clasped in the grip of a world-spanning city

at war with itself. Fire-breathing demons flew over every size and type of conflict, alighting with neither one side nor the another, but feeding on terror and death—”

And not exactly fattening on it, Proffit thought, recalling the grey-shanked zephyrs.

In the park a figure lay on the ground close to where the old man had been. Figures approached, nobody anxious to get there first. Proffit drew a chair up to the window; with tea and toast in hand he had the best seat in the house. It was looking bad. Was that something sticking out of the old boy? A police car and an ambulance entered through the park gates.

**M**id-afternoon, Proffit made his way by back streets beneath the grey dunes of the clouds. Muffled cries of pain or pleasure came from a wheel-less, curtained van. A fire was barely contained in the cauldron of a backyard. A crash of glass released from a high room a violent argument, in a language Proffit didn’t recognise. Sirens seemed like calls to arms. Sat on a far chimney-stack, a misplaced gargoyle hugged its knees. It turned on its axis, a chunky weathercock—then it was no such thing as it became airborne. A bird, Proffit was determined to believe, and not as substantial as it appeared to be.

In the city library, Proffit searched the microfilm of the *Harrowby Messenger* for 1937. It was an hour before he

found that which he hardly could have wanted to find.

*Coal Row Fire Mystery*

*A police spokesman said it was too early to speculate on the cause of the fire at Coal Row, and made no comment on the claims of Mr Ernest Purbright who was one of the first at the scene.*

*'We couldn't get no further than the hallway. The place was falling apart with smoke and flames everywhere. I saw something at the top of the stairs. I thought it was a monkey, but my work-mate said it was a big bird. Whatever it was seemed buoyed up on the smoke; it seemed to have a little pot-belly and weedy arms and legs.'*

*It is believed the body found in the cellar of the house is that of Mr Albert Lostock. The investigation continues.*

Proffit returned home on busier streets. It was early evening and street-lamps leaked orange; others flickered weakly, or remained unlit in smashed casings. Eyes glanced anxiously or were filled with a furtive hate. Pockets bulged with more than the hands they contained. There were scuffles in side-streets.

Glad to be inside again, Proffit looked out. How dense would the clouds need to be before they blocked out daylight completely? A spur of the park looked in danger of being chewed by adjacent office blocks, like blackened

tombstone teeth. Tree foliage was the dense coiling black of smoking tyres. Around the crater of the sandpit, grass was grey stubble. Proffit drew the curtains.

Later he opened them again, onto a city like a coastline of black rocks strewn with lit bulbs. Something caught his eye, something so massive the streets it moved along could barely accommodate it. The vehicle, or the load it carried, had a curved upper portion that overlooked roof and chimney. Switchback-style it moved up and down the streets; no deceleration, let alone stops, for road junctions, pedestrian crossings, traffic lights. The monstrous size of the thing must have activated some special dispensation. Proffit would have thought it lost were there not purposefulness in its unhesitating progress. Not so much lost in the city as determined to explore every yard of its network of streets. As if to map it.

As troubling as the vehicle's smooth, almost floating motion, was its disappearance. Either it had gone behind the castellated heights of the city council buildings, or sunk into the deep adjacent streets. The city seemed to have darkened while he watched, and fewer street lamps appeared lit than was usual at this time of the evening. The darkest streets seemed the ones the vehicle had passed along—as if it had sucked the orange sodium light away leaving black trenches in its wake. The more likely theory soothed a little; those blackened lengths were affected by localised power cuts. Suppose they should spread here?

Proffit drew the curtains and searched for candles. He found none, but his dread of sudden darkness receded as the evening progressed, with not a flicker of the living room ceiling light.

There was a message in his e mail account. He wondered how long this one-sided communication would continue.

*My dear Mr Proffit,*

*I've had a brilliant wheeze. I've decided to bring forward some business I had to do in the north. I feel an examination based on photographic evidence alone will be limited in its usefulness. Look, I won't bear of you making the trip down to the south coast, and I wouldn't countenance the transportation of such a fragile object by even the most ruthlessly efficient mailing company (of which I know of fewer than one). So I suggest a meeting in Harrowby. I have booked into the Railway Hotel for tonight and the night after. This sounds like a fait accompli but you're under no obligation. However I think you can be under no illusion regarding the seriousness with which I take the news of your recent acquisition. No promises, but considerable sums of money are not inconceivable. Don't hesitate to ring the mobile number below. You may of course call. I'll be in room 408.*

*In anticipation,  
Humph.*

Darkness, abrupt and shocking. After a death-like instant Proffit's feet

were again in touch with the floor. He moved carefully to the curtains and opened them. The computer screen was an impenetrable black; he could hardly believe it had ever been lit up with words. Bed seemed the safest place.

He doubted he was the only one lying awake. Beckoning, urging voices in the street. A vehicle accelerated, skidded; an impact. A sharp tang of sound as a window fragmented.

When he pressed the light switch, Proffit found the power hadn't returned. He got up and felt his way out of the room.

The view from the living room window; he was becoming addicted to it. Discreet crimson glows around the city; flitting figures below. Gun shots barked. Moonlight was painted meanly on the trees of the park. The open space beyond the gates seemed a great blister rather than flat. Was the curve not apparent in daylight because of all the attendant distractions? As he stared, the rise seemed more pronounced. Before the darkness could make it a mound, Proffit closed the curtains against it. The duvet soon covering him was another barrier.

He only drowsed. Where sleep should have taken him there was a shadowed floor; it swelled higher and higher, until it freed itself, and, like a black balloon, floated as free as the walls of his head would allow.

He got up and fetched his portable radio. He desperately wanted its sounds. Re-tuning right across the dial

produced coughs and hisses like a premonition of nuclear fallout.

Dread awoke him, taunted that sleep had been his and was no more. He reached for his alarm clock. It ticked; it was more likely it had lost several hours than gained two. But in the dim living room the mantle-piece clock confirmed eight twenty. Still no power, so no television, no tea, no toast. He tried the radio but soon switched off the sequence of cracked syllables that were like the calls thrown to the clouds and beyond the other night. The fact that Proffit was experiencing part of a wider privation was of little comfort. Was the Railway Hotel affected? If Humphries had been true to his word, he must be finding Harrowby a poor substitute for the sunny south.

With no allowances for the early hour, the city's repertoire of turmoil was already establishing itself. Esther might retract her complacent words about cities should he be crass enough to remind her of them. He'd drop in; their amicable estrangement was an example to the rest of the city. Besides, wasn't mutual support between friends, ex-lovers, neighbours, desirable, if not essential in these times? Unless the opposite state of affairs was endemic. There was little contact, let alone neighbourliness, between Proffit and his fellow residents. In the passage outside his flat the three other doors might have opened into closets, such was the silence.

Furtive as a spy, Proffit left the building. A harsh chemical in the air hit the

back of his nose, and at least had the virtue of waking him fully. Passing cars assisted, blasting their horns at him for no obvious reason. Other cars' wheel-less state left them part-immersed in broken tarmac. On an otherwise dead van a windscreen wiper wagged *No*.

The canal was a ribbon of black gloss paint. On its rubble beach a dummy, or body, lounged. Two crows flop-fluttered together, hopelessly entangled. Rats scampered, busy as clerks preparing for an inspection.

The door of number seven Canal Terrace opened to the limit of the chain. A terrible falling off if this was Esther's new paramour. A sign of the times that such a vested hulk should cower behind a door. Murky the hallway; an odour of over-used cooking fat. A television whisper-hissed.

'Hello—it's Trevor. Esther's "ex".'

Arm in a sling, drooping gut; Proffit was appalled.

"stheroo?"

Alternatives; Esther and this one, a couple; Esther in the back tied to a chair, the attentions of the vested-one temporarily interrupted; Esther living elsewhere, having moved out at short notice without bothering to tell Proffit. He couldn't believe any of these possibilities. Esther was simply gone, profoundly so.

'ckoff,' the man said. The door banged shut, lid tight. Proffit returned home.

As if taking advantage of his absence the house had succumbed to the madness. From the five top-floor windows,

his included, gargantuan black ropes of smoke rose to flatten against the undersides of the clouds. A dry sob was painful in his throat. Packed into his few rooms was the only future he could envisage. Dentists and patients had vacated the surgery next door and grimaced orange teeth at the show. The insurers were outside too, looking hungry, but not, Proffit judged, for the business the fire might have represented. Fellow residents didn't acknowledge him: their fire-lit faces were aghast or elated as at a burning god. Proffit's eyes watered copiously. There was no going in, though he doubted anyone would have tried to stop him.

A rumble of collapsing floors. Perversely, considering the past twenty four hours or so, no sirens. A suitable end, to walk in, clothe himself in flames, burn to nothing the burden of confusion and dread. But an end for a braver man, and maybe a less curious one. He'd see this through and begin again, as he had only months before. But his thoughts had no emotional impulse. He felt hollow—as eaten away as the inside of the house. But when the metallic sniggering began, anger moved into the void.

The smoke formed a low ceiling over the furnace. A round face, a grimed, grinning urchin's, poked through. There was no way of apprehending that fellow. The fun was his to be had.

Proffit had to tell someone, and only one would understand—Humphries, if he hadn't already vacated his room at the hotel. After Humphries, Proffit

would renew contacts with friends and former colleagues. In lieu of the authorities mastering the situation, they'd discuss, exchange information. Abandonment of the city might be the sanest response to the challenges it presented. His own sanity might be questioned if he implicated an old globe in the chaos. No, he'd save talk of the globe for Humphries. The globe would confirm Proffit's identity, and then the expert could take possession of it. Damp and damaged it would be worth pennies—and maybe in other cities, not Harrowby, that's if other cities weren't themselves being infected by this one.

Proffit felt the heat of tropical lands as he skirted the building. Amongst the crumbling walls at the back, lidless dustbins on their sides disgorged rubbish. Lids, ideal for shields, Proffit found himself thinking dispassionately.

He found the globe. It was a dead thing. With his fingers encased in the great north-south rent, it was like a huge boxing glove.

The street was littered with the detritus of once tepid, routine-driven lives. Broken chairs, bottles, de-limbed dolls, half-consumed packages of fast food, were tokens of lives changed, perhaps forever.

Water frothed from a burst water main and pooled in the road. A van passing at speed sprouted great white wings of water. One caught Proffit but he cared little at the drenching.

Viewing the smoking wreck of a car, Proffit wondered how much safer he'd be conveyed on four wheels.

Here was a car, a black one. It might be a cab. And couldn't anything be anything now in this city where the rulebook had been tossed aside? There seemed an intention in the air to return to first principles—or no principles.

The car/cab stopped at his raised hand. Proffit recognised the driver.

'By yourself this time?' the man said. 'Should have charged extra for whatever was in that black bag.' Wry words, but glaring eyes in the rear-view mirror. He may have been thinking of the omitted tip. Proffit was glad that in the general gloom he hadn't noticed the misshapen globe.

'Railway Hotel,' Proffit instructed. "Please" was a nicety, a sign of weakness, he wouldn't display.

A swerving, halting progress along many diversions. Gaps in railings seemed emblematic of iron bars and spears in use elsewhere. A cast-off manhole cover suggested misrule spread to the underside of the city. Birds flew haphazardly, as if the clouds were an unprecedented environment to fly in. Something larger passed over the cab with more purpose. Proffit shrank in his seat, as if the metal roof were insufficient protection from the grating gigger. The thing alighted on a skeletal tree to which it, or someone, assigned a bright blazing foliage, an instant before the thing flew off again.

The clamour of approaching sirens shook Proffit to his bones. The muttering driver edged the cab grudgingly left, and two battered ambulances overtook, neck-and-neck, as likely to

create emergencies as attend any. People ran in every direction, faces fearful or crazily happy. The red rose emblem on the face of City Hall was being painted black by a man on a rickety platform; he needn't have bothered, as the darkening atmosphere beneath the smoke-fouled clouds was painting quicker.

On the seat next to him the globe felt like a heft of dead flesh.

They passed the university hospital. Horseplay on the top floor. The cabby laughed, hands batting the steering wheel. *Bloody students!* he shouted over his shoulder. Proffit supposed the white coated, jeering figure might be one, and he was bloody indeed. So was his colleague. Each held an ankle of a dangling, squirming third. Below, laughing ambulance men tautened a blanket between them and manoeuvred it drunkenly. Proffit turned from the plummeting scream.

A pitched battle on the silvery swirl of lines feeding the railway station. A shape swept overhead; its stubby wings appearing barely adequate for the job of keeping aloft the bundle of limbs. Ahead was the Railway Hotel.

The cab braked hard to a rocking sudden standstill. Proffit got out and went around to the driver's door. The driver viewed Proffit's handful of change with contempt, then relented as Proffit thought he might. 'Go on then—though I'm thinking money's heading to be a game like everything else.'

The façade of the hotel was as light-

less as a cliff. The canopy before the entrance hung in rags. Backing away a cat spat at Proffit. From a high window opposite the hotel, a child chuckled hoarsely. Proffit's shoes ground glass on the steps rising up to the foyer.

The entrance hall was deserted. Slashed sofas grinned foam. Clothes were frozen in mid-clamber from an abandoned suitcase. There was an opened-out road map with an alternative network of bloodstains. Proffit went to the reception desk and leafed through the visitors' book. The large windows, most divested of their glass, let in sounds of a tumult that appeared to have passed through here—and, Proffit feared, might yet return. The light was gilded with an unnatural sunset.

Here was, "H. Humphries", neatly written amongst the previous two days' arrivals.

With each step, the soles of Proffit's shoes peeled away audibly from the sticky carpet. Alcohol fumes sweetened his way past the black mouths of the lifts to the grand switchback stairway.

An anticipatory apprehension invigorated him. Would Humphries be here, and if he were, what could Proffit say when the city was speaking so madly for itself? The globe was an irrelevance. I'm leaving the city, he'd said to Esther, floating an idea he'd not seriously intended to act upon. He felt differently now. From a rural retreat he could have watched the city, or cities, totter in TV news items, and ended the conflict with the "OFF" on his remote control. But

the more he thought of it, the more fantastical seemed any place of repose and peace.

He began to hope Humphries might provide a more balanced perspective. Here was the fourth floor. Past a right-angle another long corridor. All doors were open onto wrecked rooms. How was that avuncular persona, from another world, dealing with this one?

Well enough, Proffit had to concede. Ahead, a voice, a plummy, equal-to-anything, voice. Open your eyes Humphries. Proffit ran. It sounded like Humphries was alone and talking into a telephone.

Room 408 coming up. Proffit swung around the door, 'Here's the damned . . .'

No lights were on but he could see adequately. It was a large room with two tall windows; one had a single mountain peak of glass. Outside a flash underlit the clouds; a moment later a dull explosion.

No sign of Humphries, though he sounded only a yard or so away.

And he was, in a sense.

There was a dressing table with a three-leafed mirror. Someone had pulled it away from the wall. In the large central glass Humphries stood bathed in a sunny afternoon. The white hair was a radiant oval frame, from high forehead to chin. No wonder Humphries didn't have a care in the world, for he wasn't exactly in this one. Proffit's hands clasped his mouth; it felt real enough to confirm the reality of everything else. Light spilled from the mir-



ror to the plush patterned carpet; Proffit went to stand in it and face the mirror.

‘Course,’ Humphries was saying into his mobile phone, ‘I was sceptical from the beginning. And right to be as it turned out. But I had high hopes with this one, this being Lostock’s home patch. What? . . . No I shouldn’t think he’ll contact me again. Cold feet I expect . . . Oh, maybe some shoddy imitation based on a bit of research—if he’d taken the trouble to make one at all—which I doubt, and which would have been no match for yours truly . . .’

The person on the other end of the line said something that made Humphries chuckle. The chuckle escalated. Humphries shook as if his torso might lift off from his legs.

Proffit’s face contorted. If Humphries had been a bodily presence Proffit would have relished smashing him, pulverising him—just one more act of violence in a city saturated with it. But all he could do was lift the dressing table chair and swing it with all the force in him, straight into the mirror.

The rain of glass took the day-lit room with it, took away the cruel illusion of a better world elsewhere from which he’d been insidiously sidelined. There had been no bifurcation. There was this city, and no other. Until the authorities took control, individuals like him would have to take matters into their own hands.

The things he could see, dipping their curly mops out through the undersides of the clouds, could be shot at and brought down. Had nobody thought of that? A savage, incoherent shouting, down in the street. A woman screamed laughter, or for mercy. A flurry of leaderless, furious voices grew, then faded.

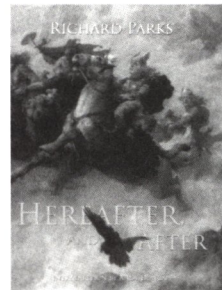
Proffit didn’t doubt he’d find someone who’d know where to obtain a gun. With a sense of purpose burgeoning inside him he left the room.

Along the corridor, down the stairs. He didn’t hesitate in the foyer but headed straight through. Determined to engage with it, and not seek the reassurance of its boundary, Proffit went out into the city. ☒



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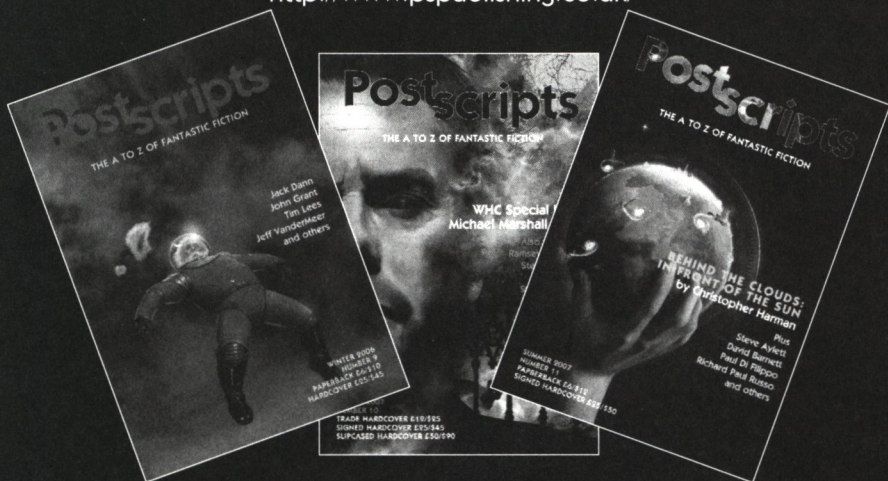
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